

СЗРРЕР MEZON - РОН

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.**

Title: Four in One Westerns

Date of first publication: 1924

Author: Stephen Chalmers (1880-1935)

Author: Wilbur Coleman Tuttle (1883-1969)

Author: William MacLeod Raine (1871-1954)

Author: Edison Marshall (1894-1967)

Illustrator: Edgar Franklin Wittmack (1894-1956)

Date first posted: March 20, 2024

Date last updated: March 20, 2024

Faded Page eBook #20240318

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

This file was produced from images generously made available by HathiTrust Digital Library

FOUR IN ONE WESTERNS



THE LAW OF THE RANGE
By W. C. TUTTLE



DON QUICK SHOT OF THE
RIO GRANDE
By STEPHEN CHALMERS



THUNDERHORSE
By EDISON MARSHALL



WITH ROPE AND BRAND
By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

FOUR IN ONE WESTERNS

FOUR IN ONE WESTERNS

DON QUICKSHOT OF THE RIO GRANDE

BY STEPHEN CHALMERS

THE LAW OF THE RANGE

BY W. C. TUTTLE

WITH ROPE AND BRAND

BY WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

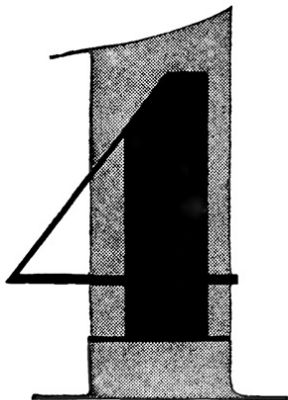
THUNDERHORSE

BY EDISON MARSHALL

GARDEN CITY PUBLISHING CO., INC.

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

FOUR IN ONE WESTERNS



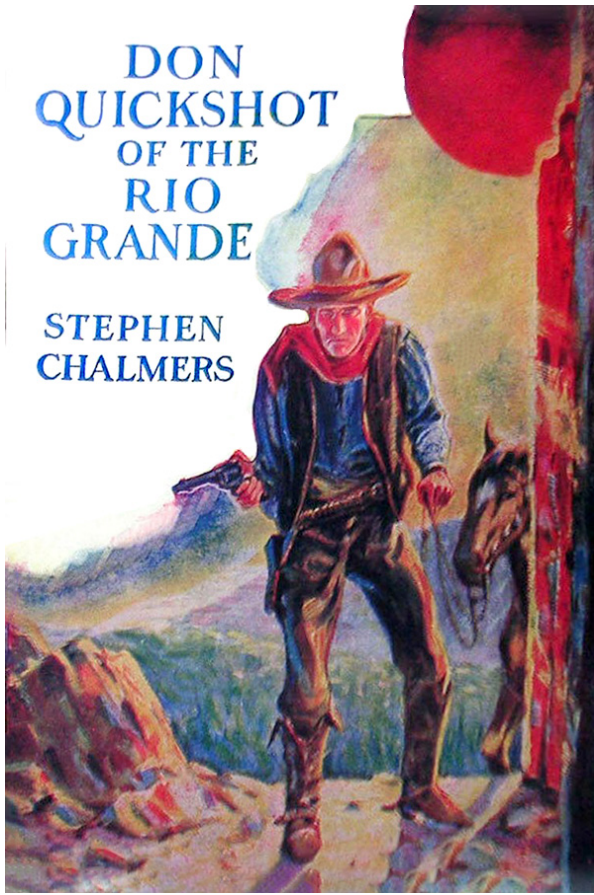
GARDEN CITY PUBLISHING CO., INC.
GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK

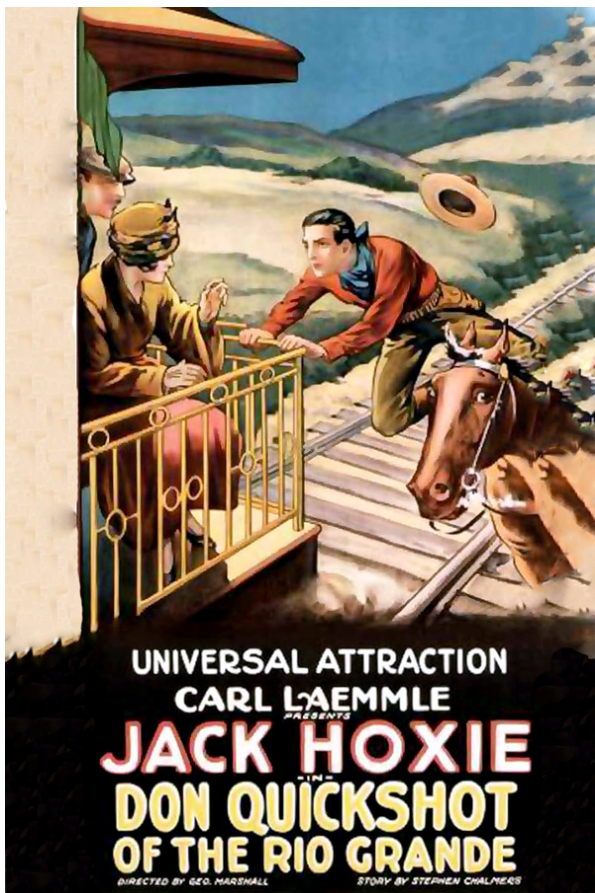
COPYRIGHT, 1921, 1923, 1924
BY DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
COPYRIGHT, 1910
BY STREET & SMITH CORPORATION
COPYRIGHT, 1922
BY THE RIDGWAY COMPANY
IN THE UNITED STATES AND GREAT BRITAIN
COPYRIGHT, 1923
BY ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

DON
QUICKSHOT
OF THE
RIO
GRANDE

STEPHEN
CHALMERS





UNIVERSAL ATTRACTION

CARL LAEMMLE

PRESENTS

JACK HOXIE
IN
DON QUIXOTE
OF THE RIO GRANDE

DIRECTED BY GEO. MARSHALL

STORY BY STEPHEN CHALMERS

DON QUICKSHOT OF THE RIO GRANDE

CHAPTER I

MR. PEPPER IS BORED

THE day on the shady side of the bunkhouse of Snake-in-a-Hole that William John Pepper, widely known through that whole section of the Texas range as Impulsive Pep, shot an extra semi-quaver into a page of the Twiddler's "Mandolin Instructor," was the same day that Miss Tulip Hellier was coming back from an Eastern schooling and the same day that Chico Villegas, Mexican bandit, found himself short on ammunition.

Pep hadn't realized that there was such a person as Tulip Hellier in existence, but that was because she had been East. If he had heard the name once or twice he would have figured that she was some relation of "Big Jim" Hellier, owner of Tres Hermanas ranch, through which the T. & S. tracks snaked a southwest course to Villa Grande, the country town, where the line hitched up again with the big P. & S. W.

Neither did Pep know anything of the sorrows of Chico Villegas, although he had heard of the gent often—and last as having shot his lieutenant full of lead for wasting ammunition.

Of the immediate concerns of Miss Tulip Hellier and Señor Chico Villegas, William John Pepper knew nothing and cared less. In fact, on that hot Sunday afternoon at Snake-in-a-Hole he cared nothing about anything. He was bored. Life was a blank, a hollow bubble, and it was blamed hot even on the shady side of the bunkhouse.

To add to his desolation—that emptiness which is like a yawn in the great Sahara of life—it irritated him to observe that the Twiddler and the Professor still clung to threads of personal interest in life, a faint enthusiasm over the possibility of continued existence.

The Twiddler, who was at this moment making queer noises over Lesson XIV of his "Mandolin Instructor," and the Professor, who was reading "Don Quixote" in Spanish, were the kind of modern ranch-hands—Pep wouldn't

undignify the time-honored term, “punchers”—who looked with superior but tolerant disapproval on chaps, spurs, high-heeled boots and an honest six-gun frankly carried well forward. They wore overalls at work, hob-nailed shoes from a famous sporting last, and starched collars when they went to town.

And their manners were plumb depressing. Pep couldn't thoroughly enjoy his meals for observing them. He couldn't spear a potato or long-arm a hot biscuit with any comfort at all.

The worst of it all was, as Pep lugubriously reflected while the Professor read and the Twiddler pulled his tinkly lemonade-wires, these two were not the freaks of the Snake-in-a-Hole outfit. They were the normals of the bunch!

Pep, with his chaps, guns, spurs, high-heeled boots—he was the freak. He belonged to another age, just like this Don Quixote old goggle-eyes was reading about—an age when a man could be his own law and do his own reformin'.

And there was the whole trouble. William John Pepper was exactly twenty-five years and a few months behind the times.

True enough, he'd been born into normal times, when an argument was settled in favor of the man quickest on the draw and when it was not at all necessary to hire lawyers and get a judge's say-so to dispose of a plain horse-thief, or a brand-blotter, or—or a fellow who defiled the face of nature with woolly things.

But Pep had refused to move with the times; he insisted on carrying the times he was born into along with him through these ensuing twenty-five years.

During these years it had become unlawful (among other things) for a man to name his own poison, even on pay-days, or pack a six-gun within the purlieu of even a one-horse scattering of nailed-up barrel shakes like Los Indios, which was called a town because it saved a lot of mental effort figuring out whatinell it was since they closed every oasis in it.

By the bunkhouse wall the Twiddler kept on groping for the lost wire until Pep groaned as one in extremity and said, “Why don't yuh play a real toon?”

“What would you call a real tune, Pepper?” inquired the Twiddler. “I'll admit I can play by ear but the ‘Instructor’ says it's the worst possible thing for a beginner if ever he would learn to play by note.”

“Does the ‘Instructor’ say that?” asked Pep anxiously. “Then you’d best not try to play by ear, son. Some things, as this instructor ses, is wuss’n others. But I’d admire to sing, if it wouldn’t no-wise retard your moosical eddication.”

“Go ahead,” sighed the Twiddler, laying aside the mandolin.

Pep cleared his throat meditatively, though it was mainly his nose through which he presently droned, the while he flipped bits of baked earth at a little horned toad in the offing.

“Oh, there wuz a li’l chicken an’ it had a wooden leg,
An’ mostly ev’ry mornin’ it useter lay an egg.
’Twuz the finest li’l chicken thet we hed upon the farm——
An’ another li’l drink won’t do us any harm!”

Half-way through the infectious air of “Turkey in the Straw” the Twiddler’s hand had reached for the mandolin. He found Pep’s key. By the time the droning singer reached the chorus the instrument was vamping a full-blast chorus which drew a hitherto retiring audience from the bunkhouse. It also brought the Chinese cookee from his domain with a frying-pan which he beat in Oriental time to the tune.

“Another li’l drink won’t do us any harm.
Another li’l drink won’t do us any harm!”

In the ranchhouse the boss breathed a sigh of relief.

“By gosh!” he muttered. “That sounds a’most human.”

CHAPTER II

A PARAMOUNT ISSUE

THIRTY miles to the southwest there was excitement around the hacienda of Tres Hermanas. Big Jim Hellier, wealthy owner of everything from ten miles back of the ranchhouse right to the Rio Grande about twenty-five miles south, had just read the telegram brought by Suarez, the Mexican.

Tulip was on the way home. The message had been filed at New Orleans, to which she had come by steamer from New York, accompanied by her aunt, her late mother's sister, Mrs. Hemingway, and her cousin, Vivian Hemingway, about whom Jim Hellier had picked out some passing references in his daughter's letters from back East. Vivian had sort of rung himself in on the Texas invasion at the last minute, moved by exactly what Big Jim did not know, but half suspected.

Hellier grinned when he opened the telegram and learned that Tulip was on the T. & S. Limited and might be expected on the following day.

The rancher looked up to find the greaser, Suarez, moodily eyeing him. A little ashamed of the paternal weakness his delighted grin had betrayed, Big Jim scowled.

“What in hell kept you anyway, Pancho?”

Suarez shrugged.

“That *hombre*, the *telegrafico*, he talk too much, Señor Jeem. He take hees own good time.”

“That's the trouble with all you people,” grumbled Hellier. “I'm not putting it by you, Suarez, that you discussed Mex politics for a good two hours, swapped thirty-seven new yarns about Chico Villegas, the bandit, and then you casually says, ‘By the way, is there any telegram for the man that's hirin' my time?’!”

“*Si*, señor,” said Suarez, humoring Hellier's humor. “And speaking of my people, Señor Jeem. It is Sunday and I could return by morning. The señor geeves me leave to veesit *mi madre*, who leeves across the reever?”

“*Madre* my foot!” snorted Hellier. “Bet it's a cockfight and you're backing your own bird. Go ahead—but you ride your own *caballo* if you're

going across that river.”

“*Gracias*, Señor Jeem!” grinned Suarez, turning his horse by a mere pressure of the knees. The animal moved off southward, the bridle hanging loosely about its neck while its rider thoughtfully rolled a cigarette from the makings.

Suarez smiled as he lighted it. These Americans were clever, but not so much with their brains as their tongues. They lacked subtlety.

It had never occurred to Señor Jim, for instance, that in that little talk with the *telegrafico* at Los Indios Suarez had indeed talked much of Chico Villegas, the bandit—and that Manuel had passed a word to Suarez that would be good news to the outlawed Villegas.

Pancho Suarez felt confident of finding the bandit at a certain rendezvous across the Rio Grande. There Chico had been more or less in hiding ever since his last unfortunate collision with Braganza’s federals.

The minute Suarez was gone from Hellier’s sight and completely from the rancher’s mind, Big Jim summoned the boys.

They came, a happy-go-lucky, dare-devil bunch who were in the main a survival of a passing type, as was Hellier himself.

Tres Hermanas was big enough and far enough removed from civilization to continue its accustomed way of living regardless of that reformed world which Impulsive Pep so deplored.

“Boys,” said Hellier from the veranda, his face beaming and damply red as he waved the yellow slip of paper. “My gal, Tulip, ’ll be home tomorrow! Now——”

“*Whe-e-ee-ow!*” came an interrupting howl of joy.

Half of them had known her in the days when she was a gawky, irrepressible, wild thing about the ranch. The other half took the first half’s word for it that she was “some gal.”

“Now, boys,” said Hellier, his face taking on a sudden strained gravity, “there’s something we got to remember. I’m not sayin’ that my gal, Tulip, ’s like to be changed in any way. All the education the East could cram into her wouldn’t squeeze out any o’ the old stuff that’s in her.”

“Yuh betcher! *Whe-e-ee-ow!*”

“Easy, now, boys—easy-y! What I mean to say is, her aunt’s comin’ along with her, an’ her cousin, the name of which is Vivian. I dunno much

about this young fellow. But the old heifer now—I mean Tulip’s aunt, Mrs. Hemingway—she’s some style, I reckon.

“Now, there’s two ways of handlin’ this situation, boys—an’ I leave it to you-all,” continued Hellier. “We can either doll up a bit an’ walk the chalk-line kinda careful for a coupla days, or till this Eastern aunt an’ cousin gets a bit used to our ways. Or we kin just go ahead as if they weren’t here, or were just like ourselves, an’ leave any explainin’ that has to be done to Tulip. What d’yuh say, boys?”

There was half a minute’s silence, much head-scratching and shuffling of feet; then a full chorus of mixed opinions. Some were for dolling-up.

It was Paramount Sam, the ranch’s universal solvent, who settled the grievous question. With his sombrero in his hands he took a step forward and cleared his throat like an oracle about to deliver.

“Boss Hellier—*an’* the bunch,” he said in the manner of one accustomed to public speaking, “I hadn’t given a thought to this yere matter, but seein’ as how it’s before the house an’ a question of paramount issue, I offer my opinion.

“As the boss says, mebbe them Easterners—not meanin’ to include Miss Tulip nor disrespect to anybody—them Easterners is entitled to some concessions. On the other hand, this yere, I takes it, is Miss Tulip’s party an’ she’ll be lookin’ to find home without—Eastern trimmin’s, the likes of which she may have been fed up on an’ the likes of which we’d have to borrow for the occasion.

“*Bueno!* Then, here’s what I propose: If there’s any dollin’-up to be done, let’s doll up real, ol’-fashioned Panhandle, cow-country fashion. Bet yuh if them Easterners—if they are expectin’ anythin’ at all it’ll be along them lines—what they’re pleased tuh call the ‘wild an’ woolly!’ So that, if we ain’t up to scratch in their ways an’ a bit over the edge on our own, Miss Tulip—who will have been tipped off by her dad—Miss Tulip ’ll do the explainin’ that we’re celebratin’ her home-comin’ in the way things useter be did, say about the time she was born.

“I thank yuh,” said Paramount Sam, stepping back gravely and replacing his sombrero.

There was a mighty roar of applause. The problem was solved. Big Jim Hellier, when he could make himself heard, summed up.

“All right, boys. That’s settled. We’ll just give ’em a bang-up, ol’-fashioned time in the way Tulip—if I know my gal—would like best, with a

free-for-all, ol'-time dance in the barn. We'll invite the whole of Texas that wants to come an' shake a hoof. We'll call it *Tulip's Party!*"

In the meantime, William John Pepper, who really ought to have been of the Tres Hermanas outfit instead of the Snake-in-a-Hole, had corralled the Professor.

Pep seized the opportunity to press some inquiries as to who and why was this *gallego hombre*, Don Quickshot.

"Meaning Don Kee-ho-tay?" said the Professor.

"Any way you say—it goes," said Pep humbly, as became a seeker after knowledge. "If he's a burro or a coyote it don't make any difference. But I would admire to hear more of said animal."

The professor, always willing to impart information, outlined the more sad than humorous history of the knight of La Mancha, the which recital reduced William John Pepper to a thoughtful silence that lasted until the middle of the evening meal in the chuck-house.

Presently, with his mouth full of hash, Pep delivered himself as follows, addressing no one in particular:

"Now this here ol' *hombre*, Don Quickshot, ain't half as *loco* as they make out. This Don Quickshot—an' a bully name too, even if he don't pack no more'n a tin sticker on a beanpole—he likes to think the ol' days ain't past when a feller could go out just lookin' for trouble, rescuin' fair maidens, settin' things to rights an' generally reformin'."

"I tell yuh, boys, this here world right now stan's in need of some Don Quickshot that'll stir things up. This here world's got into a solemn rut. Things needs hoein' over. Sure they'd say the *hombre* as tried it were plum *loco*, but I'd admire to be ez *loco* as that old nut of La Manja. In fact——"

It was at this moment that Impulsive Pep stopped short and seemed to find something of peculiar interest in a boiled potato which he had just speared by reaching across the Professor's face.

Not another word did he utter until after supper.

Then he went straight to the ranchhouse and asked the boss for his time!

CHAPTER III

QUIXOTE OF THE SAGEBRUSH

THE boss of Snake-in-a-Hole did not exactly go down on his knees and beg William John Pepper to stay on the job, much as he valued an experienced old-timer and wanted him to remain. But he did growl his dissatisfaction.

Pep presently saddled his own horse—a lean buckskin—and rode in front of the bunkhouse. The moon was shining brightly on it. From within came a desultory, uncertain tinkling.

“Aw, hell!” groaned Pep.

Impatiently turning his *caballo's* head he started the animal at an easy one-step gait in a southerly direction.

He did not know just where he was going, but he was on his way. Once out of earshot of the ranchhouse he cleared his throat as a preliminary to nasal effort and presently lifted his soul in song to the great moon.

“Oh, there was an old woman an’ she wasn’t very rich,
An’ when she died she didn’t leave much—
A great big hat with a great big brim,
An’ all tied roun’ with a woolen string!”

His song kept time to the beat of his pony’s hoofs. For the time being William John Pepper was profoundly happy.

“*All tied roun’ with a woolen string—
All tied roun’ with a woolen string.*”

Later he halted under a cottonwood tree and made camp, extracting the makings of a frugal supper from his pack. Thereafter he made a pillow of his saddle, lay down, crossed one booted leg high over the other, operated the makings of a smoke and reflected on the world in general.

It sure did need some reformin’, he again assured himself. He’d tell the moon it did.

He had never read a single line of “Don Quixote” himself, either in Spanish or English, but what the Professor told him of that old *loco* had left a deep impression on him.

Pep had no plans. Just vaguely he had an idea that he was about to do some reformin’. He was tired of doing nothing but monotonous work and was desirous of stirring things up.

As to reformin’—there could be no doubt that *somethin’* ought to be done. The world recently was become so reformed that it needed unreformin’.

The trouble was—he told the moon—where to begin.

All through that night, while William John Pepper slept the sleep of childlike innocence under a cottonwood tree, the T. & S. Limited was rolling out of Louisiana into Texas, bearing Miss Tulip Hellier and her relatives toward Los Indios, the nearest station to the southeast of Tres Hermanas ranch, where the bunch were making mighty preparations.

In the morning Impulsive Pep awoke to discover a diamond-back rattler about two yards from his feet. As the puncher stirred the snake also awoke and coiled after a warning whir like the sound of water escaping from a bad washer.

Its head flew off as Pep fired. The lean buckskin only started and looked up from its scanty grazing.

“All right, ol’ Land Crab,” said William John Pepper, proceeding to run his gun-barrel through with the rod. “Don Quickshot’s sure a bully name when anybody or anythin’s lookin’ f’r trouble.”

His breakfast consisted of a few slabs of hardtack soaked in water from his canteen and a large, thick chunk of a sweetened chocolate favored by cowmen on the range. Thereafter he saddled up and continued his errant course southward.

In the middle of the forenoon he struck the single track of the T. & S. some fifteen miles northeast of Los Indios. As far as the eye could reach there was no sign of human habitation, or human presence, except for this man-made track flanked with telegraph-poles; also a scattering of cattle—dots in the distance. Pep guessed he was within the limits of Hellier’s range at this point. Los Indios was in that, too.

He looked first at the sun, then away to the northeast. There the parallel steel rails merged into a single thick line thinning to a pin-point on the

horizon.

The pin-point away on the horizon to his left presently became studded with a moving knob under a wisp of vapor. It was the T. & S. Limited.

“There she is,” murmured Don Quickshot, dismounting and leading Rosinante to the track.

“We got to get busy, ol’ Snakeface,” said he to his four-legged trailmate. “Reck’n we’ll start in with the railroads. Them conductors ain’t any too civil when yuh ask them a simple question-like. An’ them colored gents is too busy shootin’ bones in the pantry to have any con-sid’ration for a lone female that’s waitin’ for her egg-on-a-biskit.

“We’ll larn ’em, ol’ Hatrack. Them things has got to stop!”

As the train came thundering on, its engine swelling in bulk as the perspective fore-shortened, William John Pepper worked swiftly, though with seeming leisure.

He made the well-trained buckskin lie down right in the middle of the track—across the ties. Then he took the red kerchief from his neck and strolled up the line, walking with the rolling gait of a horseman and waving the lurid bandanna as a danger signal.

The engine-driver shut down. The Limited slowed up and finally came to a standstill not ten paces from Mr. Pepper.

“What yuh stopped me for?” yelled the driver, sticking a grimy face and an oily arm from the cab window.

As the train had been slowing to a stop Pep had been coolly tying the red kerchief about the lower part of his face after whistling to the buckskin, which scrambled to its feet and leisurely began grazing by the side of the track.

The moment the engine-driver stuck his head out he knew by these signs that his question was of a superfluous nature. Before he could withdraw his head and throw her wide open he became aware that two steady, gray eyes above the red kerchief were glinting along a six-gun barrel.

“Stick ’em up, please!” said Pep, quite pleasantly.

“Holy—sufferin’—cats!” howled the engine-driver, summoning his crew.

At the same time the conductor, after a preliminary scowling look from the vestibule of a Pullman, leaped to the ground and came toward the lone

bandit.

“Is this a joke?” he asked sourly.

A second gun appeared in the bandit’s hand and covered the conductor.

“Everybody that don’t think it’s a joke, put up their little hands,” said Pep in class-room style.

“Meanin’ you, Buttons!” he added raspily. “Quick—if you ever want to be in on the laugh part.”

And then, as engine-crew, train-hands and such of the passengers as had emerged to see what the stop meant, put up their hands, a rather pleasant voice cried from the vicinity of an open car-window:

“Mother—we’re held up!”

“Indians! Don’t tell me!” shrieked a voice that could belong only to a lady of *embonpoint* and some social standing.

“Held up! Indians? Oh, piffle!” came another voice with a laughing, girlish note in it. “Bet it’s some joke of dad’s boys.”

But when Tulip Hellier looked out and saw the lone bandit with two alert, gray eyes glancing right and left over the barrels of a pair of guns, she decided that it was a real hold-up by a real bandit.

“Oh, joy!” was her comment on the situation.

CHAPTER IV

“REFORMIN’ ” A RAILROAD

IF TULIP HELLIER had any remaining doubt as to whether it was a real hold-up, or a joke, or perhaps a movie stunt, it was shattered by a vicious bark from the forty-five in the bandit’s left hand.

The train conductor had refused to take the matter seriously in the hope that he might take the desperado off-guard.

“If any of your movie gang has got a camera trained on this act,” he was cynically saying while his right hand stole to his hip-pocket, “maybe the director wouldn’t mind a little more action.

“Like this!” he snapped, drawing a short-barrelled .38 from under the skirt of his coat.

It was then that Pep’s left .45 barked. Just once and before the conductor’s weapon had come half-way to the front.

The bulldog .38 spun in the air with a metallic *whin-ng*.

“Oh, it’s the real thing, Auntie!” cried Miss Hellier, from the window.

Her quick, experienced eye only told her that the bandit was a cowman, and an old-timer at that—a term which does not necessarily imply age.

His face she could not see, except for the bridge of a rather thin, curved nose and a pair of gray eyes which, she fancied, rather twinkled under the broad rim of a sun-faded sombrero. The latter, pulled low in front and jammed down behind the ears, all but concealed close-cropped hair of a lusterless reddish-brown.

This lone bandit was now giving orders. Tulip rather liked the lazy drawl of his voice.

“I’d dream along easier, Skee-zicks,” he was saying to the engine-driver, “if you’d uncouple your fire-eatin’ *caballo* and mosey ahead a bit. I’d be real disturbed findin’ myself hauled sudden into Los Indios while I was performin’ the painful but necessary duties which de-velops on me. Unhitch, partner, an’ shoot!”

This with a flip of the right .45 at the engine-driver, while the bandit still fanned with his left the growing knot of passengers and train-hands, the conductor being the center from which the fanning movement radiated.

A brakeman uncoupled the locomotive. As the engine-driver opened up and the locomotive began to move forward, the conductor shouted, "Shoot to Los Indios and pass the word!"

The conductor flashed a heroically defiant look at the bandit.

"Much 'bliged, Buttons," said the lone one with a grin. "But I allows to get through before Skinny Littlejohn gets here with a posse—the said Skinny bein' sheriff when he's awake."

Then Impulsive Pep got busy. He ordered all hands—train-crew and passengers alike—back aboard the cars. On second thought he said, "I think maybe it would be nicer for us all to get into the diner. It's more sociable, an' them colored gents can hand out some eats while we're ne-go-shiatin'."

The company obeyed, the passengers by this time getting over their first alarm. Tulip, Mrs. Hemingway and her son moved from the parlor car to the diner with such others as had not dismounted.

The bandit himself came to the vestibule of the diner. He still kept his guns handy and warned the conductor that the first monkey-business tried by anybody would mean a sudden and horrid death.

"Yuh got to be awful careful," said Pep solemnly. "I'm the original Don Quickshot and my middle name's Lookin'-f'r-Trouble. I oncet shot the rattles off'n a sheriff's hat-band. Just f'r fun I done that!"

His remark was so unexpected that somebody giggled outright. It was a girl, and perhaps her upbringing had not been of the best.

"Tickets, please!" said the bandit.

Alas for this robber's ambition—perhaps to collect some cash fares—but the conductor had taken up all the tickets on the previous evening. The bandit remained unflustered, however, when this was explained to him.

"Saves me trouble," said he. "All right. You sure you got all the tickets, Buttons? It's outrageous, the high fares these days. People ain't freight. They oughta ride free. An' they're a-goin' to this trip. Buttons, yuh got to issue refund slips to all them people from which yuh took tickets."

The conductor perspired freely while he fumed discreetly. He believed he was dealing with a lunatic, but a lunatic who can snap-shoot a half-drawn

gun from another's hand has to be humored to a certain extent.

He laboriously explained for this lunatic's benefit that the issuing of refund slips would take no end of time.

"Ain't time what yuh're rootin' for, ol' Pieface?" asked the bandit. "So the engine can get back from Los Indios with a posse? Gee! But yuh're the rotten poker-player, ye old pasture-fed beef!

"But ne' mind, Buttons. You go right ahead on that refund business while them colored gentlemen-of-leisure serves the eats. Bring on the menus, yuh Smoked Hams! Be seated, ladies an' gents. The eats is on me, or I sh'd say, on the railroad. The which needs reformin'."

And with that, while the conductor and the colored waiters went to work, the bold bandit leaned against the polished mahogany of the vestibule door and softly hummed the air of "Turkey in the Straw," whereat some of the passengers were further amazed and amused, and that girl giggled again.

"Ma'am," said the bandit, halting his tune and fixing Mrs. Hemingway—who was quite innocent of a giggle—with a severe eye; "ma'am, please to remember that I did not come here t' be laughed at."

Which finished the true culprit. Miss Hellier buried her face in her hands and, for some reason, shed salt tears.

By this time there could be no doubt that all the passengers, with a few exceptions, were actually enjoying the affair.

The colored waiters, after one look at the bandit's guns and but one look at the helpless, docile expression of the conductor's face, hustled around distributing menus and making at least a pretence of laying table-covers. Absolute obedience to the slightest behest of this droll, but firm desperado seemed to be a newly-posted rule aboard the T. & S. Limited.

Only Vivian Hemingway seemed actually rebellious. He was the male head of his family and it galled him to submit to bullying by any mere male in the presence of the rest of the herd, so to speak, and of his cousin, Tulip, in particular. For this Texan cousin he had recently developed that admiration which had made him pass up a Florida yacht-cruise for the uncertainties of life down by the Rio Grande.

And now he could do nothing to assert his manhood short of inviting and meeting sudden death.

"Look here, my friend," said he, fixing the bandit with a really stern eye. "You have the advantage of us all, of course, 'n all that; but you're not

aware, perhaps, that you could be arrested for carrying concealed weapons. The Sullivan Act——”

“Hold on, Professor!” interrupted the bandit with a pained look. “Yuh don’t see no concealed weapons about me, does yuh? As for this Sullivan *hombre*—I ain’t acquainted with the gent, but trot him out an’ let him talk for hisself.”

Again somebody tittered. The bandit’s eyes fixed themselves—this time with justice—upon the laughing face of a girl with copper-grown hair. She was standing between Mr. Sullivan’s friend and a fat lady who looked like a dowager-something at least; the same he had previously accused of undue levity.

There was that about this girl’s face which told Mr. Pepper she was no Easterner. That face and those eyes, and that coloring had somehow, somewhere, at some time, acquired their frank openness and sparkle from the big outdoors and the lazy blue skies.

He felt, too, by the way she looked at him with those laughing eyes, that she knew him for just what he was.

The bandit acknowledged this recognition with an involuntary but undisguised wink, the slight muscular effort of which dislodged the kerchief where it clipped the ridge of his nose.

The kerchief slipped and fell about Pep’s chin. Only for a second; for he immediately worked it back in place. But in that moment Tulip Hellier had seen the bandit’s face. The promise of the humorous, lazy but steady gray eyes and the fine curved nose was not unfulfilled in the droll, wide, thin-lipped mouth set between thin sun-tanned cheeks and strong jaws.

Only a glimpse she had before that face was again half-masked. But it had been enough. She would know that face again anywhere.

“I got to go, ladies an’ gents,” Pep announced, raising his voice and addressing the company in general. “That assistant-buttons has been makin’ Injun signs to the ol’ card-puncher there, an’ I take it there’s something on the warpath from Los Indios way. I ain’t done half as much as I hoped for toward reformin’ this here railroad. Skinny Littlejohn, which is the sheriff, must ha’ been up an’ dressed an’ had his badge on.

“But,” and he waved his guns first at the perspiring conductor, then at the colored waiters, “see that yuh get them refunds all straight. An’ if I hear any complaints about it, or that them Smokes hain’t served this yere banquet

right, I'll get you-all again on the return trip, wreck the train and make the survivors do a ghost-dance over spattered lead. That's all!"

He backed through the vestibule and leaped quickly to the ground. His horse was grazing at a short distance and came toward him at a light canter the instant a certain familiar whistle sounded.

At a glance the bandit saw, away to the southwest, a smudge of vapor over a swelling black blot. The engine was returning. It was no moment for delay. To stop for an instant meant to present himself as a steadier mark for that scattered volley which the train-crew began firing after the bandit the moment the latter's guns were lifted and his back turned.

With a flying leap Impulsive Pep sprang into the saddle.

From the dining-car window Tulip Hellier, her eyes wide with excitement, saw horse and rider a diminishing blot on the landscape, and her heart rejoiced that no lead found its mark. But then, as the engine thundered in and disgorged an extremely fat man wearing a shining star and accompanied by a scratch posse, Tulip saw the bandit halt his horse on a slight rising.

He was standing in his stirrups looking back.

Jacob—Skinny—Littlejohn, the fat sheriff, had perhaps hoped to catch the bandit red-handed and overpower him by force of numbers. He had brought no horses, thus he was unable to take up further pursuit at once.

"What in thunder did he do it for?" he wheezed asthmatically when he heard the story of the bandit's queer doings.

"Struck me," said a shrewd-looking business man, "as if he was just some divil-of-a-boy out looking for trouble."

"Sure!" chuckled a grizzled old Southwesterner who might have been a divil-of-a-boy himself once. "Lookin'-f'r-Trouble. That's his middle name. Told us it was!"

Then a girl burst out laughing. Everybody else began to laugh, too. The whole train seemed presently to rock with mirth, everybody more or less convulsed, except perhaps the conductor, the sheriff, Mrs. Hemingway and her son, Vivian. The last had missed his great chance.

Miss Tulip Hellier laughed so hard she cried, and through her tears she saw in the distance the bandit on the lean buckskin suddenly wave his hat—as if as much to her personally as to the scene of his exploit. Then he cantered off toward the southern horizon.

And as the lean Rosinante cantered her hoofs beat to the rhythm of the song which Impulsive Pep lifted to the amazed heavens.

“Oh, there was an ol’ man an’ his name was Uncle Bill,
An’ he lived all alone on the top of a hill.
Oh, he never tuk a bath, an’ he sez he never will——

“Ol’ Tree-Stump,” Don Quickshot interrupted himself long enough to remark to his Rosinante, “next time we got to do better. But that young female with the open-range face plum threw me out!”

CHAPTER V

THE RECEPTION COMMITTEE

THE MEXICAN, SUAREZ, was not with the bunch that went to the Los Indios depot to greet the return of Tulip Hellier in “ol’-fashioned, cow-country style.”

For on the very afternoon when Suarez started across the boundary river to visit his “*madre*,” Chico, emerging from his rock hiding-place and bent on a foraging expedition, bumped into a strong force of Braganza federals. The latter began to act at once.

Chico, short of ammunition, had to retreat. The federals pursued hard on his heels, harassing him with their fire and reducing his strength considerably.

Villegas, hero of a thousand escapes, finally held council with his latest lieutenant, a fat Mexican who perhaps found a Bacchanalian’s pride in the sobriquet—the Drunk.

The Drunk agreed with his chief that it would be unwise to return to the lair among the rocks before they had completely given slip to the federals.

Chico, a past master in the dodging game, proceeded to turn the fox-trick.

He led the federals by devious doublings to a point where valor of fight became second to discretion about direction. There, leaving Braganza’s officers warmly debating the nearest distance to the nearest water—if any—Chico Villegas made a circuitous return to the lair with what was left of the immediate force with which he had started out.

There Suarez awaited him. But Suarez saw Chico first and kept out of sight. For the bandit was in one of his unamiable moods.

And Chico had some reason for being peeved. Given ammunition enough he could have wiped out that bunch of Braganzistas.

The bandit retired moodily to the back of the immense fire-blackened cave which had long been one of his inviolate retreats. There he and the Drunk dosed each other with potions of a nerve-sedative called *pulque*.

It was morning before the lieutenant appeared, but he was again clearly unapproachable until after a second course of treatment.

“Suarez,” said El Borracho when the miracle had been worked, “it is not possible. You would be not wise to urge an interview with our Chiquito this morning. There is but one thing that will bring a light to his eye. And that is ammunition—lots of it.”

“I bring it—news of it,” said Suarez.

“Ah! That is different. Then you might risk it.”

By the time Suarez had risked a bullet, conveyed the news Manuel, the Los Indios *telegrafico*, had whispered and answered many questions on detail the great bandit had to ask, the sun was high.

Nevertheless, Suarez, arriving later than late at Tres Hermanas, found that he had guessed right. Señor Jim had left early for Los Indios. Suarez had never been missed.

Big Jim, driving a buckboard and escorted by a squadron of cowboys who rode in all the glory of ancient days and ancient accouterment, found Los Indios in something of a turmoil.

“Silky” Lazaire, a professional card-player, was in the forefront of an excited group by the depot.

“Sheriff Littlejohn and a scratch posse have just gone ten or fifteen miles back up the line on the Limited’s engine,” said he. “The engine got detached somehow from the cars and brought word that the train was being held up by a lone bandit.”

“The hell yuh say!” roared Big Jim, jumping from the buckboard. “Sufferin’ horned toads! My gal Tulip’s on that train! Len’ me a hoss, somebody! I ain’t gonna hunt outlaws in no buckboard! I——

“Hey? What’s that?” he broke off.

Away to the north of east the Limited could be seen coming on.

“All right, boys. Le’s wait an’ see first!” cried Big Jim. “No use’n goin’ off half-cock.”

The train rolled in. The first two to alight, but at different ends of the train, were Sheriff Skinny Littlejohn and Tulip Hellier. The Los Indios crowd surged to the sheriff’s end, Hellier and his boys to Tulip’s.

“Oh, Dad!” chortled the girl, almost overcome by the fervor of the paternal embrace.

“Did that *mal hombre* touch a hair of your head, my gal?” he demanded at once.

“Oh—*he?*” laughed Tulip. “Why, no. It was a great lark. He didn’t rob anybody and treated us all to luncheon and—But goodness, Dad! You’re forgetting Aunt Hemingway.”

The dowager stood patiently awaiting her brother-in-law’s manners. Cousin Vivian was eyeing the theatrical-appearing cowboys with a certain air of mistrust and distrust.

“By Jimmy, Marion, is that you?” said Big Jim to his late wife’s sister. “How you’ve growed! I mean—ain’t yuh grown thinner like?”

“Neither one nor the other, James,” said Mrs. Hemingway quite snappily.

“Oh, well—” said Big Jim, somehow feeling he’d made a bad start.

He took off his black Sunday sombrero and at the same time made a back-hand signal to Slow-Mad Gray, the foreman.

Many shortcomings in etiquette were drowned in a wild yell.

“*Whee-e-e-ee-ow!*”

This was followed by a deafening and continuous roar of discharging .45’s. And again——

“*Whee-e-e-ee-ow!*”

Mrs. Hemingway, in the meantime, had dropped her hand-satchel and was standing—swaying, rather—supported by Vivian, her eyes shut tight and both hands over her ears.

The rude, volley of firearms disturbed still another person, but for a very different reason.

Bursting from the crowd, Skinny Littlejohn came puffing and wheezing along the platform.

“Whut’n blazes is the meanin’ of this?” he cried in an asthmatic voice. “Whut d’y’ mean by it, Jim Hellier an’ you boys? It’s agin the law to pack guns in town, let alone——”

Then he saw Tulip of the laughing eyes. Despite the woman grown, that woman failed to conceal the identity of the wild lovable girl Skinny

remembered.

“Why, bless my—bless you—it’s Tulip—I mean, Miss Hellier!” stammered the sheriff, bowing most gallantly. “Gosh! Ef I knowed it was you I’d ’a’ emptied a coupla guns myself.”

Thereupon things quieted down momentarily, the cowboys superintending the loading of the party and the party’s baggage.

Presently, with another salvo of forty-fives and another wild cowboy yell, the Tres Hermanas outfit started for home, Tulip giving every evidence of delight at her reception, Mrs. Hemingway showing every symptom of regret, and cousin Vivian beginning to register a mild but superior interest in his new environment.

When they were gone in a whirl of dust and gunpowder fumes Manuel, the *telegrafico*, who had noted that Suarez was not of the bunch, returned with a smile to his office and his key.

The crowd dispersed to await a new fillip to its interest in the bandit.

And presently, while twenty miles away Impulsive Pep sat on his reined-in horse and considered the advisability of changing his course to make pursuit more difficult, Sheriff Littlejohn sat in his cubby-hole office, his coat off, his sleeves rolled back, his tongue lolling out sidewise and a pencil gripped in his hand in the unaccustomed effort of a literary description (second-hand) of one, “Don Quickshot, *alias* Lookin’-f’r-Trouble.”

CHAPTER VI

A RANGER TAKES THE TRAIL

NOT only the planning but half the execution at least, had been done on the stage-setting of “Tulip’s Party.”

Tres Hermanas hacienda looked to the home-coming daughter exactly as she had left it five years before. But when she got inside the ranchhouse and explored the outhouses she found everything dolled up as for a great celebration.

“There’s gonna be some party to-night,” said Slow-Mad Gray in his quiet way, but with a twinkle in the eye he turned upon the ranch’s pride. “Odd ye should ariv just in time for it, Miss Tulip.”

In the meantime, in his office at Los Indios, Skinny Littlejohn, still in shirtsleeves, was leaning back in his chair and admiring a printed proof of his literary production.

Allowing for many misprints—turned letters, transpositions, recklessly sprinkled commas and a persistent “s” from a wrong font, the production Sheriff Littlejohn read with pride was something like this:

WANTED, LONE BANDIT!!

“Don Quickshot,” *alias* “Lookin’-f’r-Trouble.” Who held up T. & S. Number 4 on August 19th, about fifteen mile northeast of Los Indios.

Age: about 20 or 30. Height: between 5 and 6 feet, nearer six. Eyes: blue-gray. Two-gun man. Gave name of “Don Quickshot,” but also answers to “Lookin’-f’r-Trouble.”

Favorite tune: “Turkey in the Straw,” which said bandit hums, whistles or sings when in action.

Information leading to capture of the above will be appreciated by the undersigned.

JACOB LITTLEJOHN

SHERIFF, LOS INDIOS

Unlike Mr. Littlejohn, Bolton, of the Texas Rangers, was clearly a horseman in build and gait. He was tall and large-boned and had a hatchet face that was remarkable only for its grimness and lack of humor.

“What’s this about a bandit, Littlejohn?” he asked abruptly. “Just blew in on another job an’ heard somethin’ about a hold-up. Maybe he’s a feller I’m after anyway.”

Mr. Littlejohn felt that he could add no details on top of those contained in that literary masterpiece. With a proud gesture he handed the proof to Bolton.

The ranger took the sheet and studied it. As he read his interest visibly grew. He did not smile over the mistakes but, being a practical man, borrowed the sheriff’s stump of lead pencil and gravely corrected them. He scowled with irritation at the scarcity of detail in the physical description of the bandit.

But he half-closed his eyes and looked highly intelligent the while he underlined that detail about “Turkey in the Straw.”

“Mmmph!” he finally grunted, handing back the proof. “I’ll get that feller, Littlejohn,” said he, rising and moving toward the door. “Good thing I dropped in.”

And he was gone.

Outside the sheriff’s office the ranger, filled with a hope that at last he had struck the trail of a man for whom he had been hunting half over the Panhandle, mounted a really magnificent black horse and rode toward the spot where the train hold-up had occurred.

He followed the railroad track, hoping to arrive at the scene and perhaps pick up the bandit’s trail before dark. He could not hope to follow it after dark, even by the light of the full moon which was due that night, but he could establish, perhaps, what direction the fugitive had taken.

If it was in any direction other than generally south he would be at a loss how to act before morning. That would mean the bandit had his headquarters within Texan jurisdiction north of the T. & S. track.

If, however, the trail did lead south it would mean that the desperado, though clearly not a Mexican, was trying to make his getaway across the river.

In the latter case Bolton felt he might be headed off by other rangers or by the military patrol which was guarding the border against Mexican bandit raids. He could telegraph that such a man was wanted and have the message relayed from post to post.

But the element of blind luck served him better than reasoning could ever have done.

About five miles east of Los Indios and while it was still clear daylight, he observed where a shod horse had come from the southeast, climbed the low embankment of the T. & S. track at this point, crossed, descended the other side and continued in a northwesterly direction.

That line would have taken the horse and the man who presumably rode it straight to Tres Hermanas hacienda.

Bolton did not know this, or that many rigs and horses were presently to head in the same direction. Had he known of Tulip's *baile* he would have dismissed that oblique trail as meaning but one more guest.

But in his lucky ignorance of the party, that trail became eloquent to him of someone traveling from nowhere in particular to nowhere in particular, but seeking in particular to avoid the only town in miles—Los Indios.

Which the ranger thought queer.

Bolton did not give up his original idea of reaching the scene of the hold-up before dark. Indeed, he now pressed his horse to a swift canter in order to reach that beginning of the bandit's trail.

He had observed that the off-hind shoe of the horse on that oblique trail back there had been worn down to almost nothing at one side.

When he found at the scene of the hold-up that the lone horseman had (at first, at least) ridden southward and that his mount's off-hind shoe was worn almost to nothing, the ranger chuckled with personal satisfaction.

As plainly as if he had seen Pep's later actions with his own eyes, Bolton perceived how the bandit had ridden some distance south, then for reasons of his own decided against Mexico. Or possibly as a blind to pursuers he had turned abruptly to the northwest, recrossed the T. & S. tracks five miles east of Los Indios, gone around the back of that town and was now heading for some hiding-place to the northwest.

"He won't travel all night on that shoe," Bolton told himself. "He'll claim hospitality at some bunkhouse. Or some small rancher will fall for him for one night anyway."

So Bolton figured possibilities as he made fair speed back to where the trail recrossed the T. & S.

It was dark when he arrived there. But he put the black animal on the trail and gave him his head.

Other horses were leaving a trail that night, but all of these (in this vicinity, at least) were directly from Los Indios and went more north than northwest to Tres Hermanas. The bandit's trail traveled more from east to west, bearing only north in that oblique course which, followed consistently, would also bring the rider within sight of Tres Hermanas.

There the lights of welcome burned alike for friend and stranger that night in honor of Tulip Hellier's home-coming.

CHAPTER VII

“LASCA”

SHORTLY after sundown the guests began to arrive at Tres Hermanas and assemble in the barn which had been converted into a dance-hall.

They were something of a mixed crowd. Tulip, heading the reception committee with her father and Mrs. Hemingway, was dressed in a cowgirl's divided skirt and boots. These she had donned, not only for her own pleasure and—yes—comfort, but in compliment to the girls from neighboring ranches. These, she felt sure, would come to the informal affair dressed as in other days.

But times had changed. The girls from the neighboring ranches came all resplendent in the latest from New York, via San Antonio.

Mrs. Hemingway's evening-dress was, of course, understandable in a lady of her weight, years and dignity.

On the other hand, Vivian, who had compromised on a Tuxedo suit, stood out rather markedly in contrast with the boys who, whether from Tres Hermanas, Snake-in-a-Hole or any other ranch, appeared in chaps, spurs, colored shirts, brilliant neckerchiefs *and* guns. The word had been:

“No dollin' up now. Come as ye are, or as ye oughta come to an ol'-fashioned cow-country *baile*.”

At first the mixture of dress created a certain shyness, an awkwardness, almost a stiffness. But Big Jim loosened up things by conducting the males to a private oasis of his own.

Then, a can of music being opened, placed on the hopper of the machine and ground out fine, all began to go well. The boys grabbed the New York-San Antonio millinery and cavorted around in general eccentricities of step which all came under the head of a dance there and then created—“The Coyote Side-Step.”

Tulip was unquestionably the belle of the barn-dance. Only one little shadow marred for a few minutes Tulip's perfect happiness that night. She suddenly turned to her father and asked, “Where's Jenny Swetland?”

Big Jim looked worried on the instant. He had hoped she would not notice the absence of her girlhood chum.

“Well, Tulip—it’s like this,” said honest Big Jim, genuinely distressed. “Jenny Swetland’s Jenny Hale now an’ got four kids—one f’r every year she’s been married to Dick Hale, who was never much good before him an’ Jenny hitched up, an’ ain’t much better since. They’re livin’ in that ol’ shack a ways south that he built for himself when he first took up small ranchin’.”

Tulip read the whole story between her father’s simple words. Her eyes filled with tears.

“Aw, hell—meanin’ fudge!” said Big Jim, digging into a pocket and producing a letter. “That’s for you—from Jenny. Get off in a corner, gal, read it and have done with it. Cryin’ over spilt milk’s just pourin’ water on poor stuff an’ I’ll take yuh to see Jenny in a day or so.”

Tulip went off by herself and read the letter:

Hale’s Ranch.

DEAR TULIP—Your Dad sent word you were coming home and asked me to the dance. I can’t come because my last baby’s sick and Dick went to Indios to sell some cows and hasn’t come back. I’m afraid—but you didn’t know I was married and, oh Tulip, I sometimes wish I hadn’t. But maybe you can come and see me when you’re settled.

Your old chum,
JENNY.

There it was—a tragedy in a nutshell—the old, old story of a woman’s love for a weak man and her hope to reform him.

The great heart of Hellier’s daughter swelled in a new tenderness for Jenny. She covertly wiped two tears from her cheeks and stuffed the letter into her bosom. It was the laughing Tulip who rushed to the barn-door to greet a massive, perspiring, wheezing, but nevertheless resplendent vision of male glory which was just making its entry.

It was Sheriff Skinny Littlejohn.

His reception was boisterous. He was slapped on the back, quizzed on his Lothario appearance and even kissed by a few of the girls.

Then, his arrival somehow producing a climactic atmosphere, the *baile* proper began—a sort of informal grand march.

The sheriff led with Tulip on his arm, followed by Big Jim escorting his dowager-like sister-in-law, Mrs. Hemingway. The bunch trailed along with their “fancies” clinging tight, and somewhere down the line came Vivian in his Tuxedo with a fair Texan maid.

Now, Vivian had visited the oasis several times.

Under the influence of this fortification he was proving himself quite genial and charming. He confided to the fair Texan on his arm that he had always aspired to the open, free life—life with a spice of danger in it and the kind of romance of which one reads in that celebrated poem, “Lasca.”

What? She didn’t know “Lasca”? And he quoted, from more or less erratic memory, the opening verse:

“I want free life and I want fresh air,
And I sigh for the canter after the cattle;
The crack of the whips like shots in battle;
The *mêlée* of horns and hoofs and heads,
That wars and wrangles and scatters and spreads—
 The green beneath and the blue above,
 And dash and danger, and life and love—
 And Lasca!”

“Oh, bully!” cried the girl on his arm. Immediately after the dance which followed the grand march, that girl was in close conference with Tulip and Big Jim Hellier.

As a result, Hellier, with an air of—well, as if he wasn’t quite sure that he was doing the wisest thing—took advantage of a lull to step forward, clear his throat and announce:

“Ladies an’ gents—we are now going to have the pleasure of hearing my nephew, Mr. Vivian Hemingway of New York, recite that well-known poem, ‘I’ll Ask Her’.”

There came an encouraging burst of applause. Vivian looked rather dazed—annoyed, too. It may have been the sudden publicity, or that he really didn’t know the poem referred to. But he was escorted by main force to the middle of the floor and ordered to “ask her an’ don’t be shy about it.”

“I—I’m afraid there’s some misunderstanding,” stammered Vivian. “The only poem I know that might—that might be the one to which my uncle has been good enough to refer, is called ‘Lasca’.”

“I knew I’d get it twisted,” groaned Big Jim with solemn self-conviction.

“‘Lasca’,” continued Vivian, gaining confidence now that things were made right, “—the great classic of the Southwest, the epic of the cowboy and an epitome of days that are, alas, no more; although when I arrived in your fair city, at Los Indios, to-day——”

“Is this the piece you’re on now?” wheezed Sheriff Littlejohn.

“No—er—just a preliminary explanation,” said Vivian, derailed for the moment. “However——”

He cleared his throat, changed his voice in a funny way some amateur elocutionists have of doing and began:

“I want free life and I want fresh air.”

The first verse went well. Hellier glanced around, himself approving, commanding the approval of others.

But then something went wrong—that indefinable something; which ruins an actor’s best scene.

Whatever it was, while Mrs. Hemingway and the sheriff and Paramount Sam looked sentimental and almost lachrymose, Big Jim seemed to grow fidgety; some of the girls began to suppress giggles, and the belted and armed men who sat around in chaps and high-heeled boots grew very red and their faces puffed out as if each was trying to see which could hold his breath in longest.

Now Vivian was dilating upon the contradictory feminism of his heroine. Quoth he, wistfully:

“But once, when I made her jealous for fun,
At something I looked, or said, or *had* done,
One evening in San Antonio,
She drew from her *girdle* a *cute little dagger*,
And—sting of a *wawsp!*—it made me stagger.
An inch to the left, or an inch to the right,
And I shouldn’t be *meandering* here to-night!”

During this verse—or version—for some reason the Twiddler from Snake-in-a-Hole got up suddenly and went out. He contained himself absolutely until he got clear outside, but then he lay down on the ground and

seemed very ill. His illness took the form of some sort of convulsion when he heard a *sotto voce* whisper from the open doorway:

“Whatinell’s a wawsp, Gila, anyway? They ain’t none in Texas, is they?”

Inside, Vivian, impressed perhaps by the strained silence of his audience, *meandered* on. He described very well that sultry night when Lasca and he watched the restless cattle. When he suddenly started and asked tensely (as the hero), “*Was that thunder?*”—and Sheriff Littlejohn innocently replied, “Gosh, no! They ain’t a cloud out!” Vivian got rattled especially when Slow-Mad Gray was attacked with a paroxysm of something like whooping-cough.

Well, it was thunder all right—in the recitation, that is. The cattle stampeded and Lasca and Vivian leaped on one horse and rode for their lives with the panic-stricken cattle avalanching after them.

And at this point Vivian’s memory played him one of those tricks which are painfully well-known to reciters. The beginning of the next verse was quite clear to his mind—“The cattle gained on us”—but the sequel was vague.

Sooner than stop, Vivian (like the cattle) kept a-going. His memory jumped hither and thither all over the poem, seeking a continuing line. But ever he came back to that blank wall, that solidly established fact that “the cattle gained on us.”

Beyond that point of the circle he did not get for a while. It was as if he and Lasca just galloped around and around, and the playful cows, enjoying this circus stunt, just kept on galloping around after them.

Once in desperation he again tensely asked, “Was that thunder?” And when Skinny Littlejohn assured him for the second time that it “wurn’t,” Vivian almost gave up. But before these illiterate cow-persons pride supported him.

He didn’t explain what happened to Lasca. He couldn’t have done so except in a prose summary; which refuge pride refused. Leaving out altogether the important fact that Lasca was hooped to death with her body spread over her lover’s, Vivian just proceeded to bury the lady and, having done that, resumed tearful reminiscence with really fine feeling.

That last verse was a success, making up to Vivian for all previous inward frustrations and outward annoyances. He threw himself into that sob-verse with true tragic fervor. Tears were in his voice as he described the lost

grave “down by the Rio Grande.” And tears streamed down the faces of his audience.

Around that grave the black snake glid and slithered and slid. And the little gray hawk hung aloft in the air. When he described the stately buzzard his audience sobbed. It actually honked when he spoke of the “sly coyote” trotting here and there around that unknown grave.

When he bowed and strolled right into the thickest of the fair to receive his deserved laurels, that barn shook with an outburst of pent-up emotions.

He’d made the hit of the evening—and only half knew it!

Big Jim Hellier was recalled to his duties as host by the appearance of a long-legged person with a pair of humorous gray eyes. He was standing in the doorway, sombrero in hand, looking bashfully in.

Instantly the host was on his feet and advancing to greet him.

“Welcome, stranger,” said he with just a slight rising inflection.

“My name’s Pepper,” said the bashful one, rowelling his left bootleg with his right spur. “Will’am John Pepper, late of Snake-in-a-Hole outfit. Just drifted in.”

“Yuh’re sure welcome. Come an’ meet the folks.”

On turning round to perform introductions Big Jim found a large man with a wheezy breathing as the first in order.

“Stranger, shake hands with our sheriff, Mr. Littlejohn.”

“Pleased to meet yuh, Sheriff!” said the bandit, sticking out a hand—and grinning.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DISTURBING ELEMENT

TULIP had been dancing with the Twiddler from Snake-in-a-Hole. She was now talking with him while cooling off. Suddenly into the eyes of that modern-school cowboy came a look of surprise.

At the same time Tulip became conscious that behind her was some person at whom the Twiddler's gaze was directed with a glimmer of recognition.

She turned to find a rather long-limbed individual with twinkling gray eyes, close-cropped, reddish-brown hair and a most engagingly humorous smile.

"Your dad," said this long-limbed person, "told me jes' to ride right into the rest of the herd an' cut out anything as tuk my fancy. I ain't an awful lot on the hoof, but if you can stand it, reck'n I can. How about the next?"

Tulip had been staring at the man. She could hardly believe it was he. Yet it was—the bandit!

She made a funny little noise in her throat—more like a chortle than a chuckle. Then she drifted off in the arms of Impulsive Pep.

It was a waltz—and she noticed that he was no novice at the step, although his *caballero* gait and his tallness made the concert of their movement somewhat awkward.

At last, she again made that funny little noise in her throat, looked up at him and said, "You *must* be looking for trouble!"

"Not at this partic'lar minute, ma'am," drawled Pep. "My hands air full, so to speak. But I wondered how long it was gonna take yuh to recognize me."

"Oh, I knew you right away."

"Yuh did—huh?" He fell into deep thought for a moment; then—drolly, "Do yuh know, little girl, yuh spoiled a perfectly good hold-up."

"I did? How?"

“Why, yuh just looked at me—an’ it was all off. I lost muh nerve. But let’s go outside an’ talk it over. There was an awful fine moon driftin’ aroun’ when I come in. How about it?”

She hesitated, as was perfectly proper. But then the honesty of his droll smile completely disarmed her. They were near the rear door of the barn just then. Through this they walked into the moonlight, mixing outside with a few other couples who were taking the air.

Presently Tulip stopped and faced her partner.

“Why did you do it?” she asked point-blank.

He did not hedge, knowing exactly what she meant. But in his embarrassment he rowelled his left bootleg with his right spur.

“Oh,” said he vaguely, “it was just one of them blamed impulses.”

“Why—you must be terribly impulsive!”

“Impulsive, ma’am, is my family name,” said Pep, looking down at her gravely and wondering if all faces are alike in moonlight.

He grinned. She liked him when he grinned. She didn’t hide the fact that she liked him. They went on talking—strolling—stopping—talking.

While romance moved at the rear of the barn, up to the front of it presently rode grim reality mounted on a black horse.

Bolton had lost the trail some way back. His horse, becoming confused by the many tracks that converged toward Tres Hermanas, had chosen to follow the crowd.

The horses of all the early comers had been hitched or corraled well away from the barn. Therefore the lone mount of the last-comer before Bolton did not escape the ranger’s eye. It was a lean *caballo* of a dirty buckskin hue and standing unhitched at the left front corner of the converted dance-hall.

Bolton dismounted at the right front corner and made his horse fast by simply throwing the bridle reins over its head.

Then the ranger, not really expecting any fruit of the action, went over to the buckskin, raised the off hind-hoof, glanced at it, then stared at it, the while he whistled softly.

The shoe was worn almost to nothing on one side.

Hitching his six-gun to a little handier position, the ranger entered the barn by the front door. His dress, his star, everything about him proclaimed the ranger to Hellier's eye. Big Jim made him welcome.

But it was at once clear to the rancher that Mr. Bolton had not blown in to join in the revels, that something lay on his mind, something which showed plainly on his stern countenance.

"Any strangers here to-night?" he asked Hellier.

Big Jim's brows came together in a slight frown. He resented the invasion into Tulip's party of a ranger *on business*. He was about to say something tinged perhaps with this resentment, but he changed his mind.

He fell to swift, hard thinking. Was there any guest present and whose record he did not know personally? None except, perhaps, that latecomer, Mr. Pepper.

Hellier looked around the floor in search of that person. A few minutes before he had seen him dancing with his own daughter. Now he could see neither Mr. Pepper nor his daughter.

Still thinking, yet wishing to cover his momentary preoccupation, he pretended to notice suddenly that the air in the barn was getting a bit thick. Skinny Littlejohn was mopping his face and neck with a huge blue-and-white bandanna.

"Say!" cried Hellier to his foreman, Slow-Mad Gray. "It's hotter'n hinges in here. Suppose ye opens the roof-trap there, Ike."

The foreman went to a cleek in the wall just over the refreshment table to the right and undid a double rope from it. A haul on one of the ropes lifted a skylight trap up in the angular roof. Through this gap cool air and moonlight streamed. This effected, the foreman made fast again to the cleek over the refreshment table.

Big Jim, having anxiously watched this simple operation, now turned again to Bolton and asked, "What was it ye said, Ranger?"

"I asked if there were any strangers here, anybody you didn't know personally."

"No," said Hellier with just a shade of antagonism; "nobody as I'd say ain't welcome if they plays the game right."

At this tactfully administered rebuke to the very latest comer, Mr. Bolton decided to ask no more questions, but to wait and watch.

In the meantime, Tulip had turned with the person the ranger sought and was moving with him toward the back door of the barn.

“We’d better go in,” said she. “Of course, it is understood that I—I never saw you before, Mr.——”

“Pepper, ma’am—William John. Pep f’r short mostly. What’s yours—f’r short, I mean?”

She stopped again and looked up in his face.

“Tulip,” she said after a moment’s hesitation.

“Too-lip,” said Pep softly; then with a chuckle, “Suppose’n we makes it four.”

He bent swiftly and lightly kissed her with a curious mixture or mischief and respect.

She started back, utterly surprised, but somehow no more angry than she was pleased—and she wasn’t that.

“Why—what——” she stammered.

“Don’t get mad, little girl,” said Pep with his conquering grin. “It was just another of them impulses.”

“Let’s go in,” she said quietly, turning to the rear door.

Pep followed, walking on air.

Bolton saw his man enter with the girl just as Paramount Sam was assembling a double line of partners for an old-fashioned country dance.

The dance was about to begin—everybody impatient to get started—when Paramount saw one more couple on the horizon. He immediately and peremptorily ordered them to take places at the foot of the line.

Thus Tulip, with the bandit’s kiss still tingling on her lips, was unable to decline his continued partnership when all eyes were turned upon the dilatory pair. But she did not look at the eyes that twinkled at her across the lane of the barn-dance set.

The orchestra, composed of a fiddle, a clarinet and a drum, assisted by the Twiddler, struck up “Turkey in the Straw.”

As the first couple came down the middle and went through the simple figure, Pep, unable to restrain himself where that tune was concerned, began

softly to hum the air and then, a little less softly, to sing the words through his nose.

“Oh, there was an old woman an’ she wasn’t very rich,
An’ when she died she didn’t leave much . . .”

Presently, at the chorus, everybody caught up the infectious doggerel. Pounding the floor, cavorting and clapping their hands in time, the whole company was singing in repetition the last line of the verse.

Then they urged Pep to pipe up the next verse. The second couple came down the middle to the words:

“Oh, there was a li’l chicken an’ it had a wooden leg,
An’ every blessed mornin’ it useter lay an egg . . .”

Bolton, observing the singer (who was coming in for a lot of attention just then) turned to Hellier and asked, with an attempt at casual geniality, “Who’s the minstrel end-man?”

Big Jim turned a pair of glinting eyes on the ranger and snappily answered, “Why don’t yuh go an’ ask him yerself?”

“Maybe I will, at that!” returned Bolton, just as snappily.

As it came the turn of the last couple—Pep and Tulip—and they came down the middle, hand in hand, Mr. Pepper was chortling joyously:

“Oh there was an’ ol’ man an’ his name was Uncle Bill,
An he lived all alone on the top of a hill.
Oh, he never tuk a bath an’ he ses he never will.”

Then Bolton the ranger knew beyond peradventure of a doubt that this was his man, the bandit of the T. & S. Limited.

As Pep and Tulip came back to their original places at the bottom of the lines and the dance ended in a loud burst of handclapping, Bolton stepped up to his man, tapped him on the shoulder and said quietly, “*Amigo*, I’d like a word with you—outside.”

“Aw, g’long an’ get a girl of your own!” chuckled Pep, who had Tulip on his arm and her final complete forgiveness to occupy his mind for the moment.

The ranger quietly and swiftly showed his badge of authority. At sight of that glittering star Pep looked momentarily serious, but not half so alarmed

as Tulip appeared.

He grinned in the ranger's face and stuck out one of his long legs in a curious octopus-like reach. Bolton fell all his length on the floor.

Instantly Pep, with a whispered, "Sorry, Two-lips!" shot across the floor to the rear door of the barn. Half-way there he saw that it was blocked by couples making for the cooler outdoors after the boisterous country-dance.

Bolton by this time had scrambled to his feet. He saw his man turn and make for the other door—at the front. Sitting beside the latter (to get all the air he could) was the fat sheriff. Littlejohn was galvanized into action only by the sudden confusion and the ranger's voice shouting to him, "Stop that man, Sheriff!"

When Skinny saw Pep dashing toward him (and the door) and became aware that a six-gun had suddenly appeared in the ranger's right hand, he knew the business must be serious.

The fat sheriff just slammed that front door shut and planted his mountainous body against it, himself facing inward.

Pep, cut off again, hesitated for a second, glancing this way and that.

"Put up your hands!" cried the ranger, levelling the forty-five.

Instantly Big Jim struck up his arm with a roar.

"Goldarn your hide!" he cried. "If ye're so blind yuh don't see females present yuh couldn't shoot straight nohow! What in hell's the meanin' of this?"

"Quick! The roof-trap! Can you make it?" whispered a girl's voice close to Pep's ear.

He gave her one glance and followed the swift directing flash of her eyes.

Next instant he rushed to the right hand wall, leaped on to the refreshment table, scattering sandwiches, pies, glasses and bottles with his spurred feet, sprang upward to an overhead cross-beam, hauled himself astride it, straddled along that, laid hands on the edge of the roof-trap and pulled himself up and through.

Down on the dance-floor during this lively trapeze performance, there was a great uproar. Hellier was actually wrestling with the infuriated officer. Bolton was trying to break loose while explaining that he wanted only to shoot up.

But this part of the excitement was over in less than a half-minute. A face with a humorous grin was momentarily visible framed in the oblong of the roof-trap. A hand and half an arm appeared and blew a kiss in the general direction of—Was it to the host's daughter? Then the picture frame was blank, save for a misty moonlight effect.

Bolton, detaching himself from Big Jim, dashed toward the front door, where Skinny Littlejohn stood as one in a daze, his big body leaning heavily against the door, as if he defended the latter against an attack of wolves from without.

“Git out of my way!” yelled the ranger, violently assisting the mountain of a man to one side.

Just as Pep slid down the roof-slope outside and in the direction of the corner where he had left his horse, Bolton, emerging, reached the buckskin first. There the ranger crouched, gun ready, awaiting that moment when the bandit would probably attempt to drop into his saddle and escape.

But if the ranger reached the buckskin first, Impulsive Pep first became aware of the fact.

He suddenly checked his downward slide on the roof. Then he scrambled, crablike, along the slope to the other corner.

The first Bolton knew of his own defeat was when from the other corner-edge a figure nimbly dropped to the ranger's fine black horse, neatly clothes-pinning the saddle with a pair of long legs.

A moment later Impulsive Pep was galloping at breakneck speed out into the moonlit night, carrying with him the satisfying knowledge that his own lean Rosinante was no match for the steed which he had borrowed.

CHAPTER IX

THE REFORM TRAIL AGAIN

IT was a saying in Los Indios that “when the sheriff’s away the gamblers play.”

The town being sheriffless that evening and most of the better element gone to the *baile* at Tres Hermanas, “Lazaire’s Main Event” was wide open. That is to say, it was doing a fair business ostensibly in harmless chips and ginger-ale.

At the soft-drink bar there were quite a few persons who seemed to be thriving on that particular brand of ginger-ale, which (to the observing eye) was carefully dispensed under the back of the bar.

Lazaire himself was in the back room and conducting the operations of a small and remarkably soundless roulette wheel.

Beside the roulette table, steadily playing and nearly as steadily losing was an old young man who was plainly intoxicated.

Lazaire knew Dick Hale had come into town a couple of days before and sold a few cows. Also, Lazaire knew that Dick Hale would not leave town until he had drunk away his money or otherwise been cleaned out of it. The gambler watched the weary, dissipated face with a look less of pity than cold contempt.

Lazaire would have felt—if he ever gave a thought to the ethics of any matter—that as Dick Hale had to be cleaned out before he would return to sobriety and sanity there was something even commendable in cleaning him out quickly.

In Hale’s left hand there was a crushed ball of green banknotes. On the table ledge at his right elbow was a diminishing pile of colored chips. His face was red and unshaven, his eyes bloodshot and the lids swollen. His brain was so leaden that Lazaire had to draw his attention at intervals to the rare fact that he had won!

It was unnecessary to tell Hale when he had lost. Why waste time? And Hale always woke up sufficiently at the soft-spoken “Place your bets!” to

mechanically plant a few chips at random; sometimes winning thereby—but not often.

Into one of the alleys which flanked Lazaire's place rode the bandit, Pep, on the borrowed black horse. In the shadow of Mr. Barkis' print-shop behind the "Main Event" Pep left the animal standing and himself entered Lazaire's.

He was unknown to any there save as a puncher from Snake-in-a-Hole way. As that he had appeared at Lazaire's before—many a time. He came in for no particular scrutiny when he approached the ginger-ale counter and fingered his parched throat with a comically eloquent gesture.

The bartender grinned, dispensed a mixture behind the bar and passed it over. Pep also grinned as he sniffed the stuff and drained the glass.

Then, having purchased some cigarette makings, he strolled into the rear rooms and for a while stood watching the turns of the wheel while he idly smoked.

His one thought in heading for Lazaire's was that it was about the last place any pursuer would imagine a fugitive would go. For Lazaire's was too well known as an open rendezvous of the more or less lawless.

And for that very reason Impulsive Pep went there.

Bolton was on his trail. He felt sure of that. And his surmise was correct. But the ranger just then was laboring under disadvantages.

He had been unable to get a horse at Tres Hermanas; that is to say a *real* horse.

The guest animals were needed for more or less long return-trips after the dance. Hellier, perhaps in a continuing spirit of resentment at the ranger's disturbing invasion, discovered that all his own utility mounts had been turned out, excepting a few in the corral that the boys would be needing to escort some of the ladies home.

Bolton turned away from that unsympathetic party with bitterness and took Impulsive Pep's buckskin.

This animal had done a goodly number of miles during the past twenty-four hours. Between tiredness and a bad shoe it made but poor progress at the outset. By the time Bolton brought it to Los Indios the buckskin was lame.

He went directly to the sheriff's office. There he found a sleepy constable holding down Littlejohn's chair. The ranger ordered this bucolic

person to hang up the cayuse somewhere and himself sat down moodily in the vacated chair to reflect on the poor showing he had made at Tres Hermanas.

When the sleepy constable came back and reported the disposal of Pep's Rosinante the ranger said, "And supposin' I brought in this bandit *hombre*, is there any place in this bailiwick where I could lock him up short of handcuffing him to my own bunk?"

"Sart'n! Sart'n sure!" said the constable, opening a cubby-hole door in the office wall. Immediately behind was another door—a skeleton of iron bars like a grille.

"What in blazes is that, a clothes-press or a bird-cage?"

"That's what it is—was, ruther—a clo'es cupboard," said the constable, admiring the other's swift intelligence. "It useter be Skinny's, an' roomy at that. Skinny got the idea of usin' it for a one-man emergency lockup an' jest put in them bars. Good idea—eh?"

"Oh, my Gawd!" muttered the ranger in profane disgust.

And then both he and the constable sprang to their feet, as if the bullet had passed between them which heralded a pistol-shot from somewhere about the middle of the town.

"Bet that's trouble at Lazaire's!" said the constable, pounding out of the sheriff's office on the heels of Bolton the ranger—who had a sudden hunch.

Pep had not been looking for trouble at the "Main Event." In fact, he was enjoying a breathing spell and was momentarily off the reform trail.

But looking for pleasure, he bought a few chips and played the wheel. He lost—won—lost—won again—then lost until he would have been under the necessity of buying a new stack.

But he had had enough. He was more than half sure that Lazaire was operating that wheel.

Pep bought another ginger-ale and returned to watch the workings of a misguided fate. Also he had become interested in the drunk, who apparently went by the name of Hale.

"Silky 'll clean him out," said a Los Indios storekeeper who was odorous of ginger. "Might as well. Hale 'ud jest booze away anythin' he'd got left. His wife an' kids never stands no show of a look-in anyway."

"He got a wife and kids?" Pep inquired absently.

The storekeeper repeated the story of her that was once Jenny Swetland, and about the kids and the cows.

Although there were still several onlookers, by this time everybody had withdrawn from the game but Hale. That person was too drunk to know that Lazaire, having glanced at his watch, was proceeding to bring matters to a swift conclusion.

It was then that Impulsive Pep bought a new stack. Lazaire glanced at him, but said nothing. Pep laid a blue chip on the red and lost. He repeated this performance thrice and lost each turn. Apparently Lazaire was tired and wanted to discourage any further small business.

But Pep kept on playing—as did the drunk in a mechanical way—until the bandit's stack was down to a single white chip. It was worth only half a dollar and Lazaire snarled as Pep laid it on the funeral color.

“Well, what's a fella to do?” asked Pep plaintively. “I'm flat. But, say,” he added, as with bright inspiration, and digging under the left breast of his shirt, “I got somethin' here I'll stake against fifty dollars.”

“Let's see it,” sneered Lazaire.

For answer Impulsive Pep produced a small but vicious-looking automatic pistol from a concealed shoulder holster and stuck it in the general direction of the gambler's vest.

Lazaire became rigid and his face went white, although not a muscle of the latter moved.

“How much is that souse behind the game?” Pep asked, quite genially.

“About fifty dollars—not more,” said Lazaire through thin, steady lips.

“Yuh're lyin'!” said a thick voice. “'M behin' a hunder 'n' fiff—fiff—fiff——”

“That's near enough. I get yuh,” said Pep, never removing his eyes from the gambler's. “Cough up, Lazaire—swift an' careful.”

There was a gravelike stillness in the room, disturbed only by the quick, irregular breathing of tense, living men.

The gambler's hand went to his hip-pocket. Pep grinned. Lazaire drew from his hip-pocket a roll of bills. Slowly he counted out one hundred and fifty dollars and left the bills on the table.

Pep, still with his eyes on the gambler's eyes, lowered the pistol and with its short barrel swept the bills toward the fleeced drunkard.

As he did so and the pistol-point was momentarily diverted, the gambler's hand flew to his left sleeve-cuff.

Two shots came simultaneously, sounding as one. Lazaire's ball whizzed past Pep's ear and smashed the glass which partially clothed a pictured lady on the wall.

The gambler himself stared glassily at his antagonist, then slowly subsided to the floor, a small puncture on his shirt-front spreading into a red blot.

Instantly there was a rush for the rear and side-doors, only the bartender going out by the front. In less than ten seconds the place was inhabited only by William John Pepper, the momentarily sobered Hale, and Lazaire—who was dead.

“Say, Hale,” said Pep sharply to the trembling cause of it all, “you’ve gone an’ got me in dutch. Take that money—*pronto*—and you beat it home. *Anda!*”

With nerveless fingers Hale gathered up the bills, his eyes shifting from the dead gambler on the floor to Pep's face with a kind of doglike appeal.

Then he tried to make the door, but his legs gave way under him, not from liquor but sheer nervous reaction.

Pep half-dragged, half-carried the man through a side-door on the left. In the alley stood a horse with down-drooping head.

“Get aboard!” commanded the champion of the weak and distressed. “I never knew a man so bad but felt better with a hoss under him.”

Hale indeed seemed to recover some nerve as his legs clutched the saddle. Pep, assured that the man could stick on, took the horse by the bit and led it out of the dim alley to the main thoroughfare.

He glanced right and left. No one was in sight. For the moment he was safe. The sheriff was away. None of these other *hombres* would meddle.

“All right, ol’-timer,” said he, looking up at the dazed man in the saddle. “Beat it home now an’ give that roll to your wife, Jenny.

“An’ say, ol’ man,” he added. “How about cuttin’ out the ginger-ale? Don’t ye reckon yuh’ve had enough if a nice fellow like me’s maybe gotta swing f’r your foolishness?”

The man in the saddle sobbed suddenly.

“As God sees me,” he cried, “I’m *through!*”

“Shake on that, pardner! Ye’d better. Ye might forget that He keeps on seein’ yuh. But yuh ain’t gonna forget that ye shook hands with a pal on it—are ye, ol’ man?”

And that moment of generous impulse was Pep’s undoing. He shifted the weapon from his right to his left hand, holding the automatic carelessly in his palm—and *reversed*—while he extended his right to Dick Hale.

They shook on it.

“I won’t forget what I swore afore God an’—an’ a white man!” gulped Hale.

“Now, beat it!” said Pep.

He watched the horse and its rider merge into the shadows beyond the late lights of the “Main Event,” then recalled himself to his own situation.

His right hand reached to his left and the pistol which might yet be necessary in emergency. But before his palm could close over the butt, a sharp voice behind him said, “Put up your hands, Pepper, and turn around!”

Pep obeyed, the reversed pistol still in the left of the two hands he raised. He faced Bolton the ranger and a forty-five.

“*Hola, amigo!*” said the impulsive one cheerily. “Where’d yuh leave my ol’ Burlap-sack?”

CHAPTER X

THE SIAMESE TWINS

AS soon as the many eyes that had followed the movements of the gunman beheld his capture by the ranger, quite a little crowd began to assemble as from nowhere. It presently followed Bolton and his prisoner to the sheriff's office.

For the most part this crowd was silent—eloquently silent. Its sympathies were with the gunman for two reasons. First: he had done what a rough sense of finer things had conceived, vaguely perhaps, as admirable. Secondly: his opponent was the law, which may be respected but is never very popular, even in the best circles.

But the crowd knew the power of the law behind the ranger, also the power of the ranger force backing the law. The crowd kept its hands and tongues still.

Pep, on his part, after learning that his Rosinante was being cared for, and giving Bolton the assurance that his black horse was all right but unfed, walked ahead of his captor, operating the makings as he went.

As he entered the sheriff's office and was invited at the point of Bolton's forty-five to take up lodgings for the night in the "bird-cage," the impulsive one was reflecting that the path of the reformer is a short, but hard trail, not strewn with roses but beset with cactus and leading to strange beds. If he hadn't been so blamed impulsive . . .

After the constable had locked the grille padlock and handed the key to the ranger, Bolton went outside and for a few moments faced the crowd which lingered there, talking of the shooting, now with less restraint.

As the crowd dispersed, somehow relieved, the ranger himself went back into the sheriff's office. He occupied the sheriff's chair, which he turned around to face the grille. Behind that the bandit sat smoking and pondering on the folly of altruism—although he might have resented the word.

Bolton spent the next hour with the forty-five lying handy across his knees and his eyes fixed on the twinkling pair behind the bars. The outer

door of the clothes-press had been left open because it was within the law's province to hang, not asphyxiate.

At last the ranger, failing to get the expected rise out of his prisoner, broke the ice.

"Say, Pepper—if that's your name——"

"William John—Pep f'r short mostly," said the bandit with a grin. "Lookin' f'r trouble an' found it good and hard."

"Hunh!" grunted Bolton, a glint of admiration in his eyes. "Maybe you wouldn't mind telling a fella just why you plugged Lazaire."

"Yuh'd 'a' done the same. I only got to it first," said Pep.

"Would I? Can't say, of course, not knowing the details. You don't have to tell me of course."

"Oh, I ain't a bit sleepy," said the bandit. "It's been some day though. But I had the love-liest sleep last night under a big cottonwood. Love-ly moon, too."

He fell to musing for a bit, his face touched with an incredulous expression. Was it only last night? It was about one in the morning now, so that made it night before last that he left Snake-in-a-Hole.

"Some day!" he muttered, adjusting his legs more comfortably in the narrow confines of Skinny Littlejohn's clothes-press.

Then he replied to the ranger's more direct question, telling him just what led to the shooting of Lazaire. He told it in his own way, as if he felt the ranger would fully appreciate without a diagram the necessity for the killing of Silky Lazaire.

Before he had finished telling of Hale's promise "before God an' a white man" to quit drinking, Bolton had holstered the forty-five and was leaning forward studying the face of William John Pepper. The latter was half-hidden behind a veil of cigarette smoke. In the ranger's eyes was a queer light and on his usually hard lips a smile that came there so rarely that few had ever seen it.

"And the train hold-up?" Bolton quietly pressed. "Mind, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. You see, I'd have to repeat anything you said."

"Yuh might's well get it straight then," said Pep, chuckling. "About the train now——"

And he told all about that too; told it in his own way, quite unconscious, seemingly, that there was anything really funny about it.

The ranger was not blessed with an over-abundant sense of humor, but for some reason the rare smile developed into a grin, although at the same time there was a glimmer of wonder behind the acknowledgment or humor's presence. He wondered if—well, maybe there was a screw loose somewhere. Pep's general behavior did not seem quite rational in a grown man.

When Sheriff Littlejohn returned (looking wilted and as if he had lost a few pounds in weight) about four o'clock in the morning, the ranger looked up and said quite pleasantly:

"Here's our mutual friend, the bandit, Sheriff. Sorry I've got to rob you of his interesting company, but I'm taking him to the county jail at Villa Grande right after breakfast."

"Do as ye durn please!" said Mr. Littlejohn, who was tired and a bit chilled from the ride home in a jolty rig behind a long-suffering horse. "An' as soon as ye get him out of my press mebbe I c'n hang up my clo'es. I'm damp as a ice-box."

Between tiredness and disgust that the ranger had captured the bandit and was taking him away "over his head," the sheriff went straight to bed. The constable who held the law's chair during the night was called by Bolton about daybreak.

Pep had fallen asleep. The ranger wished to make arrangements for the prisoner's removal to Villa Grande at the earliest possible moment. To this end he started for the T. & S. depot, leaving the constable in the guardian seat.

The light was spreading in the east as Bolton drew near the depot. He hoped to find some early comer on the job and make inquiries about westbound trains.

He was in luck to find Manuel, the *telegrafico*, at the station, for as a rule Manuel did not come on duty before eight o'clock.

The Mexican clerk had apparently just arrived. His hat was on his head and he wore a kind of shawl about his shoulders, as if he had either been up all night or feared a chill from the comparative coolness of that early hour.

With him, and engaged in close conversation at the east end of the depot, was another Mexican—one Suarez, a cowpuncher from Tres Hermanas. The

greaser's *caballo* was standing near by.

As the ranger approached the pair they stopped talking quite abruptly. Suarez went to his horse and mounted. As he rode off, without even a farewell gesture to the man with whom he had been conversing intimately, Manuel began fumbling in his pockets in search of the office key. He was unable to find it at once. Like one at bay he suddenly turned a green-hued face to the ranger, who was regarding him a little sharply—at least so Manuel thought.

“What ees et, señor?”

“You look as if you had the flu,” said Bolton, noting the man's color.

“*Si, si, señor,*” said Manuel readily. “Eet ees as you say. I have a touch of the fever. Eet ees the mornings. They are *mucho frio*, an' my blood ees theen.”

Bolton explained his errand and inquired about the first train that could take him and his prisoner to Villa Grande.

At that Manuel seemed vastly relieved about something. The greenish pallor disappeared. He found the office key and even invited the ranger inside.

“About that train,” the ranger reminded him.

“Yes, the train. There is but one passenger train—the Leemeeted which comes in the afternoon—and the regular freight, which comes any ol' time. You mus' wait unteel the Leemeeted, *amigo*, unless——”

“Unless what?” Bolton asked sharply, noting that Manuel again looked suddenly uncomfortable.

“Ah, señor, I forgot. Eet ees private bees'ness of the road.”

“You can tell me if it concerns a train. I'm a state officer.”

“Ah, but eet ees bees'ness of the gover-ment, señor.”

“Come ahead. It's a special freight, isn't it, carrying supplies to the troops on the border?”

It was a long shot and a good guess.

“But, señor——”

“Never mind. You take your orders from me, *chico*. I'll shoulder any come-back. You flag that special freight. I'll talk to the conductor in charge.

What time?"

"Ver' well," said Manuel, shrugging his shoulders. "You take it upon yourself, señor. It is due to pass Los Indios any time in the nex' hour. That is why," with a smile of inspiration, "that is why I come to the key at an hour so early."

Bolton turned and walked swiftly toward the sheriff's office. As he went he said over his shoulder, "All right. I'll have my man here in five minutes. You flag that freight, *amigo*, and hold it, or you'll find yourself in the beans."

"*Si señor*," said Manuel resignedly.

But while the ranger went back to wake and bring the bandit, the clerk stood by his key, his eyes fixed on nothing. He was doing some hard thinking.

Suarez had brought a relayed word from Chico Villegas. All was ready at a chosen point about twenty miles west of Los Indios. The Mexican bandits had crossed the river unobserved in the night. They would hold up the train, secure the coveted ammunition and return across the line before the law or the military authorities on the Texan side woke up to the exploit.

But the ranger's presence worried Manuel. Was he telling the truth? Was he indeed carrying a prisoner to Villa Grande? Might not that prisoner be another ranger in disguise? Might not the authorities be aware of the planned Villegas raid and the special freight be crammed with concealed armed men—rangers, or even gringo soldiers?

The telegraph instrument began a clicking sputter. Manuel started from his reverie and listened intently. He opened the switch and acknowledged the flash message.

The special freight had passed Augua Prieta and should be in sight within a few minutes.

As Manuel turned from the key he saw the ranger returning across the plaza. By his side, his right wrist manacled to the ranger's left, walked a sleepy-eyed, long-legged person who was smoking a cigarette. The two holsters hanging at his gun-belt were empty.

Behind these two came the constable and a handful of early risers who had heard rumors of the killing of Lazaire and were now learning for the first time that the captured killer was also the bandit of the T. & S. Limited.

Manuel, listening, felt a great relief. All was well. The ranger was merely one ranger and taking a real prisoner to the county jail.

He flagged the special freight. It came to a stop in the Los Indios depot. The conductor in charge got down with a scowl and—wanted to know. He understood quickly enough when Bolton, still with Pep attached to him, drew the conductor aside and explained the situation.

“That’s all right,” said the conductor, “But this is a gov’ment special—ammunition an’ all that for the troops. I dunno——”

“And I’m the State of Texas just at this minute,” said Bolton. “Is that good enough?”

“I reck’n so,” said the conductor, but still dubiously. “All right. Get aboard the rear car—into the house. We’ve stopped long enough.”

CHAPTER XI

THE LUCK OF THE WICKED

CHICO VILLEGAS had laid his plans well. At the first glimmer of daybreak his bandits had merely to put a few finishing touches to the strategy.

The ambush and hold-up of the ammunition train had been designed to take place at a point between Los Indios and the county town, Villa Grande—west of the former town, about one third of the distance to the latter, and about ten miles south of Hale's Ranch.

Here the T. & S. follows a serpentine twist of the Rio Grande, squirming around a dip southward, then west, then again to the river's general course—northwest.

Before dawn the bandit and his picked support had crossed the boundary river in secret. When light came in the east most of them were hidden in the chaparral flanking either side of the T. & S. track at the selected point.

There Chico Villegas gave his final instructions. They were characteristic of the man's simple genius.

Briefly, he divided his men into two parties. The lesser, containing only ten men, he concealed in the brush at a point where the T. & S. track ran fairly straight for a short distance, so that the one man Chico detailed to flag the train with a red *serape* could not fail to be observed by the engine-driver from some distance off.

If the driver halted his train on the danger signal, the ten men would emerge, cover the crew with rifles and hold the situation until that other and larger party of from fifteen to twenty men came up to reinforce.

This larger party had been placed in the chaparral about two hundred yards farther west on the line and beyond a slight bend.

If the engineer refused to shut off steam and bring his train to a stop, it had been arranged that he should encounter, beyond the bend, a high pyramid of rocks and brush roughly constructed right on the ties and between the rails.

This pyramid was not designed to derail the engine (although it might do so), but rather to intimidate by its size and bulk. Chico had no desire to wreck the train; not through any humanitarian thought for those aboard, but lest there be any explosive that might react to shock.

The one thing he reckoned without was that the engine-driver was an American of Irish birth; one of those U. S.-Hibernians who class all swarthy races as Niggers.

In this particular case the Irishman would have sent his train piecemeal to heaven, and himself with it, rather than that it should fall into the hands of a swart Mexican.

The train came on. The man Chico had detailed to flag-duty stood on the track waving the red *serape* on the end of an undisguised rifle-barrel. The ten men in ambush number one were poised ready to emerge and support the flagger if the engine-driver responded to the scarlet hint.

The Irishman had been slowing up for the curve ahead when he saw the *serape*. It did not take him two seconds to realize what he was up against. So instead of stopping and surrendering a few paltry cases of material ammunition he burst out in a torrent of vituperation and opened his throttle wide.

Nearly running down the red *serape*, he shot past ambush number one. The bandits composing this had to content themselves with firing a spiteful volley in the general direction of the train and then, emerging into the open, they sprinted over that two hundred yards to the bend.

What was to happen there happened before the first party arrived on the scene. They heard the crash a second after the train rounded the bend.

The engineer saw the pyramid of rocks and brush too late to check speed. The swaying, snorting, tearing locomotive struck that pyramid. For a moment it seemed as if the ancient problem of the immovable body and the irresistible force had been solved. But something had to go!

First it was the pyramid which burst into a great, flying mass of *débris*. Then the locomotive, which seemed almost to have won through, failed to right its equilibrium after the shock. It left the rails, turned over on its side and hauled the cars after it.

Next instant that spot, which had been so silent five minutes before, was a seething, hissing inferno.

There came a volley of shots from the chaparral. The engine became enveloped in a cloud of steam and there was a loud explosion. When the steam-cloud parted for a moment the bandits, who had begun to surround the locomotive, saw the dare-devil Hibernian hanging limply from his cab.

One or two train-hands who had survived the shock of collision and jumped from the cars were unceremoniously shot down.

As no others appeared, and no further explosion occurred at once, Chico Villegas gave loud orders to break in on the ammunition—and *muy pronto* at that, for the front of the first car was being licked by a blaze of fire which suddenly burst from somewhere about the engine and was being fanned by a rising day-breeze out of the southwest.

The bandits, seeing that the train would shortly be reduced to charred timber and scrap-iron, promptly went to work to salvage the precious cargo before that was touched by fire. They worked with desperate enthusiasm; fire and gunpowder before them, the devil in the shape of Chico Villegas sitting behind on a wiry *caballo*.

William John Pepper and his captor, Bolton, knew nothing was amiss until—Well, not even then.

When Pep came to he observed that the caboose was tilted and full of smoke. There was a smell of burning wood in the air.

The back of Pep's neck ached horribly. Between that and a curious sulphurous smell he had an unpleasant conviction about himself and his whereabouts. But then he concluded that he was not dead and about to meet his just deserts. Something had happened to the train. That was all.

Manacled to his right wrist was a man with a lot of blood about his hatless head. The face, where it was not crimson, was very white and still.

“Too bad!” muttered Pep. “He wasn't such a *mal hombre* at that.”

Of course it was no time to reflect overlong on mortality and misawarded deserts. As Pep could see no sense in being baked to a cinder just for the sentiment of sitting up with the remains, he explored Bolton's pockets with his left hand, found a small key and succeeded presently in detaching himself from his twin.

He also helped himself to Bolton's guns, thinking that the ranger was not likely to need them again. Then he scrambled to the uptilted window of the car. The glass had been shaken out; which was very convenient just then.

Pep made a careful survey of the outside. He could see little on that side for smoke; except that the end of the car ahead was tilted to the right, or north side of the track, while the last car had slewed over to the left. Any rescue work that might be in operation must therefore be on the south, or opposite side.

As the self-freed prisoner had no desire to be rescued by any one but himself just then, Pep prepared to pull himself through that little window, drop to the ground and, under cover of the smoke, gain the chaparral.

He was about to put this into execution when he heard a groan from the direction of Bolton. Turning sharply he discovered the ranger sitting up and nursing his head.

For the moment Pep was humanly tempted. But then a gush of heated air fanned his face. Also he saw Bolton, unable to rise, sink prostrate again.

“Here—you!” cried Pep, shaking the other violently. “D’yuh want to be baked like a *frijole*? We got to get outa here!”

Bolton opened his eyes and looked dazedly up at his late prisoner.

“You win, bo,” he said faintly. “Beat it while the going’s good. Reckon I’m all in. Beat it and—luck to you!”

“Luck hell!” said Mr. Pepper inelegantly, and peevishly laying hands on the ranger’s shoulders. He dragged him up to a half-sitting posture. “Yuh’re only a bit groggy. Take a brace an’ git outa this. Then I’ll beat it to Kal-mazoo an’ back if it’ll make yuh feel any better.”

He got Bolton to his feet. The ranger could barely stand. His battered head contained an addled brain. Pep supported him to the window and bade him grip the ledge and hold tight. He, himself, took another survey of the outside.

There was still not a soul in sight on that north side. Moreover, there was a wonderful smoke-screen spread by the southwest breeze. This screen was helped a little by a small fire which had started from a spark in the brush.

Above the crackling of burning timbers Pep could hear a snarling voice lifted in choice phrases of Mexican profanity. But that was on the south side. The north was clear.

“Come on!” said Pep, himself crawling through the window and reaching back to help the ranger through.

It was about the worst job he ever tackled.

But by cursing the ranger into fighting rage, and so gaining his active assistance, he managed to get him through that little window.

Pep then slid to the ground. Bolton followed, hitting the earth like a half-filled sack of bricks.

Again Pep assisted his late jailer, half-carrying, half-dragging him to the concealment of the chaparral. There he dropped his burden and himself lay down to recover wind.

When he sat up again he observed that Bolton was opening and closing his eyes repeatedly, as if trying himself out.

“Lie quiet a bit, buddy,” said Pep. “Yuh ain’t all used up by a long shot. Take it easy while I scouts around and gets the lay of this picnic.”

He left Bolton lying there in umbrage and cautiously returned to the wreck, again taking advantage of the screen of smoke. He presently discovered the bandits. They were toiling like stokers in Hades, trying to get the ammunition clear away before the fire ate sufficiently into it to make the task unhealthy.

“Yaller boys—huh?” grunted Pep. “And them cases looks like gun fodder.”

But then his mind seized upon another thought which brought a grin to his face.

“Now I wonder where *they* are?” he chuckled. “They cain’t be fur off.”

Ten minutes later Bolton opened his eyes to see a man standing by a saddled Mexican *caballo*, both man and horse framed in the brush through which they had pushed.

“Mr. Bolton,” said Pep, “I hope yuh feels improved. I got to leave yuh now, unless yuh feels some wuss.”

“It’s your pot, partner,” said Bolton with a wry smile. “I don’t blame you. Beat it while you can, for as soon as I’m less groggy I’ll be right on your heels.”

“Don’t blame you neither,” said Pep. “That’s why I allowed to let yuh rustle a hoss yourself. I didn’t have no easy pickin’s gettin’ this ragmat. Knocked a piece of rubber off’n one of your guns when I beaned the *cholo* ez was guardin’ Chico’s herd. It’s Villegas, of course. One of his li’l *pasears* over the line. Gettin’ to feel all right?” he added anxiously. “D’yuh reck’n it’s safe to leave yuh?”

“Go ahead, you blamed idiot! And I hope to God you beat me clear away. But I’m coming after you.”

“I’m andying, sure enough,” said Mr. Pepper.

He turned to the Mexican pony, arranged the stirrups to his liking and leisurely mounted. From the saddle he turned a worried face to the ranger. Bolton was again sitting up, nursing his head.

“Mebbe I oughta got yuh a cayuse, but—Well, I cain’t now. That *cholo*’s bean wasn’t hurt none. Jes’ look at that gun-butt, will yuh? But I reck’n there’s a ranch jes’ north uv here. We ain’t come more’n twenty mile from Indios.”

“Get out, will you!” snapped Bolton, highly irritated. “Get out or I’ll arrest you again—right here—though a fat chance of holding you I’d have.”

“Glad yuh mentioned that,” said Pep gravely, drawing one of Bolton’s guns from his own refilled holsters. “Yuh oughta have a gun anyway. They’s snakes an’ things in this chaparral.”

He tossed one of the forty-fives to its owner, said “*Adios! Hasta mas tarde!*” and started the pony off to the east, disappearing presently among the thickets.

Bolton was left with the gun lying at his feet. He stared at it, that rare smile coming and deepening about his lips.

CHAPTER XII

QUICKSHOT RIDES!

WILLIAM JOHN PEPPER, being temporarily a man without a country, presently brought his horse to a halt and considered his next course.

To the south, about ten miles distant, lay the Rio Grande, and beyond that, Mexico.

To the north were these United States, in the eyes of which William John Pepper was an outlaw, bandit and mankiller.

The place where Pep halted the borrowed Mexican pony was on top of a knoll which commanded a vista inviting to reflections on various directions.

But for the moment Pep was more attracted to the scene of the wreck, whence had just issued a loud bang followed by what sounded like the rattle of musketry.

Out of a cloud of fumes and débris burst a flurry of Mexicans. Several of them staggered a few steps, then dropped to the ground and squirmed. The rest ran back to the pile of ammunition cases. Beside this Villegas marshalled things with the aid of his carbine.

The bandit chief gave some more peremptory orders and his men proceeded to transport the cases back to the spot where Pep had knocked the *cholo* horse-guardian over the head and stolen a horse from the temporary corral. He had seen pack-animals, too.

Then the bandits disappeared into the brush beyond the south side of the wreck. There, free from smoke and danger of further explosion, they presumably expedited the loading of the pack-animals and presently made good their retreat to Mexico.

Pep's eye, in the meantime, was taken by something which amused him less.

It had been hot and rainless for several months. Much of the chaparral was dry as tinder. To the north and east, the grass was as inflammable as hot paper.

The little fire which he had seen in the brush from the caboose window had spread into a right merry blaze. The low flames were now racing at prodigious speed before the freshening southwest breeze.

Before widening its path the fire had already passed the spot where Pep had left Bolton nursing his head; so he was not anxious about the ranger's safety.

But as a true son of the ranges that fire worried him. A little bit of a thing like that wouldn't make a great hole in the pocket of a rancher like Big Jim Hellier, whose ranch—and whose daughter—lay just about twenty-five miles to the northwest.

But these small ranchers now—like that poor devil, Hale, for instance. Tough luck if, just as he turned over a new leaf, the first day he stuck close to the farm that little farm should be burned up—house, barn and all!

“Bet yuh, now, that Jenny wife of his was quite happy this mornin’,” Pep mused. “Too damn bad if she finds out that, after all, life's just one damn thing after another.

“Dunno but what I'll cruise ahead an' . . .”

He turned the cayuse's head—*north!*

It had been a strange night for her who was once Jenny Swetland—one of these nights that make the gray gather about a woman's temples.

While Tulip Hellier and other chums of Jenny's girlhood tripped the light foot at Tres Hermanas, she sat alone with misery, also four of misery's children, who made the night more desolate with their pathetic crying.

Jenny sat by lamplight, a wan, prematurely old girl, her eyes fixed before her with a kind of blankness of desolation.

Then—about three in the morning it was—the shack door was opened and Hale came in. She looked at him only when he made none of the customary sounds of his periodic nocturnal entrances.

He was standing within the doorway and staring at her. His face was deathly white and drawn with lines of dissipation; but there was a queer, new light in his eyes.

“Jenny,” said he huskily. “I've given ye a raw deal, lass. But I'm through, Jenny—I'm through! Let's start fresh over again.”

“Dick!” she gasped, hardly above a whisper.

For answer he threw a crushed ball of banknotes on the table. Then, without a word, he crossed to the home-made family bed in the corner, picked up the next youngest of the squalling children and began soothing it to sleep.

At the diminishing of the volume of sound the elder of the four young ones turned over and fell asleep. The second oldest followed suit presently. The child in Hale’s arms became still. Only the faint whine of the teething baby broke the stillness.

Then Hale said, still moving up and down with the child in his arms, “One God’s good man, lass—he done what I oughta done for myself long ago. . . . I’m through—an’ I’ve brought home some money.”

“Oh, Dick!” breathed the woman, her eyes following him about the mean room—eyes filled with unbelief, yet a dawning hope.

Then the baby in her lap ceased whining and a great, blessed peace fell upon that little household—“in Texas, down by the Rio Grande.”

As if he would punish himself, Hale did not sleep the rest of that night.

It was graying in the east when he put the child in his arms back on the bed and bade Jenny herself lie down by the baby that was now sleeping as from sheer exhaustion of crying.

Then he changed to old clothes, procured a hoe and went to the little vegetable garden at the back of the shack. The garden truck was dead from neglect and drought, but nevertheless he went valiantly to work on this one of many new beginnings in order.

He hoed that baked earth while streams of perspiration burst from his weakened body, despite the fact that, as the *telegrafico* was finding out, the morning was cool. His knees shook under him; his arms and shoulders ached; but still he thrashed that soil as if the hoe were a whip and that hot earth his own back.

Once he paused for a few seconds when a faint explosion sounded as from a long distance to the southward.

A breeze came up from the southwest and fanned his damp face. He resumed his self-chosen labor and kept at it till long after sunup.

Then, as the man leaned on his hoe, a little lass of four came marching with proud importance into the patch, carrying in one hand a can full of hot

coffee and, in the other, a basket containing hot cornbread and crisp-fried bacon.

Dick Hale stared at the child—and the basket—and the can. He stared with a great wondering. Then his eyes slowly moved to the shack that was home, to the land about that was his, and to the violet morning skies—that were his, too, if he would—spreading clean and clear above.

Then for some reason the man bowed his head and shed slow, salt tears.

Along about ten o'clock a long-legged person rode up on a horse accoutered with Mexican trappings. He dismounted before the shack door to which Jenny Hale hastened with a new fear knocking at her heart.

“Your man to home?” inquired the stranger.

She nodded, speechless with dread. It had been too good to be true.

“Well, there’s a nasty little fire blowin’ up your way an’ I reck’n’d to stop an’ tell your *hombre* to look out for it.”

“Oh—is that all?” Jenny gasped.

“Lots, I’d say,” said Pep. “Where’s your man?”

“He’s out at the back, hoein’ his patch.”

Jenny summoned her man. Hale came presently and stopped dead when he recognized his champion of the night. But he refrained from comment or question at a broad wink from Mr. Pepper, who then told him of the oncoming fire. All Hale said, as he turned to go and get the necessary implements, was, “It’s him, Jenny, I told ye about. Mebbe he could eat something.”

Instantly Jenny, her heart big with gratitude, was inside the shack and putting the cornbread back to warm. Pep had dismounted, put away his borrowed horse and now came back to a brimming dipper of water ready in Jenny’s hand.

“Thankee, ma’am,” said he simply, when he had drunk. “That’s awful good water.”

As Jenny fried fresh strips of bacon the baby woke up and demanded her attention.

As the child’s crying became worse, Pep presently got to his feet and took the baby from its mother, who protested.

“That’s all right, ma’am,” said Pep gravely. “It ain’t the kid that’s worryin’ me. It’s that bacon.”

Thereafter, until the bacon was done and Jenny could come on as relief-nurse, Pep ambled about the little room with the baby in his arms and looking preternaturally anxious as he soothed the child with a tune and some doggerel words, the latter very long drawn-out.

“O-o-oh the-ere was a li’l chick-en an’ it hed a wood-en laig . . .”

Presently Hale returned and held the baby while Jenny served the guest’s breakfast. And Pep allowed the bacon was *primera clase* and the cornbread first-rate.

He had ridden that Mexican pony hard from the scene of the train-wreck; not that he anticipated any danger of immediately being overtaken by Bolton or that the fire was—at that time—very pressing, but merely that he might pass the fire-warning to somebody and himself get back on the south trail to Mexico.

The matter of wielding a second hoe on a fire-trench was “one of them impulses.”

After he had eaten he and Hale went to work. That fire gathered fuel and fury as it advanced. The wind had freshened still more and was now blowing a small but steady gale out of the southwest.

Pep and Hale had dug a wide shallow trench in a cross-line to windward of the shack and at a considerable distance from the latter. From this ditch they had thrown the dirt and all inflammable brush and grass about it toward the oncoming fire.

Ordinarily a low grass fire would have consumed itself out at this guard, escaping only around the ends of the trench-line. It might continue there until checked by greater resources, but leaving Hale’s shack and immediate surroundings untouched.

But that steady half-gale overcame the rude fire-guard. Sparks, wisps of burning grass and brush rode on the wind and started independent fires ahead.

The trench, after all their labor, proved futile.

At this development, Pep, forgetting his record, his need for sanctuary—forgetting the hold-up of the T. & S. Limited, the killing of Lazaire—forgetting Bolton and everything else, buckled down to business. With Hale

he presently undertook strenuous measures to prevent that fire from destroying the shack which sheltered Jenny and her household.

The chief menace was a small hay-barn to windward of the shack and right in the path of the fire. Nearer the blaze than that was a thick patch of mixed weed, grass and brush which was dead or dry from the long drought. A more industrious man than Hale had been would long since have removed this menace to his ranch buildings.

They renewed the fight, cutting brush and casting it fireward, along with dirt from a new and deeper trench designed to save the barn and the shack.

They toiled all afternoon at this, while the fire spread around and past the shack.

About sunset they were completely surrounded, except to the north, by a wide area of black-charred terrain. Only at the edge of the trench the flames still raged fiercely, fed by the bundles of brush thrown to its ravenous tongues.

It was a contest, the result depending on whether the fire could be fed that brush on the safe side of the trench or the flames leaped the guard and chose their own fodder on the spot where the fire-fighters were desperately levelling and transporting it.

Hale, weakened by the last two days' debauch (and many a previous one) was now hardly able to wield his arms. Pep was working like a piece-laborer, his face black with smoke, while Jenny, leaving the children locked in the shack, was out, armed with a broom, laying about her at every wind-blown spark which threatened the deadline.

So they were still fighting when dusk came. And with it came an apparition.

It walked out of the fire-scorched terrain to the south, its head bound with a bloody kerchief, its face blackened with smoke, its eyes red and watering and its boots half-charred.

At sight of this apparition Pep suddenly remembered a few things. His hand flew to his gun-belt but he had cast it aside hours before. But Mr. Bolton was not thinking about arresting anybody just then.

"Got any horses?" he gasped, addressing Hale.

"One—an' the stranger's," was the reply.

"How many people?"

“Three grown-ups an’ four kids.”

“Then it’s a cinch eight people can’t get away on two horses,” said the ranger through parched lips. “Reckon we’ll all have to fight it out together.”

Then Pep, who had been regarding his enemy with wondering eyes, thinking of that tramp—with a hurt head, too—over ten-odd miles of hot ground, opened his mouth and said, “Say, ol’ man, I reck’n you’re less fit to dig trench than ride a hoss. Supposin’ yuh takes the Mex cayuse and rides to Tres Hermanas for help.”

For a moment the ranger stared straight into the eyes of William John Pepper.

“I’ll be here when yuh git back with the help,” said Pep quietly.

Bolton decided the question in his mind on the instant.

“Sure you will! Where’s the cayuse? And where do you keep your water?”

When he had gone presently at a steady gallop toward Tres Hermanas, Pep turned to Hale and his wife.

“Come on, buddies!” said he. “We’ll save the ancestral palace yet!”

CHAPTER XIII

A SPORTING PROPOSITION

PEP, HALE and Jenny were facing a serious situation. The fire had leaped the guard and seized upon what was left of the uncut brush. It now had Hale and his assistant backed up against the hay-barn. They were now fighting as much to save themselves as the fodder.

Jenny was on the roof of the shack. To this she had climbed with the aid of a rude ladder. With her broom she was valiantly beating out sparks that threatened the "ancestral palace."

It looked like the end of Hale's ranch for awhile, when a cool drop of water hit Impulsive Pep square in the left eye. Another smote the back of his hot neck. He looked up and saw more than smoke-clouds against the sky.

"Jumpin' horn-toads!" he gasped. "It's rainin', buddy. Five minutes of this'll let us down easy!"

And five minutes later it was raining quite hard; the brush-fire was a smelly smudge, and Jenny was back at the cookstove, preparing a much-needed meal for "her men."

Bolton was about one third of the way to Tres Hermanas when the first drops fell. But he pressed on. A spatter might be all there was to it.

When he was about half-way it was raining so hard that he was drenched as he believed the fire must be by now.

He halted the half-winded horse and considered whether to proceed to his planned destination or turn back and get his prisoner.

But he was wet, and he wanted his own black mount; also, Pep had given parole that he would remain at Hale's until the ranger got back. So Bolton decided for morning, dried-out clothes and a horse—a real horse.

He rode on, but more easily, to Tres Hermanas.

Big Jim scowled when he heard that the ranger wanted to see him. Hellier had not forgiven that riotous incident of the previous night in Tulip's party. But he asked the ranger in.

All Bolton wanted was a place in the bunkhouse, a chance to dry out his clothes and the favor of having one of Hellier's boys ride into Los Indios and get his horse.

"Sure thing!" said Big Jim, suddenly ashamed that a white man had to invite his hospitality. "Sure! Where yuh blown in from anyway? Yuh look kinda all-in with that rag on your head."

Bolton briefly described events as they had occurred between his leaving Tres Hermanas and his present return. Tulip, in particular, listened intently to his description of the killing of Lazaire, the arrest of William John Pepper, his escape from the train-wreck following the hold-up by Villegas, and how the ranger had again found him helping Hale to put out a fire, when he (Bolton) had thought him well over the border.

"An' yuh let him go? Bully!" cried Big Jim.

"No," said Bolton. "But he gave me his word he'd stay at Hale's till I got back with help from here. They won't need help now, of course, and in the morning——"

"Hell!" shouted Big Jim, banging the table with his mighty fist, quite regardless of his sister-in-law's nerves. "Let the fella go! He deserves a chance if ever a man did!"

"You surely wouldn't take him to jail now, after all the fine things he's done!" cried Tulip, her face rather white and strained.

"I've got a duty to do, ma'am," said Bolton, "even if, maybe, I wish he'd crossed the border, instead of——"

"Instead of—what?" blazed Tulip. "Oh, you make me—tired!"

"Sorry, Miss Hellier," said Bolton, stiffly but civilly.

Big Jim had fallen to thinking. All at once he looked up at the ranger.

"You can hev a room in the house, ranger," said he, "an' the Chink'll dry out yer clo'es. An' I'll hev somebody get your hoss *mañana por la mañana*. Maybe, too, some of us'll ride out to Hale's with yuh. I'd like t' see the finish of this," he added frankly. Then catching a light in his daughter's eye, "Let's all go!"

That night Suarez got instructions to start for Los Indios and have the ranger's black horse back by sunup.

Suarez did not sleep at all, but took advantage of the general order to start right away. At Los Indios he spent the couple of hours thus gained with

Manuel, his compatriot. From him he learned of the complete success of Chico's little sally and was further treated to a bit of interesting information (which Manuel had received from the same underground source) concerning the Mexican bandit's next proposed exploit.

The dark eyes of Suarez gleamed admiration of his hero and suppressed excitement over the plan. He and Manuel talked in whispers for a while.

When Suarez got back to Tres Hermanas with the black horse he found Big Jim, Tulip, Bolton, Slow-Mad Gray, Paramount Sam and half a dozen of the other boys impatiently awaiting him.

"Now I've got a horse—a real horse!" said Bolton, swinging into his accustomed saddle.

"Oh, I dunno," drawled Slow-Mad. "That animal ain't so much. Ye can't judge a cigar by the wrappin'. Miss Toolip, now's got a *caballo* that c'n give that lump of lampblack a coyote start an' head him off jes' circlin'."

Bolton laughed, but said nothing which might seem ungallant, as the lady herself was near by. She sat astride a pinto which had points, but none that were greatly outstanding. Her dad had presented it to her on the previous day as a small souvenir of her home-coming.

The start for Hale's was delayed by Big Jim, who was standing aside talking in a low voice with Suarez.

"Say that again!" said Hellier to the Mexican. "I reck'n I'm gettin' hard o' hearin'."

"Villegas, Señor Jeem—so I hear the whisper from a *compatriota*—he plan to make a raid on Los Indios."

"The hell yuh say! When?"

"That I do not hear, señor," said Suarez, and, with a shrug. "Eet ees not true perhaps."

"You bet it ain't, or you wouldn't be telling me, *hombre*."

"Señor!" protested Pancho with a pained look. "I may be Mexican—*la sangre*—but also *buen Americano*!"

"Mebbe," said Big Jim dryly. "But I don't put no stock in that talk. If yuh were to believe all yuh hear about Chico Villegas he'd have to be sixteen men in sixteen diff'runt places to once."

He turned away from Suarez and mounted his horse.

“Le’s go!” he cried, himself leading the way toward Hale’s.

Mrs. Hemingway, waving adieu from the veranda, called anxiously after her son:

“Vivian, take care! Are you armed?”

“Don’t worry, Mater!” answered Vivian, lifting his coat-tail and revealing a pearl handle jutting from his hip-pocket.

Hellier and Bolton led the way at a smart pace with Tulip between them. Bolton noticed with surprise that the pinto she rode showed a great deal of spirit and an eagerness to get ahead.

“What’s your *caballo*’s name, Miss Hellier?” he asked.

“It hasn’t any—yet,” replied Tulip. “But—*Whoa*, Beauty! Isn’t he just full of pep? Oh, yes—pep. His name’s Pep.”

The pace grew warmer, Pep the pacemaker. Vivian straggled, fell farther behind and finally, jarred in every bone in his body, dropped out of the running altogether and turned back. He presently explained to his mother that he saw no pleasure in being uncomfortable.

From the shack Hale saw the cavalcade coming out of the northeast. Pep was still making up for lost sleep. The man who had reason to be grateful woke him up.

“They’re comin’,” said he, handing Pep his own old-fashioned six-shooter. “Ye’ll find my nag in the corral. I’d advise ye to go.”

Pep sat up quickly. He stared at the gun. The one he had taken from Bolton he had surrendered to its owner on the previous evening. But the moment sleep was shaken from him he remembered.

“I’d jes’ love to travel in furrin’ la’ns,” said he, “but I got tuh get a ticket-of-leave frum Pardner Bolton.”

He was out in front of the shack, unarmed, when Bolton, Hellier, Tulip and the boys rode up. The Tres Hermanas crowd saw at a glance that all the fire-damage was already done. Their interest was mainly in the ranger and his man.

“Good morning, Pepper!” was Bolton’s greeting.

“Ye needn’t ’a’ brought help,” said Pep simply. “Didn’t it rain some where you wore?”

Tulip had dismounted and flown to the arms of Jenny Swetland. They rapturously kissed, and then Jenny whispered something in Tulip's ear. Tulip looked dubious, but kissed Jenny more rapturously. The wife beckoned her husband.

Hale came up rather diffidently, his eyes on the ground.

"Dick," said Jenny, "this is Tulip Hellier—my best girl-friend."

Tulip held out her hand, laughing, and said mischievously, "Who's her best male-friend, then?"

Hale looked up quickly and met her eyes. Then his own sought out William John Pepper and he said quietly, "I reck'n it's that man over there."

Tulip turned and saw Pep. He was looking at her—as from a very long distance.

"Good morning, Mr. Pepper," she said.

"Good mornin', ma'am," he responded respectfully, almost humbly.

There was an awkward pause.

"Well?" said Jim Hellier, nervously clearing his throat as he glanced at Bolton. "What yuh gonna do about it? Looks to me like this fella oughta have another chance?"

"He's going to get one," said the ranger, indulging in his rare smile.

"Pepper," said he, turning to his prisoner. "I owe you half an hour."

"How come?" said Pep.

"By my watch it was a half hour after you left me in the chaparral before I was able to start after you. I'd never have caught up on you if you hadn't turned aside to do a mighty decent thing."

Pep colored deeply and rowelled his left bootleg with his right spur.

"Maybe I owe you more time. Maybe I don't owe you any," continued Bolton, "but as a sporting proposition let's call it that half hour."

Pep was now staring at him. So was Hellier. Everybody was puzzled.

"Come again," said Pep.

"It's about eighteen miles to the border," said Bolton. "Borrow Hale's horse and—Here's the gun you loaned me when you'd have been wiser maybe to have kept it. It's for self-defense if you get away. I'm taking your

word for it that you won't turn it on me between here and the border, although I still hold the right to turn mine on you."

"Thirty minutes to the second after you start I'll be after you with bells on. Either you beat me to the river or you stand trial for holding up the T. & S. and killing Lazaire. How about it?"

"*Whee-ee-ow!*" joyously yelled the boys.

Hellier grinned. Tulip was staring wide-eyed at William John Pepper, who was thinking.

"Do I *hev* to take Hale's hoss?" he inquired drolly, the while he looked over the fine points of the ranger's black steed. "Dunno as it would go that far in a race."

"The horse is immaterial to me," said Bolton. "You can walk if you prefer."

"Take my horse!" said Tulip impulsively.

Big Jim looked queerly at his daughter, but said nothing.

"*Whee-ee-ow!*" yelled the bunch, more joyously than ever.

Bolton looked a little worried for the moment. That pinto animal! But then his face cleared.

"It's all in the game," said he.

"A sportin' prop'sition, gents," said Paramount, removing his sombrero and, as if by right, taking the field as umpire.

"What's your hoss's name, miss?" asked Pep, carefully eyeing the pinto.

"'Pep'," said she.

He raised a pair of wondering but twinkling eyes to her blue ones, which were momentarily very sober.

"Ye don't say!" he drawled. "Now ain't that odd? But supposin' pardner Bolton here drops this nice hoss of yours with a nifty shot."

Tulip bit her lip; then—she almost burst out with the words:

"I don't care! I mean—please take my horse. It can beat his. I know it can."

"Time you were starting, Pepper," said the ranger quietly.

“Thanks, li’l lady,” said Pep, the twinkle going from his eyes and being replaced by a curious, sober wistfulness as he looked at her. “I’ll try to—to have your hoss beat his.”

He lengthened the stirrups and mounted.

“Say when,” said he, sitting in the saddle and looking straight ahead of him to the south.

“Wait a minute,” said Bolton, detaching his watch and handing it to Paramount Sam. “Start him on the even minute and then you keep the time on me.”

“I thank you,” said Paramount ceremoniously as he took the watch.

There was silence as the second-hand tripped around to 60. Tulip was watching the face that was turned to the south.

“Are yuh ready?” Paramount warned.

“Loaded an’ full cock,” said Pep, without moving his head.

“Go!”

But instead of sinking his spurs Pep casually turned his head and looked the crowd over.

“So long, Hale,” said he. “Mis’ Jenny, here’s luck! Thanks, Miss Tulip. I won’t be forgettin’ what yuh done. *Adios*, boys—an’ Pardner Bolton, you ain’t sech a bad *hombre* at that.

“An’ now,” he concluded in his leisurely fashion, “here’s where, I s’pose, Pep sez to Pep——

“*Giddap, Pep!*”

He slapped the pinto’s neck with his sombrero. The animal gave a wild, startled leap.

Next moment it and its rider were a speeding, diminishing blot hurtling toward the horizon—and Mexico!

CHAPTER XIV

THE RACE

THEY watched the flying horseman until he and his mount were lost to sight behind a roll of the land. Big Jim was the first to break the silence.

“Hell!” he growled. “Hain’t he got no sense? He’ll founder that pinto afore he’s made ten miles. That ain’t no way to win in a long run.”

Bolton, sitting ready, was thinking the same thing. In a way the ranger was sorry to note this latest impulsiveness of Mr. Pepper, but it was his business to recapture his prisoner if he could and he was now figuring out the surest way to do it.

Should he profit by what Hellier had said and use his own horse less violently? But was the handicap of half an hour too great to be overcome by slower methods? It would avail nothing if Pepper rode that horse to death and the death occurred on the far side of the Rio Grande.

Tulip was thinking of the chances, too. She turned an anxious face to Slow-Mad Gray, the foreman, and appealed to his judgment and experience.

“What do you think, Ike? Pep—Mr. Pepper’s an old-timer. He ought to know what he’s doing.”

“Mm—mebbe,” said Slow-Mad, but a little dubiously. “It all depends. But I’m inclined to bet ag’in Pepper’s gittin’ to the border fust.”

“How much yuh bettin’?” asked Hellier, looking up quickly.

“Place yer bets, gents,” said Paramount with ceremonious gravity, but without removing his eyes from the face of Bolton’s watch.

“Four to one!” grinned Slow-Mad.

“I take yuh!” said Hellier. “In dollars or eagles.”

“And I’m offering ten to one on Pep’s winning!” cried Tulip, slapping a shapely booted leg with her quirt.

They discussed the possible upshot of the race and placed bets, which Paramount solemnly recorded, until it lacked but a few minutes of the half hour.

During this interval Bolton had sat his horse, hardly uttering a word. What he was going to do, how conduct his race, none knew or could guess until Paramount gave the word.

Then the ranger, without comment or *adios*, drove his spurs into the black's flanks.

The animal gave a curious squeal of surprise or disgust and streaked southward at a terrific gallop.

"Huh!" grunted Hellier. "Now, what d'yuh think o' that? They's two of 'em!"

"Oh, I dunno," said Slow-Mad. "I reck'n he's figgered it out about right. It ain't sech a long race at that. A half hour's a long distance at the pace Pepper was settin' when last seen. The ranger cala'ates it's a test of speed an' endurance. Speed ain't gonna count if endurance don't. It's the black's staying powers ag'in the pinto's."

They watched until the ranger was out of sight. Then they turned their horses toward Tres Hermanas—all except Tulip, who, horseless, was standing with her eyes turned thoughtfully toward the south.

"Come on, Tulip!" called her dad.

"Coming," she said and covered her dilatoriness by adding, "—as soon as somebody'll lend me a bronc. Guess *I'll* have to take Hale's."

Hale was standing a little apart, his hands down by his sides, the fists tightly clenched and his eyes unwinkingly staring at the horizon to the south.

"Ride, boy—ride!" he was muttering.

Bolton had figured, as had Slow-Mad Gray, that if William John Pepper kept the pace at which he started, it would be a test of endurance rather than a race of speed. Neither horse might ever reach the border going like that.

The ranger's belief—if not hope—was that the fugitive, in his eagerness to escape, would use no discretion. If Pepper's horse foundered first and its rider was not near enough to the border to foot the rest of the distance before his pursuer came up, the race would be to Bolton.

If, on the other hand, the ranger's horse gave out before overhauling the other, there was still a chance that by legwork Pepper could be overtaken—perhaps discovered a few miles farther on with an equally played-out animal. Bolton figured that his chances were as good as—if not slightly better than—the fugitive's. He followed the pace the latter had set.

He hated to do it, for he loved that black horse as he loved nothing else in his somewhat austere, solitary life, but his duty called and he was answering to the best of his judgment.

But both Slow-Mad and Bolton were incorrect in their judgment on Pep's flying start. Tulip and her father had drawn a wiser, if more intuitive, conclusion.

William John Pepper might be impulsive in many things, but never in the matter of using the resources of horseflesh.

His wild start, his first furious gallop, were but a blind to induce Bolton to do just what the latter did.

As soon as he was out of sight Pep checked the pinto into a long, swift canter. Only when he felt that the nature of the land rendered him visible to those watching back there at Hale's did he again urge the painted pony into that reckless gallop.

Always he chose his course to put as much obstruction as possible between him and the view from Hale's, conserving the pinto's eager energy wherever possible.

This strategy he kept up until the distance separating him from Bolton's view made action indistinguishable. By that time the pinto had worked off its surplus pep and was contented to settle down to a steady and fairly easy gait. This its rider fitted to the tempo of his favorite song. The pinto's hoofs beat out the measure:

“Oh, there *was* an ol' woman an' she *wasn't* very *rich*,
An' *when* she *died* she *didn't* leave *much*—
A *great* big *hat* with a *great* big *brim*,
An' *all* tied *roun'* with a *woolen string!*”

And presently, less than five miles behind, Bolton started and was coming on at a gait which only a patter-song could have accompanied.

The border was only seven miles away when Pep, turning in the saddle, saw his enemy coming on behind. Bolton was still a mile or two away, but his pace was terrific and the distance between them was diminishing rapidly.

“Going some!” murmured Pep. “Now for the answer.

“Keep cool, ol' Painted-Face,” he went on, addressing the pinto. “Yuh're doin' first rate. Mebbe in a li'l while I'm gonna ask yuh to put some more

swift in it. But f'r the nonce—as the Perfessor used to say—keep a-goin', Lizzie—keep a-goin'!

“Oh, there *was* an ol' *man* an' his *name* was Uncle *Bill*,
An' he *lived* all *alone* on th' *top* uv a *hill*”

Four miles to the river. But now Bolton was closing in behind. He was almost within pistol-shot distance.

Pep, looking over his shoulder, grinned and waved a hand.

“Halt!” cried the ranger.

Pep kept going to the tune of “Turkey in the Straw.” Bolton closed up to within possible killing distance with the forty-five which he drew.

“Halt, or I shoot that pony under you!” he cried.

“Aw, don't do nothin' like that!” Pep called back. “What's yer blame hurry?”

And then he did what he had refrained from doing before—tested out the limit of that pinto's speed and endurance.

“Go to it, Angel-Child!” he yelled suddenly, slapping the animal's neck with his sombrero and just touching it with the spurs. “Go to it!”

The painted horse gave a snort and leaped forward as if, despite its slight fatigue, it resented any imputation of being tired. With ears erect, long tail streaming and eyes and nostrils distended, it dropped into a long, low, swift, streaking gallop.

“Of course she said yer name wuz ‘Pep’,” said the rider, chuckling. “So's mine, yuh li'l bag of ginger. But I ain't lookin' f'r trouble no more. Don Quickshot's found his Lady Dulcinny del Taboozy, only she don't know it!

“*Vaya*, you Lightnin'-Bug! Yer middle name's ‘Goin'-Some' an' ye were sired by a tornado! Oh, ain't it breezy!”

A shot came from behind, but no lead touched or whistled by. The range was long, for at the first few leaps of that new start, and before Bolton quite awoke to Pep's latest impulse, the fugitive had gained another hundred yards.

The distance to the border was now less than three miles. Already the riders could see the dense chaparral, the groves of willow and glimpses of dried river-bed flanking either side of a shimmer of water.

Bolton saw himself faced by defeat once more. Now he perceived the folly of having fallen into the trap the fugitive must have deliberately laid for him. That pinto could not have been ridden hard all the way—not a quarter of the way. It was almost as good as new!

His own black mount had done its best—had done marvelously well in speed and endurance. But now it could do little more.

It did not break its pace, keeping up to the long stride of its start, though with a little less springiness. Sensing that the race proper was on and feeling perhaps that its reputation was at stake, the black even lengthened its stride a little.

But try as it did it could gain nothing on the now loosened-up pinto. The black did not lose ground, however, but kept an even distance between it and the painted pony.

Now only a half mile separated Impulsive Pep and the river thickets. He was making for a gap in these, beyond which appeared what looked like fairly quiet river-shallows.

“Halt or I drop you!” shouted Bolton, more as a bluff than with any actual thought of getting his man by killing him. “Rein up and show me your hands.”

“Can’t do it!” Pep hurled back at him. “This bit uv Thunder-Juice ’z bolted, an’ my hands is busy!”

Bolton dug his spurs for the last time. The black, with one last mighty effort, strained every muscle to the last lap.

It gained. By the time Pep reached the gap in the willows the ranger was within easy pistol range. But the willows intervened.

Through the gap Bolton tore a few seconds later, his forty-five up, cocked and leveled.

“I win, Pepper!” he cried. “Don’t make me shoot!”

“The hell yuh do!” laughed Pep, as the pinto, clattering across the dry stones of the river-bed, splashed into the shallows of the Rio Grande.

Bolton fired. The ball struck up a miniature geyser in the stream to the pinto’s left. He was about to fire again when Pep suddenly reined in his horse and turned its head toward Bolton. The latter, thinking the race over, slowed up.

“So you thought better of it?” said the ranger. “You’re wise, Pepper. You may be acquitted on all counts at that.”

“I wasn’t thinking of nothin’ like that,” said Pep. “What’s bitin’ yuh, *hombre*? Yuh don’t want international implications, do yuh? Hev we got to measure this blame ditch with a footrule to git the middle of it? I’m in Mexico, ol’-timer, an’ it’s a right nice country if yuh ain’t too partic’lar.”

To make certainty surer Pep urged his horse toward the farther side of the river.

“*Adios*, buddy!” he called back over the line. “Mebbe we’ll meet ag’in when this cruel war is over. Give my regards to the li’l lady an’ tell her—tell her that Pep—meanin’ her *caballo*—won out.”

Bolton sat on his foam-flecked, blowing horse, the forty-five drooping in his right hand. Slowly that rare smile stole about his mouth.

“All right, Pep!” he called. “Your trick again. Dunno as I’m sorry. *Adios!*”

“*Adios!*” came from the other side of the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER XV

QUICKSHOT RIDES AGAIN

WILLIAM JOHN PEPPER, safe and free on foreign soil, had turned his head toward Mexico's hinterland when something caused him to pause for a second, then as quickly urge his pinto into cover of the chaparral.

There presently appeared from the south three men, two of whom Pep recognized as the redoubtable Chico Villegas and (probably) his lieutenant, El Borracho. The third was a Mexican whose face was somehow familiar to Mr. Pepper. He had seen him somewhere on the other side of the river.

Behind these three came what Pep at first thought must be all the bandits Mexico ever produced, or at least the whole of Chico's band. On further survey, however, there appeared to be not more than a hundred, all mounted and fully armed.

Pep, in the shelter of the chaparral, laid a tight hand over the nostrils of Tulip's painted pony.

Chico, sighting the river through the brush, called a halt and presently talked to his men, his voice lifted so that all should hear and understand. He blessed the day he had learned the tune of Mexican-Spanish.

"Here we divide, as arranged," said Villegas. "Miguel here (El Borracho he meant) leads one party against Los Indios, while I myself carry out the main movement against Tres Hermanas ranch."

"Yuh don't say!" murmured Pep, much interested.

"Suarez here—" he indicated the third man in front—"will ride ahead to Tres Hermanas and tell the rich gringo that what he heard and told him before is true. Chico Villegas attacks Los Indios—is advancing now.

"The rich gringo, Señor Hellier, will muster his vaqueros and ride to warn and assist Los Indios. But he will be too late, you but making a bluff attack on the town and creating a noise that will cover the real game at Tres Hermanas.

"There, at the ranch, the gringo will have left his daughter with little protection. Suarez, who will be fatigued after his brave ride to warn his *empleador*, will be left there to revive. He will have tied to a shade-tree near

the hacienda a signal that all is clear. After you have created the *tumulto* at Los Indios, you return swiftly to the river, drawing off any pursuit, from me—any idea that I am not with you, but elsewhere. I, in the meantime, have taken the *señorita*, who, Suarez tells me, is very beautiful and should be worth much money to her rich *padre*, and I will be back at the *caverna* with her before you arrive there.

“That is all. And who fails me, Chico Villegas, will account to Chico Villegas. You know the price I charge!

“Feed and water your *caballos* and prepare yourselves. I give thirty minutes.”

“Just thirty minutes, sez he,” murmured Pep. “Mebbe I could put a snarl in your rope in that time, ol’ Garlic-Whiskers. Wouldn’t be surprised.

“Only—” And he looked worried. “I don’t seem to be able to shake off these United States nohow. I sure am bound to attend my own fun’ral over there.”

The bandits dismounted and prepared a hasty noon meal, while Chico, El Borracho and the spy, Suarez, sat apart, discussing the plan to kidnap Hellier’s daughter for ransom—the same plan which the smooth Pancho had mulled over with Manuel, his countryman.

Suarez presently mounted his horse and rode toward the river. At the same time Mr. Pepper was working his own mount back through the chaparral.

Fifteen minutes later Pep recrossed the Rio Grande and headed, on a more than half-fatigued horse, northward again!

Bolton, riding a horse which had fallen lame, was making for Los Indios, which he calculated to be the nearest place where he could recuperate himself and his animal without being asked a question which he was naturally anxious to avoid.

Pep had figured that Bolton would try for Los Indios rather than Hale’s Ranch or Tres Hermanas. In less than half an hour he sighted him ahead. Five minutes later he hailed the ranger.

Bolton turned in the saddle. So great was his surprise at seeing his man back on American soil that he forgot to draw a weapon.

But he had no need to, for Pep’s first words declared a truce by tacit consent. In a few hasty words he described a situation which might develop seriously if, as he said, nobody put a snarl in Chico’s rope.

“You make Los Indios, if that hoss’ll carry ye that fur,” said Pep. “Tip ’em off! I’m headin’ for Tres Hermanas to gum up the Mex’s game there. *Vamonos!*”

And he was off, heading now at a more northerly tangent, having come off the direct Tres Hermanas line to overtake Bolton. That person was left staring after his quarry.

Then he pressed his lame horse into a jerky lope toward Los Indios. But he knew he could never make it before the bandits if they kept to their schedule.

They did. Bolton saw them some twenty minutes later coming on some miles behind, riding in a cloud of dust. They were coming on hard.

They might have seen and taken him for some lonely cowpuncher. If he got in their way they would probably shoot him down and let it go at that. His presence could not have worried El Borracho in any event. That lone rider could not reach Los Indios ahead of his bandits. His horse—if the rider had been noted at all—was obviously lame.

But El Borracho might not have seen the single *caballero* before Bolton discovered the cavalcade away behind. Adopting discretion, the ranger dismounted and made his horse lie down. Behind it he crouched with his remaining forty-five—Mr. Pepper had the other—ready for anything, although he hoped the Mexicans would ride past without observing him.

This they did, tearing by in a cloud of dust about a gunshot distance to the left of the crouching ranger.

Bolton waited until they were some distance ahead and himself screened by their own dust-cloud before he remounted and continued the halting pace to Los Indios. Again Pep changed his course and headed for Los Indios.

After leaving Bolton, upon whom he had depended to warn the town of the threatened raid, Mr. Pepper began to see probabilities more clearly.

Clearly Bolton might not make it on that lame horse. Maybe the bandits would overtake and get him. And Los Indios was, after all, entitled to some warning.

Yet that meant leaving Tres Hermanas unwarned save by the lying Suarez, whose frenzied report would surely send Hellier off at the head of his men to help defend the town. Villegas would have an easy thing of kidnapping the woman whose body would surely bring a rich ransom from the wealthy rancher.

“Oh, Lord—send me some judgment!” muttered Pep as he rode.

And possibly the Lord sent it. Pep presently perceived that it would avail little for him to ride alone into a ranch deserted by more than half its men and hope to save a girl from Chico Villegas and probably a half-hundred bandits.

Of course, he might get there first and abduct the lady himself, but——

“Gol darn it!” he muttered. “They’d have that ag’in me as another charge—wuss’n train-robbin’ or man-killin’.”

Not that he would have worried much about that, especially if Miss Tulip didn’t, but now he saw that the best plan was to ride to Los Indios, incidentally warn that town, and if Hellier and his men were not there, ride toward Tres Hermanas, meet them and head them back.

“Mosey, gal, mosey!” he whispered to the pinto. “Yuh’re doin’ better’n angels’ best, an’ if yuh bring me in on time I’ll buy yuh a bag uv lump-sugar an’ a tombstone!”

He made the town five minutes ahead of El Borracho, who saw him cutting in from the west at businesslike speed. Suspicious of that rider, Chico’s lieutenant urged his own men to a swifter pace.

Pep observed that increased scurrying and knew they knew.

Into Los Indios he dashed on a winded, lathered pinto which roared hoarsely from its lungs as it came. Its rider stood up in the stirrups, yelling. At the same time he fired shots from the loaned forty-five.

Instantly the plaza and main street became alive as storekeepers, cowboys, ranchers and loafers poured out of the buildings to learn what was in the air.

Pep rode straight up to the front of the main store, where there were a number of saddled horses hitched to the rack. Unheeding the guns that appeared from law-enforced cover——for many recognized the mankiller and bandit, Pepper——he leaped from the pinto and yelled:

“The Mexicans is comin’ to raid Los Injus! Get the reception c’mittee out——quick! ’Nuther party’s raidin’ Tres Hermanas. Is Jim Hellier’s bunch in town? No? Then gimme a fresh mount. I gotta ride!”

They knew he was telling the truth. This man, wanted by the law, would not have ridden into Los Indios except on some pressing errand, even if they could account for his presence out of Villa Grande county jail.

Not a hand or gun was lifted to prevent his picking a horse from the bunch before the main general store. Among these horses was a dirty-hued, lean buckskin, at sight of which William John Pepper exclaimed, "Blamed if there ain't my ol' Gunnysack!"

Before his words and actions had had time to sink in with their real significance, Mr. Pepper was aboard his old Rosinante and off again, this time heading northwest for Tres Hermanas and leaving behind a sweat-lathered pinto with a drooping head.

"By cripes, fellas!" wheezed a large man, emerging from the main store. "That's Pepper, the outlaw, an' that's his own hoss he's took away. I was ridin' it myself for a change. Mebbe it was that hoss he come for."

But any doubt of the purpose of Mr. Pepper's swift entrance and exit was ended by a volley of scattered shots from the south side of the town, beyond the T. & S. tracks.

The Los Indios raid was on.

Half an hour before, Pancho Suarez had ridden up to the hacienda of Tres Hermanas, flung himself from a beaten nag and burst in on Big Jim Hellier while he was eating dinner (Mrs. Hemingway called it luncheon) with his family.

"Señor Jeem!" cried the Mexican. "What I tell you ees *verdad*—true. At thees vair' *momento* Chico Villegas make raid on Los Indios. I see hees band!"

Hellier sprang to his feet and glared at the Mexican. He had just been thinking about this man Suarez, who was developing a habit of leaving the ranch without leave, always choosing his time when Hellier was absent.

Big Jim had returned from Hale's that forenoon to find Suarez gone. None knew when he had left; it might have been right after he brought Bolton's horse and that first rumor of a bandit raid.

But at the news the man now brought, confirming, as it seemed, that first rumor, Hellier forgot the accounting he had decided to have. The man was apparently telling the truth. He was clearly all in from hard riding. Perhaps, after all, Pancho was a good American, even if of Mexican birth. Perhaps loyalty accounted for his recent mysterious behavior.

"All right, Pancho. Good work!" said Big Jim quickly but quietly. "Round up the boys. Tell 'em boots an' saddles an' guns. Then you go lay off a bit, Suarez. You ain't fit to come along. *Pronto* now!"

“Vivian,” said Hellier, turning to his nephew as the Mexican slipped out, “all the men of this section are like to have their hands full around here—you with the rest. There ain’t likely to be nothin’ go wrong here, but I’m leavin’ you in charge of the women-folks an’ things in general.”

Then he went through the doorway in a hurry, leaving Mrs. Hemingway aghast and suffering some palpitation. Tulip was staring at the doorway by which her father had gone.

“Oh!” she breathed tensely. “If only I were a man!”

“Don’t worry, my dear,” said Vivian. “I’ll look after you both. I’m armed!”

Tulip turned away impatiently and went to the veranda before which the boys were swiftly assembling.

Even in that moment her eyes turned to the south and she was wondering whether Mr. Pepper had won out.

CHAPTER XVI

MANY ENGAGEMENTS

THE few minutes' grace that Mr. Pepper's warning gave to Los Indios offset absolute surprise by the bandits. It enabled the inhabitants to close and barricade doors at least and allowed men time to reach their guns or be in the act of reaching for them.

Had El Borracho's instructions read to take, loot or destroy the town of Los Indios he would have failed, and later, probably, paid the price of failure which Chico Villegas was in the habit of charging.

But his orders were merely to engage Los Indios and preoccupy the mind of its population. This El Borracho proceeded to do.

As he and his men tore into the plaza, yelling and firing voluminously enough for three times their force, they were greeted by a shower of lead from roofs, windows and handy loopholes.

El Borracho saw that if the engagement was to be prolonged and not at once ended by his own repulse—when men might have time to think of the other half of that lone rider's probable warning, concerning a simultaneous raid on Tres Hermanas—he had better seek cover.

To the surprise of the defenders of the town, the Mexican leader, shouting to his followers, made straight for the T. & S. depot. The doors of the station-house did not resist their entry, but yielded as if opened from within. Manuel, the *telegrafico*, must either have been caught napping and shot down, or had shown a yellow streak and surrendered, or——

But the defenders of Los Indios did not suspect the truth just yet, or generously dismissed the thought of actual treachery.

For the next twenty minutes a battle was fought between two sides of the plaza, the fire of the defenders concentrated on that station-house, that of the Mexicans concealed within it at the buildings facing the plaza from the town side.

Most of the lead found its billet in the general wood structure of Los Indios. Casualties were few, but there was noise enough and enough powder burned for a man-sized engagement.

Into this mess rode Bolton on a limping horse. He had scarcely appeared in the plaza, making apparently for cover on the town side, before his black animal was shot from under him by a well-aimed ball from the depot.

Bolton went down with the animal he loved, but struggled free of its expiring convulsions. It had been shot through the head.

With a snarl of fury the ranger crouched down behind the carcass and peered over the saddle at the station-house from which that particular shot had come.

He was not surprised that the Mexicans were in possession of the depot. He supposed they had rushed and occupied it at the outset. But he was surprised, astounded, when through one of the open windows from which the bandit fire poured he saw the fat, gross-faced El Borracho in close conference with the telegraph clerk, Manuel.

There could be no doubt of Manuel's attitude in this collision. The clerk was waving his arms excitedly and pointing toward different quarters of Los Indios, as if he gave El Borracho information and advice.

"By the Lord Harry!" muttered the ranger, sighting his forty-five over the saddle of his fallen black. "That's the answer to a number of little things!"

The forty-five spat once. The *telegrafico* stopped talking. His arms ceased to gesticulate and he slumped forward against El Borracho, who jumped back from the line of that open window.

"So much for the telegraph-spy!" grunted Bolton.

By this time El Borracho apparently had had enough, or thought he had played his game a sufficient length of time. The firing from the station-house became desultory, then ceased altogether.

Then, from the back of the station-house—the side facing away from the plaza and across the tracks, southward—dashed the bandits, once more mounted on the horses they had bunched under this leeseid cover.

The raid ended as suddenly as it had begun. Doors opened and the inhabitants of Los Indios emerged, still with ready guns and all with questions stamped on their faces.

Sheriff Littlejohn, appearing from his shelter in the main general store, came wheezing like a superannuated locomotive to where Bolton was somberly regarding the remains of his beloved black.

“Shake, pardner—shake!” cried the sheriff. “We win, by cripes!”

“Win what?” asked Bolton sourly. “They might ha’ shot blanks for all the intention back of it. The real job is at Tres Hermanas.”

As he was speaking he forgot his dead horse for the moment in the call to further duty. His manners and words took on speed.

“Get together a posse quick, Sheriff—and get me something to ride, too. Chico Villegas is at Tres Hermanas and aiming to kidnap Hellier’s girl for ransom. This was a trick to draw off Jim Hellier and his men to Los Indios.

“Get busy!”

Impulsive Pep had the same story to tell Hellier and his boys when he met them about one third of the distance from Los Indios to Tres Hermanas.

“My God!” said Big Jim in a strained whisper. Then, with a yell, “Turn aroun’, boys! Come on back!”

“By th’ tarnal bobcats!” he snarled as he and his crowd, accompanied by Impulsive Pep, started at full gallop along the road over which they had just come. “Let me git hold of that yaller-livered coyote, Suarez, an’ I’ll squeeze his lights out through his eyes!”

They had been six or seven miles from Tres Hermanas when Pep headed them off. Now, as they streaked back to the imperilled home they could hear—like the popping of distant firecrackers—the faint spatter of gunfire both behind and ahead.

They knew what it all meant, but were interested only in the sounds that came from Tres Hermanas. Chico Villegas had attacked there—might at this minute be laying hands on Tulip Hellier.

“If he’d only sent word!” groaned Hellier as he rode. “I’d ’a’ paid him the ransom aforehand—jest tuh keep his dirty hands off my gal. I’d——”

“Yuh knows darn well yuh wouldn’t ’a’ done nothin’ like that,” said Impulsive Pep, whose buckskin was keeping the pace quite easily.

Hellier turned and glared at the speaker. Perhaps then for the first time he really recognized the Paul Revere of the occasion.

“You musta won across?” said he.

“And come back again!” chuckled Pep. “I was aimin’ to prevent your gal bein’ carried off.”

Big Jim swallowed hard.

"I owes you su'thin' for this, *hombre*," said he, reaching over and laying a hand on Pep's bridle arm. "I ain't forgettin' it either. But I'm thinkin' yuh come too late."

"I done my bes'," said Pep modestly.

But apparently it was true. He had come too late with the warning.

When they arrived at the ranch the firing was still going on, however, much to Hellier's mystification. If it was only to seize and carry off Tulip that the bandits had come—why all this firing? Who could be putting up any resistance? It didn't seem likely that that Vivian. . . .

But the strategy of Chico Villegas was presently apparent. The bandits had seen the cavalcade tearing in from the direction of Los Indios. Instead of retreating they pretended not to have noticed the oncoming force and even increased their random fire at the ranch buildings.

Then, when the cowboys were within five hundred yards, as if by a preconcerted signal the bandits turned and streaked southward.

"After 'em, boys!" shouted Big Jim, "Get 'em! They may ha' my gal among them! Get her!"

He himself was leading the pursuit when Pep, riding at his side, grabbed his arm.

"All right!" said he. "Let the boys chase 'em to hell an' back, but Tulip ain't in that bunch; neither's Villegas. You an' me falls out an' looks over the *casa*. Come on!"

Hellier, sensing a steadier wit than his own at that moment, turned and yelled the new arrangement to the boys. With a wild whoop they continued pursuit of the main body of bandits while Big Jim and Pep swung out and away toward the ranchhouse.

As they went Pep pointed to a shade-tree growing at the end of the tool-barn. From a branch easily reached from the roof fluttered a dirty yellow kerchief.

"Suarez' signal!" said Pep.

"Let me lay han's on that yaller-jacket!" muttered Hellier, throwing himself from the horse and dashing toward the house, which was now strangely silent.

And the first person they saw was Suarez.

He lay on the floor just inside the living-room doorway. Blood almost covered his swarthy face and was still trickling from a hideous gash over his temple. He was apparently dead.

Beyond him the living-room presented a staggering sight. It was as if a cyclone had struck it. The dining table was upset, also the “canned music-box” and its stand. Vulcanite records, books and ornaments littered the floor. Near Suarez’ head was a heavy bronze book-end stained with blood.

In a chair, hanging limply in a genuine faint, was Mrs. Hemingway. Propped against a leg of the sideboard which was Big Jim’s private oasis was Vivian Hemingway. He was in a half-sitting posture, apparently only half-conscious, and there was a dark discoloration, as from a fist-blow, between his eyes.

Tulip was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XVII

TWO—AND A BANDIT

PEP first went to Suarez and looked him over. He was almost instantly followed by Big Jim, in whose eyes flamed a kind of animal rage.

William John Pepper pushed the outraged father back as he himself rose from the Mexican's side.

"Don't do it, ol' man," said he. "This fella'll never make no more trouble. That brass knocker checked his young career."

A moan came from the direction of Vivian Hemingway. At the same time Mrs. Hemingway uttered a deep sigh, opened her eyes and promptly fell into hysterics.

"What in tarnation am I to do now?" groaned Hellier at this new development. Then he did the best thing he could have done—used such frightful language to his sister-in-law that she was scared into staring silence.

In the meantime Pep had grabbed a bottle of rattlesnake-weed from the oasis and helped Vivian to a dram that restored him to his senses.

"Now, then—what happened?" asked Pep. "Where's Tulip?"

"A Mexican," said Vivian faintly. "Said he was Chico Villegas—boasted of it. He took her, I think. Must have."

"Take it easy now," drawled Pep assuringly, although he was more excited than he had ever been in his life over anything. "Tell us what happened."

And Vivian did to the best of his ability. What he was unable to relate for reasons presently apparent was later filled in.

"I don't know quite," said the dazed city youth. "We were just sitting here, talking—about you, Mr. Pepper, I think—the race, you know—when all at once there was a lot of firing.

"That man—Suarez I think his name is—stood in the front door there and covered me with a pistol. Almost at the same time a large man, a fierce, bandit-looking Mexican, came in by the pantry door and began laughing.

“He spoke very bad English, but I gathered that he did not mean to harm any of us if we behaved, and that he only wanted Tulip to come with him.

“I protested, of course, and Tulip refused to go. I would have drawn my pistol, but the man Suarez pushed his right into my face.

“Villegas tried to seize Tulip and she fought him. There was a terrible fight. Tulip was very plucky, I must say. She kept him off for a while by throwing things at him—books, records, dishes, glasses—everything she could lay hands on.

“I could do nothing until—Well, Tulip picked up one of those bronze heavy book-ends and threw it at the bandit. It missed Villegas, just missed me and struck the man Suarez—on the head, I think. He just fell down and didn’t move again.

“Then I drew my pistol and threatened to shoot Villegas. But he just laughed and knocked the pistol out of my hand. Then he struck me—I don’t know. I don’t know what happened after that.”

“That’s good enough,” said Pep, rising with a flame in his eyes. Turning to Hellier, who was divided between his sister-in-law and his nephew, he said, “Villegas got her. He’s probably riding alone with her while his men draw off the bunch after them.

“I’m going after Chico,” he concluded abruptly. “*Adios!*”

He stepped over the body of Suarez and ran out toward the buckskin. He made a flying leap into the saddle and swung the lean Rosinante’s head around toward the back of the ranchhouse. There the trail must begin.

Hellier slumped into a chair and cursed his own helplessness, his momentarily shattered initiative. Into his profane muttering came a voice, religiously solemn, full of deep conviction and determination.

“Vivian,” it said, “we must leave this dreadful place at once!”

“Yes, Mater,” said another voice, less decisive, from somewhere in the region of the private oasis.

William John Pepper found the marks of the bandit chief’s horse near the kitchen door. But Pep knew that to follow the trail in a southerly direction would be next to impossible, owing to the rough nature of the ground.

For south undoubtedly Villegas must have gone, carrying the girl—who might or might not be unconscious—across his saddle. There were no signs of a second horse and there had probably been no time to procure one.

Doubtless the unexpected return of the men of the ranch had been a surprise that upset the bandit's calculations and forced him to make his getaway with the girl quickly and by whatever means he had immediately at hand.

That the bandit's horse was probably carrying double filled Pep with a great hope. He stood a fair chance of overtaking the abductor—that is, if he could only tell in which way Villegas had gone.

He thought intently, figuring possibilities, swiftly accepting one here while he dismissed another there.

The leaderless bandits pursued by Hellier's boys would undoubtedly go due south to the river, thus avoiding Los Indios. That town was a point or two east of south from Tres Hermanas.

In all probability Chico Villegas would naturally bear a point or two west in his southward retreat in order not to come in contact with, or be visible to, the cowboys pursuing the main company.

"That's what he'd do—sure!" muttered Pep, who delayed no more but urged his buckskin into a swift canter, heading more west than he even thought Villegas was likely to have veered.

About a mile with this westerly drift he traveled hard, then swung in a wide circle more to the south, ever sweeping the land about him and ahead with keen eyes in which there was a curious hard glint.

Half an hour later.

"I get yuh, Chico!" Pep suddenly grunted, and to the cayuse: "Hop, Daddy Longlegs!"

Away ahead, directly south, he saw a horse that moved steadily but with a heavy gait. Also, at the same moment, to Pep's ears a faint scream drifted down the wind.

The buckskin, as if it knew its master's secret and his eagerness, put its best foot forward. Rapidly it overhauled the bandit, who, as well as his horse, was handicapped by his burden. Tulip was fighting her saddlemate, using fists and fingernails without regard for fighting rules.

"Keep it up, gal! Keep it up!" muttered Pep.

She kept it up so much that Villegas, fully engaged with his fair loot, was not aware of the danger behind until the clatter of hoofs made him turn his head.

Then, seeing but one person and knowing that his own horse, carrying double, could not hope to out-speed even that mean-looking buckskin, the bandit reined up and dropped to the ground. Tulip, released, also dropped from the saddle. She fell in a heap, struck the ground heavily and lay still.

Villegas promptly opened fire on Mr. Pepper, who lost his hat at the third shot.

The ground was rocky at this point and both the bandit and Pep took prompt advantage of the fact and the handiest boulders. Their horses, not a whit frightened by the shooting, merely drew off a bit and coolly began nosing around for feed.

“Chico!” cried Pep from behind his rock. “Up to now I never had nothin’ against yuh—even had a sneakin’ adm’ration for your nerve. But this yuh done last is fair reprehens’ble.”

“*Quien es?*” asked the bandit, surprised at the speech, thinking perhaps there might be some misunderstanding and this pursuer prove a tractable friend after all.

He incautiously raised his head, but almost instantly ducked it again, his shooting eye suddenly filled with a gritty powder raised by a shot which glanced off his rock.

The circumstance bothered the bandit’s aim. The grit-filled eye watered and presently affected his left. Fearing that his antagonist might think him out of the fight—and find him so practically—Villegas kept on firing at frequent intervals.

So the duel went on for about ten minutes, at the end of which time Tulip Hellier sat up on the ground and slowly took in the situation.

At first she believed it had all been a dream—an exciting dream into which, at the end had ridden her knight of the sage-brush to rescue her from the pursuing villain.

But it was no dream. There was the bandit behind one rock, and behind another—yes, it was really he—Mr. William John Pepper. He must have escaped Bolton after all, although it puzzled her how he came to be where he was.

From her angle she could see both the duelists plainly, although they could not see each other. And particularly—being concerned for the safety of Mr. Pepper—she noted the bandit’s actions.

At that moment these actions struck her as peculiar. Villegas was rubbing his eyes one moment and the next fumbling at his cartridge belt and blindly reloading by touch. Then he fell to cursing softly in Spanish and digging his knuckles into his eyes again. Instantly Tulip had a rare inspiration.

“Quick, Pep!” she cried. “You’ve dusted his eyes and he can’t see straight!”

“Yuh don’t say!” answered Pep, but not moving until with a furious curse the bandit blindly fired a shot in the direction of the informing voice. He missed, but the ball came dangerously near the girl.

At that Pep delayed no longer to come out into the open. He slipped around his rock and rushed Chico’s. The bandit heard him coming, rose up and fired at the figure which appeared blurrily against the sun-glare of the rocks.

His shot found Pepper’s left arm, which, its owner felt, exploded like a box of firecrackers, then died a sudden death. But Pep’s return compliment lodged in the bandit’s gun-arm, breaking the bone above the wrist.

Villegas dropped his pistol and reeled.

Between pain and blindness he almost fell across his rock.

Pep glanced over the terrain to the west. There was none of the bandit’s crew in sight. The game was all in his hands for the moment.

But Chico knew his own advantage, particularly in that this lone *hombre* would hardly take him back prisoner if he had regard for the girl’s safety at the same time.

It had always been said of the famous—or infamous—Chico Villegas that he did not lack for nerve. He displayed this characteristic now, perhaps because he knew that gringo peculiarity of never shooting a helpless man.

Nursing his broken right arm he coolly whistled to his horse, which came to him. With some difficulty, using only his left hand to assist, the bandit got into the saddle and as calmly started to ride away, southward.

Pep’s gun was still covering the bandit. A puzzled expression came into the humorous gray eyes. Presently, when Villegas was almost out of range, Pep lowered the pistol and turned to find Tulip standing beside him.

“Oh, I’m so glad you didn’t!” she said. “I wouldn’t have interfered, but—he was blind, you see.”

“ ’Tain’t that,” said Pep, grinning, “but somehow I always had a sneakin’ adm’ration for that *hombre*, an’ mebbe when I visit him in Mexico he’ll ’member he owes me that much.”

“You’re going to—to Mexico?”

“Right now,” said he. “The show’s over, I reck’n. I——”

He winced. She saw his face whiten and his gun-hand steal to his left arm.

“Oh, you’re hurt, Pep—you’re hurt!” she cried.

CHAPTER XVIII

“Adios!”

“WELL?” said Pep when she had made a tourniquet with a strip from her skirt. “What’s next?”

“I—I don’t know, Pep,” she said uncertainly. “You ought to—to go to Mexico.”

“I sure ought, li’l lady—but I hates to. It’s about twelve miles from here an’ it’s blame’ hot walkin’.”

“But you have your horse.”

“Oh? So you were thinkin’ of footin’ it back home yuhself? Ye’d bes’ not, li’l woman. They’s snakes an’ things. Fair crawlin’ with rattlers, those rocks.”

“But——”

And there they were faced by a problem, out there on a half-desert, with one horse, no water and the sun beating mercilessly on them. Yet the solution was so simple. Pep could give her his horse; and he was quite willing—said so.

“Oh, but I owe you so much already!” she protested.

“Oh, not such an awful lot, Miss Tulip. Mebbe jes’ one li’l thing would square you an’ me.”

“Oh, anything——”

Then she stopped, aware that his eyes were wistfully upon her—eyes in which humor, tenderness and physical pain were mingled. Slowly the blood crept into her cheeks, for intuition told her what he wanted.

“Jes’ once,” said he; “somethin’ to remember yuh by, Tulip. I knows it’s a helluva—an awful nerve, I mean—a fella like me an’ a girl like you. But God knows there’s nothin’ in my mind but just—just the sweetness of you, lass, an’ the hankerin’ I have for—for just that ye kissed me once of your own free will!”

“I’m—I’m glad to kiss you, Pep,” she said simply. “I’d like to remember, too.”

As she came close to him he removed his sombrero, shut his eyes and stood there with slightly bent head.

She laid her hands on his shoulders, tiptoed and softly kissed him on the lips, drawing back presently and turning her face toward the southern horizon.

Pep opened his eyes and said quietly, “Thank yuh, Miss Tulip. Now—le’s go!”

He whistled to his Rosinante and presently swung into the saddle. Yet he did not ride off. She turned and said, “What are you waiting for? Please go!”

“I was waitin’ till you woke up,” he said, pushing the left stirrup into position with the foot he withdrew from it. “Don Quickshot never left no lady in distress. We’ll ride double to Tres Hermanas.”

Hellier, Bolton, Sheriff Littlejohn, the boys of Tres Hermanas and the posse from Los Indios, all assembled before Big Jim’s ranchhouse, saw the buckskin returning in the distance.

That the cayuse was traveling at a listless walk augured (to Big Jim at least) no good result of Pepper’s quest. Hellier, his face drawn with anxiety, went inside to get his field-glasses. He found them, luckily unbroken in their case, in a corner where they had landed after missing Villegas’ head. Hellier also discovered his sister-in-law and his nephew packing up, preparatory to departure.

Outside, Bolton, Littlejohn and the bunch eyed the returning buckskin. The Los Indios posse had arrived after the Tres Hermanas raid was all over. Hellier’s boys had chased the Villegas band clear to the river, giving up there because they had perceived that neither the bandit chief nor the girl were of the party. Uniting at Tres Hermanas, the double force had just decided on a plan to follow Villegas *into Mexico* when the buckskin’s reappearance called a halt.

“He must have found a lead of some sort, or he wouldn’t be comin’ back here,” said Slow-Mad with a glance at Bolton.

“You can’t tell about him,” said the ranger with a quiet grin. “But here’s Hellier with the glasses. Maybe they’ll tell us something.”

Big Jim leveled the glasses, grunted, lowered them, wiped them, looked again, again lowered them, readjusted the focus and looked for the third

time. Then he burst out in a joyous whoop.

“Weepin’ bobcats! It’s Pepper! An’ he’s got Tulip behind him! *Wheeow!* An’ she’s laughin’! *Wheeow!* That ol’ buckskin cayuse is fair staggerin’ with joy. He’s got my girl!”

“*Whee-ee-eow!*” yelled the boys and several began shooting in the air.

“Lookuh here, you Bolton!” Hellier cried belligerently to the ranger. “What yuh gonna do now? Yuh mean to have the nerve to tote that fellow off to jail after this—a—fter rescuin’ my daughter and turnin’ back to deliver her safe to her ol’ dad? I ain’t going to stan’ by, law or no law, an’——”

“Hold your horses, Hellier!” said Bolton snappily, but with his ghost of a smile at that. “Listen to me.”

“I’m listenin’,” snorted Big Jim.

“Well—listen so I can hear myself talk!” said Bolton.

“What are you all worrying about?” he went on. “Of course this ain’t Mexico. A fellow can’t go holding up trains and shooting citizens and not have to appear and at least explain himself before a jury of his peers.

“You’re forgetting the peers, boys, the which are residents of Texas—like yourself, Jim Hellier—and you may find yourself on that jury.

“Now, if you were to invite my opinion, this Pepper *hombre* is likely to get a medal for shooting that vermin, Lazaire, especially when said Texas jury of his peers hears why he did it. It was self-defense, anyway.

“As for the train hold-up—that may be harder to explain away. But he didn’t rob anybody, or—outside of shooting a gun out of a conductor’s hand—do anything much but read a sermon to the company officials and tickle the funny-bone of a lot of the passengers.

“The public loves one on a corporation—particularly a railroad—and if I’m any judge of corporate human nature, the T. & S.’ll be damned glad to hear the last of that joke.

“And me? Well, boys, I’ve got a duty to do. But between you and me and the corral fence, I’ll be as tickled as any of you to see Impulsive Pep acquitted on all counts!”

And then Don Quickshot, with his Lady Dulcina del Toboso mounted on the saddle behind him, her arms about his middle for support, rode into the circle.

It was like the return of a conqueror, or the passage of a bride and groom. The boys fell aside. Up a lane formed by two lines of yelling, gun-firing horsemen, Mr. Pepper brought the girl to her father.

“P-P-Pepper,” sputtered Big Jim after hugging Tulip to his paternal bosom, “if you get clear outa this mess—an’ by the ’tarnal, yuh’re going to, if there’s any law or lawyers in Texas—you c’n come back to Jim Hellier an’ ask him anything yuh’ve a mind to!”

“I get yuh,” said Pep, his eyes twinkling, although he was suffering secret agonies in his left arm. “Mebbe after they let me out of the hoosgow I’ll come back an’ ask yuh for—a job.

“All right, Pardner Bolton,” he added to the ranger. “I reck’n you holds the other end of my rope. Le’s go.”

“I guess the sooner we get it over the better, old man,” said Bolton, laying a hand on the other’s shoulder with a touch less legal than comradely.

Pep had not dismounted. He was ready and anxious to ride on. His arm bothered him. Besides, he had a lot to think about and would welcome the privacy of even the county jail.

But after he had shaken hands with Hellier and the sheriff and waved a general *adios!* to the boys, he looked at Tulip.

She was standing by the buckskin’s head, stroking the nose of the tired, faithful Rosinante. Tulip looked up at its rider with eyes in which glowed a light of—well, natural gratitude to this man who had saved her from a possibly unthinkable predicament.

“Good-by!” she said. Then, “No—not that. *Hasta luego*, Pep.”

“*Hasta luego*, Miss Tulip,” said he—for general consumption. Then, leaning over, he added quietly for her ear alone, “Li’l girl—if they don’t give me more’n sixty-seven years—I’ll come back.”



THE LAW *of the* RANGE

W·C·TUTTLE



THE LAW OF THE RANGE

CHAPTER I

IT was the year of the big drouth in the valley of Moon River; a season when every blade of grass was worth its weight in gold to the cattlemen, who watched with jealous care over their unstaked portions of the range and guarded closely their almost dry water-holes.

Day after day through the long summer the merciless sun had baked the grass roots; browning the land; burning below the surface, until a puff of wind would drift the soil, as a wind drifts dry snow. Even the sage and greasewood turned from purple to brownish-gray.

Along the river, which wound its way through this crescent-shaped valley, the leaves of willow and cottonwood hummed paper-dry in the hot winds, while the river itself was shrunken to half its normal summer stage.

The range cattle were red-eyed, hollow of flank and dust-colored and when they stopped to graze their panting nostrils would send up tiny puffs of smoke-like dust. In all that valley of rolling hills, which sloped upward on both sides to the hazy heights of the Shoshone Mountains, there was no sign of green vegetation.

Riding down the slope of one of these hills, heading toward the river, came a tall, thin cowboy, unshaven and unshorn. The expression of his thin face was serious as he squinted into the hazy distance and spoke softly to his rangy bay horse—

“Bronc, ’f this ain’t the best place I ever seen t’ commit murder in, then my name ain’t ‘Skeeter Bill’ Sarg.”

The horse sniffed suspiciously at the dry grass but did not crop at it.

“Ain’t much juice left in that kinda feed,” declared Skeeter Bill, removing his sombrero and wiping his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. For a few minutes he surveyed the country before riding on.

Suddenly he drew rein and sniffed at the breeze. His rather long nose quivered, and he shook his head. Beyond him a cloud of dust floated over the skyline of a ridge, growing more dense. It was impossible to see what

was making the dust-cloud, but whatever it was, it came over the ridge toward Skeeter Bill and dipped down into the depression beyond.

“Sheep!” snorted Skeeter Bill with the true cowman’s disgust of such animals. “We shore poked into one fine country t’ poke right out of ag’in, bronc.”

Skeeter Bill turned and rode angling along the side of the hill, going through a heavy thicket of greasewood. Suddenly his horse jerked ahead and went to its knees, and Skeeter fell head first into a thick clump of brush. As he fell he heard the whip-like snap of a rifle, and he knew that someone had shot his horse from under him.

He backed out of the tangle and investigated. His bay had crashed into some brush farther down the hill, and Skeeter could see that it was dead. He swore softly and held his gun ready.

The bullet had torn through Skeeter’s chaps, along his thigh, missing the flesh by a narrow margin, and had broken the back of the tall bay horse. Skeeter had no idea why he had been shot at, nor how many men might be ready to shoot at him again. It was a ticklish situation, but Skeeter smiled grimly and waited.

Far away he could hear the soft bawling of sheep and the tiny tinkle of a bell. A bluejay screeched harshly from down the cañon. Suddenly the brush crashed as if someone had stumbled into it. Skeeter glanced keenly in that direction, but did not move.

In a few moments the brush crashed again, and Skeeter grinned widely. He knew that someone was tossing rocks into the dry brush to try to get him to investigate. He snuggled a trifle lower and peered low through the tangle of brush above him. Whoever it was, they were moving very cautiously, for no sound of footsteps had come to his ears.

Suddenly his eyes focused on something. It might be part of the brush, and again it might be the legs of a man—a man whose body was completely screened by the heavy foliage. Skeeter considered these leg-like things very closely. Then came a dry cough—more like a wheezing chuckle; as if the man had tried to choke it and merely strangled. It came from above the legs.

“Pardner,” said Skeeter distinctly, “I’ve got yore legs in trouble. ’F yuh don’t toss yore gun over toward me, I’m shore goin’ t’ interest yuh in a pair of crutches.”

The legs remained motionless, but from their owner came another wheezing cough. In fact, the man coughed for quite a while, and the visible

legs shook weakly at the finish.

“Now, throw over the gun,” ordered Skeeter, and a moment later a Winchester rifle crashed into the brush and hung up in view of Skeeter.

“C’ m on out, pardner,” said Skeeter. “Walk right down past where the rifle hangs, and I’ll kinda look yuh over.”

The man was coming down through the brush before Skeeter had finished, and broke his way out into the open a moment later.

“Keep yore hands above yore waist,” ordered Skeeter meaningly, “while I look yuh over.”

The man was possibly not more than thirty years of age, yet looked much older. A stubby beard covered the lower part of his face, and a pair of weary-looking eyes seemed to consider Skeeter closely.

The man was not evil-looking, in spite of his unkempt appearance. His torn shirt was clean, as were the worn overalls. He coughed softly again, and a flush crept across his thin cheeks.

“Shucks!” muttered Skeeter softly. “Whatcha tryin’ to kill me for, pardner?”

The man shook his head slowly, wearily.

“What’s the use of arguing about it? I’m willing to take what’s coming to me. I got tired of being shot at, that’s all.”

“Well,” grinned Skeeter, “that’s a-plenty, ’f yuh stop t’ ask me. C’ m here and set down.”

The man obeyed wonderingly.

“Yuh got a bad cough,” observed Skeeter.

“Go ahead,” said the man bitterly. “It’s my cough—not yours.”

“Aw,” grunted Skeeter. “I beg yore pardon. I’m always sayin’ the wrong thing.”

He studied the man for several moments, and then:

“Mind tellin’ me somethin’? Honest t’ goodness, I don’t know a danged thing about this here country. I just rode in. When a feller gets his bronc shot out from under him he kinda wants t’ know why.”

The man’s eyes expressed his unbelief. Skeeter laid his six-shooter across his lap and rolled a cigaret while he waited for the man to explain.

“Well,” began the man slowly, “you’ve got me dead to rights; so it don’t make much difference now. If you’re one of the cattlemen I’ll likely get lynched for killing the horse.”

“Likely,” nodded Skeeter dryly. “’F yuh don’t get lynched, you’ll figger out that I’ve told yuh the truth.”

Skeeter leaned a little closer and tapped the man on the knee with his finger.

“Pardner, ’f there’s anythin’ yuh don’t want t’ tell me the truth about— don’t tell anythin’. *Sabe* what I mean?”

“Afraid I’ll lie to you?”

“Tellin’ yuh not to. I don’t care who yuh are, nor what yuh are, pardner. I reckon the killin’ of my bronc was a mistake, but that’s all past. I don’t lie, and I won’t stand for no man lyin’ t’ me.”

The man looked curiously at him, wondering if this lanky cowboy was joking or not. No, he decided that Skeeter Bill was not joking. A man who would not lie and would not stand for a liar was a novelty in the range land. The man decided against prevarication.

“My name is Kirk,” he stated; “Jim Kirk.”

“Mine’s Sarg,” grinned Skeeter. “Mostly always folks call me Skeeter Bill.”

“I’m a sheepherder,” stated Kirk.

“I’m not!” snapped Skeeter. “I hate the ——— things.”

Kirk nodded and dug into the hard soil with the heel of his boot.

“I don’t love ’em,” he admitted softly, shaking his head. “Nobody does, I guess. Still —” Kirk lifted his head and gazed off across the tangle of brush —“still, they have made it possible for me to live out here.”

“Oh,” softly.

“If it wasn’t for the sheep I would probably have to live in a city.”

Skeeter cleared his throat softly.

“Well, under them circumstances, sheep ain’t so danged bad, I reckon. Feller does feel better, livin’ out here in the old hills. Mebbe I’d herd sheep, too.”

“Yes, you’d do anything to keep living.”

“I come danged near shufflin’ off a while ago,” reminded Skeeter seriously. “That bronc was worth a lot t’ me.”

The cough came again and occupied Kirk’s attention for a period.

“I’m awful sorry about the horse,” he panted hoarsely. “I thought you might be gunning for me, and I wanted to beat you to it.”

“You shore had the right idea,” grinned Skeeter.

“The idea was all right,” admitted Kirk, “and, as I said before, I got tired of being shot at.”

“Cows and sheep kinda warrin’ round?” queried Skeeter Bill.

Kirk nodded slowly.

“Yes. In a way I don’t blame the cowmen. This range has belonged to them ever since the first cow came in over the hill. The sheep will ruin it for anything but sheep, but the law says that sheep and cows have equal rights.”

Skeeter Bill snorted. The law had never meant much to him.

“And so the cowmen takes things in their own hands, eh?”

“It seems that way,” smiled Kirk.

“You own the sheep?” queried Skeeter.

“Me?”

Kirk shook his head.

“Nope,” he denied. “I’m just a hired shepherd.”

“Thasso?”

Skeeter considered Kirk’s humped figure for a space of time, and then—

“You ain’t no hired killer, Kirk; so why take a chance on killin’ or gittin’ killed?”

Kirk coughed softly and got to his feet. The sun was yet an hour high, but the cañons were already blocky with purple shadows. From farther down the hill came the bleating of sheep; the everlasting, meaningless “*baa, baa, baa, baa*” from hundreds of throats.

Kirk turned and looked at Skeeter.

“No, I’m not a killer. I never shot at a man before.”

He pointed down across the brush toward the sheep.

“Do you think I love those things? Sarg, I am not physically fit to do a man’s work, and I can’t live inside a house. Out here in the hills I have a fighting chance to live, and there is nothing I can get to do, that I can do, except herd sheep.”

“Well,” drawled Skeeter, “I reckon we better give three cheers for the sheep. But I’m still a li’l hazy as t’ why yuh tried t’ bump me off, pardner.”

“Self-defense. I thought you was one of the gang that left warning at my camp yesterday. They ordered me to pack up and get out—my wife and me.”

“Oh!” grunted Skeeter softly. “You’ve got a wife with yuh?”

Kirk nodded, and a deep crease appeared between his eyes as he frowned over his own thoughts. Suddenly he shook his head and looked down toward the sheep.

“It’s time to take them back, I guess,” he remarked. “You might come down to camp with me and have something to eat.”

Skeeter nodded.

“I’ll take yuh up on that, pardner; but I’ll get m’ saddle first.”

It was only a few moments’ work to strip the saddle from the dead horse and to remove the bridle. Skeeter made no more comments about the dead horse. The tall bay had served him well; but Skeeter in his time had ridden many horses, and this was not the first one to perish under him.



CHAPTER II

CARRYING the heavy saddle, he helped Kirk round up the herd of sheep and head them in the direction of the bed-ground. Through a filmy cloud of dust they followed the bleating herd along the side of the cañon, until of their own accord the sheep headed down on to a flat, where Skeeter could see an old tumble-down shack and part of an old pole-corrall.

Smoke was issuing from the crooked old chimney, and as they drew nearer a woman came to the open doorway and looked at them. She was dressed in faded calico and coarse shoes, but Skeeter thought he had never seen a more beautiful face.

After a searching glance at him the woman darted from the doorway and ran to Kirk, as if partly for protection and partly to find out if he was all right. Kirk put an arm around her shoulders and turned to Skeeter.

“Sarg, this is my wife.”

“Glad t’ meetcha,” muttered Skeeter as he placed the saddle on the ground and held out his hand.

The woman glanced at Kirk before she shook hands with Skeeter Bill.

“I killed his horse,” said Kirk slowly. “I thought he was one of the cowboys.”

“Tha’s all right,” grinned Skeeter. “Mistakes’ll happen in the best of families. I’ve been mistaken f’r the same thing before.”

“Then you’re not a cowboy?” queried Mrs. Kirk.

“I dunno.” Skeeter Bill shook his head. “I’ve been a lot of things, ma’am, and I dunno which one took the most. I’m just kinda peesticatin’ around, yuh see. I poked into this here country, and unless I’m misreadin’ the signs I’m goin’ to poke right out again.”

“You’ll have to get another horse,” reminded Kirk.

“Uh-huh. But that’s a cinch in a cow-country. I’ve got a rope left.”

Mrs. Kirk turned to the doorway, as she said—

“Supper is almost ready, Jim, and I know you must be starved—you and Mr. Sarg.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Skeeter seriously. “I sure could fold up quite a parcel of food right now, thank yuh kindly.”

Skeeter and Kirk washed at the little spring, where a little fence had been built to block out the sheep.

“Does yore wife like this kind of a life?” queried Skeeter.

Kirk shook his head as he squatted on his heels at the side of the spring.

“I don’t think so, Sarg, but she is willing to do it for my sake.”

Skeeter rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a while and shook his head.

“I dunno much about women, Kirk—the right kind. You ain’t much t’ look at. She’s mighty pretty and sweet; but she’s willin’ t’ live out here, alongside of a bunch of battlin’ woolies, just ’cause it’s goin’ t’ help you.”

“That’s love, Sarg.”

Skeeter Bill squinted closely at Kirk’s face and looked back toward the cabin door.

“Love—eh? Heat and dirt and the smell of sheep! Old rickety cabin, canned food, and swappin’ lead with the cattlemen. No other women; lonesome as ——!”

Skeeter looked down at Kirk and nodded slowly.

“Yeah, I reckon it must be love, pardner” he went on. “I ain’t never seen it in that kind of a package before, so I didn’t *sabe* it on sight.”

“She’s my pal—my bunkie,” said Kirk slowly. “She’s willing to go fifty-fifty with me in everything.”

“Thasso? About bein’ a pal—I didn’t know that a woman could be thataway. Women, t’ me, have always been kinda—mebbe I didn’t look at ’em right, Kirk. I kinda like that bunkie idea, y’betcha.”

“She’s the best in the world,” said Kirk softly as they neared the house.

“I s’pose,” nodded Skeeter. “I s’pose that’s right.”

The supper was meager in variety as well as in quantity, but it was well cooked.

“I’ve got to go to town to-morrow,” stated Kirk. “We are out of food. I’ve been putting it off for several days, but it has become an absolute necessity.”

“I hate to have you go to town, Jim,” said Mrs. Kirk. “Under the circumstances it is hard to tell what might happen.”

“Don’t you worry, honey.”

Kirk leaned across the table and patted her on the shoulder.

“I’ll hitch up the old horse to the old wagon in the morning,” he continued, “and be back here in two hours with a load of food.”

“I’ve got a better scheme than that,” grinned Skeeter. “I’ll go after yore grub for yuh.”

Kirk shook his head.

“No, I can’t let you get into any trouble on our account. They would recognize that horse and wagon, and you can’t tell what would happen.”

“I’d shore like t’ see what would happen,” said Skeeter slowly, rolling a cigaret. “I’m willin’, ’f the town is, and I ain’t got nobody waitin’ f’r me t’ come back all in one chunk.”

“But why should you do this for us?” asked Kirk. “I killed your horse and nearly killed you.”

“I dunno why,” said Skeeter honestly. “’F I stopped t’ ask m’self, ‘Why?’ all the time, I’d never do anythin’. Tell me somethin’ about this sheep and cattle trouble.”

“We are from Chicago,” said Kirk. “I was a telegraph operator in a brokerage office until a specialist told me that I must live in the hills or quit living entirely. Then we came West with no place in mind and very little money to start with.

“Somehow we came to Wheeler City and met the man who offered me this job. He was sending in a lot of sheep, which were to be driven through Table Rock Pass and then broken up into several bands.

“We didn’t have a dollar left when this offer came to us, and we accepted it quickly. It was a mighty hard trip for us, because neither of us had ever roughed it before. On this side of the pass the herd was split into four parts and a man led us to this spot.

“Nothing was said to us about trouble with the cattlemen. We were given a rifle and a shotgun and plenty of ammunition. The shotgun is over there in the corner. I have never fired it.”

“How long have yuh been in here?” asked Skeeter.

“Two weeks. Three men were killed in the next camp to us on the first day—two sheepmen and one cowboy. The man who brought us in was arrested, although he had nothing to do with the shooting. The judge turned him loose and notified the cattlemen that the sheepmen were not to be molested until it could be fought out in the courts. The cattlemen know that it will take months to get a decision, and in the meantime the sheep are wearing out the range.”

“Who owns the sheep?”

Kirk shook his head.

“I don’t know. The man who hired me is named McClelland. He did not admit ownership in court, but stated that he was responsible for the sheep.”

“You been shot at?”

“Five time,” said Kirk. “Anyway, I think they shot at me. Perhaps they merely tried to frighten me. At least a dozen of my sheep have been killed at long range.”

“Yuh spoke about a warnin’,” reminded Skeeter.

Kirk got up and took a piece of paper from a shelf above the table. It was crudely printed with a lead pencil, and read:

GIT OUT AND KEEP GOING. WE DON'T LIKE SHEEP BUT
WE DO LIKE PURTY WIMIN. THE LAW AIN'T GOING TO
HELP YOU NONE IN THIS CASE. YOU BETTER HEED.

There was no name signed to this missive, but its meaning was very plain. Skeeter squinted up at Kirk and handed him the paper.

“You ain’t goin’ t’ heed?”

“They wouldn’t dare harm my wife, Sarg.”

Skeeter looked at Mrs. Kirk and back to Kirk.

“Pardner, yo’re a long, long ways from Chicago. Folks say that men are big-minded, big-hearted in the West, but it takes all kinds of folks to make up the West, just like it does the East. Some of these cattlemen hate a sheepherder, and ’f that sheepherder had a danged purty wife—Still, they was honest enough t’ give yuh a warnin’.”

“Would you heed it?” demanded Kirk.

Skeeter rubbed his chin and glanced at Mrs. Kirk, who was watching him intently.

“If you were sick and needed the work, and your wife was willing to stay with you?” added Kirk softly.

“No, by ——!” exploded Skeeter Bill. “Not as long as I had a shell left f’r m’ gun, or one arm able t’ throw rocks.”

“That’s how I feel,” said Kirk.

“But what protection has your wife got? You have to leave her here alone, don’tcha?”

“Not all the time,” said Mrs. Kirk. “I go out with him quite a lot, and when I am here I have the shotgun, you see.”

Skeeter Bill crossed the room and picked up the shotgun. It was a sawed-off Winchester, with a magazine full of buckshot-loaded shells. Skeeter grinned at Mrs. Kirk.

“Didja ever shoot this, ma’am?”

“No, I never have; but I know I could.”

“Hm-m-m!”

Skeeter placed the gun back in the corner.

“Perhaps we ought to try it,” said Kirk. “I don’t know how it shoots.”

“Oh, it’ll shoot,” said Skeeter. “Don’tcha worry about that; but it ain’t nothin’ t’ practise with. When the right time comes, just squeeze the trigger.”

“I hope I shall never have to use it,” said Mrs. Kirk.

“I hope not,” agreed Skeeter; “but ’f yuh ever have to—don’t hesitate, ma’am.”

“I do not think I shall.”

Mrs. Kirk shook her head.

“Jim and I came out here to stay, you know,” she added.

“That’s shore the way to look at it, ma’am.”

“Do you intend to locate in this country?” asked Kirk.

“Me?”

Skeeter grinned widely.

“No-o-o,” he said, “I can’t say I am. I ain’t much of a locator, Kirk. I’m jist kinda driftin’ along—mostly. I ain’t got nobody t’ care where I wind up m’ li’l ball of yarn. M’ pardner got killed in Sunbeam, and since then I’ve kinda moseyed along.”

“We heard of Sunbeam,” said Mrs. Kirk. “A new mining-country, isn’t it? We thought perhaps we might go there, but there is no railroad and they told us that it was a long desert trip.”

“I guess it’s a tough place,” added Kirk.

“It was,” agreed Skeeter thoughtfully. “But there ain’t an outlaw left in the town now.”

“What became of them?” asked Kirk.

“Well”—Skeeter rubbed his chin slowly—“well, he rode away.”

“He rode away? Was there only one?”

“Uh-huh—only one left. The rest cashed in one night. I dunno who’s moved in since he left.”

“You don’t mean to say that you——” Kirk stopped.

Skeeter got slowly to his feet and hitched up his belt.

“’F you folks don’t mind I’ll spread m’ blankets out by the li’l corral,” he said.

“There’s room in here,” said Mrs. Kirk.

Skeeter shook his head and went out to his saddle, where he untied his blanket-roll and took it up by the little tumble-down corral.

Moonlight silvered the hills, and the moon itself was stereoscopic, hanging like a huge ball in the sky, instead of showing as a flat plane. From the bed-ground came the soft bleating of sheep, while farther back in the hills a coyote barked snappily for a moment and wailed out his dismal howl.

Skeeter wrapped up in his blanket and puffed slowly on a cigaret. He was thinking of Sunbeam and of Mary Leeds, who had come seeking her father. Skeeter had ridden away the night he had been instrumental in cleaning up the outlaws of Sunbeam—the night that Mary Leeds’ father had been killed.

Skeeter's partner, Judge Tareyton, was Mary's father, but no one knew it until after the judge had died, and Skeeter, broken-hearted over the death of his old partner, had ridden away in the night; ridden away, so that with his going Sunbeam might be entirely rid of outlaws.

He wondered what had become of Mary Leeds. He knew that the good people would take care of her. He could still hear her voice calling, "Skeeter Bill" to him, as he rode away in the night, and for the first time since that night he wondered why she called to him.

He found himself comparing her to Mrs. Kirk. No, she was not as pretty as Mrs. Kirk, but they were alike in some ways. Finally he snuggled deeper in his blankets and threw away his cigaret. The words of old Judge Tareyton come back to him—

"Keep smilin', son, and don't forget that God put a spark in you—a spark that will flare up and build a big flame for you—if you'll let it."

Skeeter smiled seriously at the memory picture of his old drunken lawyer partner and eased himself to a comfortable sleeping position.



CHAPTER III

CRESCENT CITY was the county seat of Moon River County, and a typical cattle town. The branch line of the N. W. Railroad came in out of the desert, dropped down through a winding pass, traversed nearly the entire length of the valley and wound its way eastward through the southern pass.

Just now Crescent City was the seat of much agitation, due to the invasion of sheep. Bearded cattle owners and hard-faced cowboys thronged the town, arguing, prophesying, swearing at the law, which gave a sheep the same rights as a cow. The saloons were doing a big business, as were the gambling-halls, and fights were plentiful and easy to start.

Judge Grayson, following his decision in the matter, had remained religiously at-home. He was a married man, small of physique, and abhorred violence. Several reckless cowboys had openly sworn to scalp the judge and tie the scalp on a baldheaded sheep.

Ben Freel, the sheriff, was another object of wrath with the cattlemen. None of them considered the duty of a sheriff in this case, Freel was a gunman, cold as ice, and heartless in matters concerning his sworn duty, and he remained unmoved under the vitriolic criticism hurled at his back.

With the cattlemen it was a case of ousting the sheep or quitting the cattle business. It was true that only a small part of the range was being sheeped out; but if the sheep once gained a foothold in the valley of Moon River it would only be a question of a short time until more sheep would come pouring in through Table Rock Pass.

Cleve Hart owned the Lazy H outfit, which was the largest in the Moon River range, with the home ranch within two miles of Crescent City. It was a combined horse and cow outfit and employed many cowboys.

And in all the range land there was no man more bitter toward sheep than Cleve Hart. He was a big man, hard of face, hard-riding, hard-drinking, and a hard fighter. And he hated Ben Freel.

As far as that was concerned, there was no love lost between them, for Freel hated Cleve Hart with all his soul. Hart also hated Judge Grayson—not because he was a judge, but because he was a friend to Ben Freel.

It was Hart's cowboys who killed off the two shepherders, losing one of their number at the same time; and it was Hart who declared openly to wipe out all the sheep and shepherders, but was stopped by Ben Freel and later restrained by the law.

It was fairly early in the morning when Skeeter Bill drove down the main street of Crescent City; but the hitch-racks were already filled with saddle-horses, and a large number of cowboys were in evidence.

Skeeter's equipage was fairly noticeable. The horse was an ancient gray, uncurried, patchy of hair and moth-eaten of mane and tail. The wagon was even more ancient than the horse, with wheels which did not track and threatened at any time to wrench loose from the hubs.

The seat springs were broken down on one side, causing Skeeter to sit sidewise with his feet braced against the opposite side of the wagon-box, where he looked entirely out of proportion to the rest of the outfit.

Several cowboys stopped at the edge of the board sidewalk to size him up as he drove up in front of a general merchandise store. There was no doubt in their minds but that this was a sheep-wagon, and the news spread rapidly.

Skeeter appeared oblivious of all this. He rolled and lighted a cigaret before dismounting, which gave the cowboys plenty of time to make closer observations. Several of them went past him and into the store, while others gathered around him and seemed to marvel greatly at his equipage.

"Ba-a-a-a?" queried a skinny cowboy seriously, looking up at Skeeter.

"Yea-a-a-a-ah," said Skeeter just as seriously.

The skinny one colored slightly under his tan, as his lips quivered in another question.

"Maa-a-a-a-a?"

"Naa-a-a-a-a-a," bleated Skeeter seriously.

One of the cowboys laughed nervously, but the bleating one's eyes did not waver from Skeeter's face.

"You think you're—smart, don't yuh?" he asked.

"Smart enough t' talk yore language," said Skeeter.

The cowboy's hand jerked nervously along his thigh, but Skeeter did not move. His eyes narrowed slightly, and he nodded slowly.

“Hop to it, pardner. I don’t know who yuh are, but I ain’t lookin’ for no cinch.”

The cowboy relaxed slightly and seemed undecided. He had not expected this from a sheepherder, and he wanted to back out gracefully.

“You jist toddle along,” smiled Skeeter. “You don’t need t’ be afraid t’ turn yore back t’ me.”

“You can’t run no blazer on me!” snapped the cowboy, as if trying to bolster up his courage with the sound of his own voice.

“I betcha yo’re right,” agreed Skeeter. “I ain’t never goin’ t’ try it, pardner. When I talk t’ you, I mean every —— word I say.”

The cowboy growled something under his breath and turned back across the street toward a saloon. The rest of the cowboys sauntered on, talking softly among themselves and glancing back toward the saloon. Skeeter made a bet with himself that this loud-talking cowboy had disrated himself in their minds. He climbed down, tied his horse, and went into the store.

Some of the cowboys were sitting on a counter when Skeeter came in, but paid no attention to him. The storekeeper, who was behind a counter arranging some goods, also paid no attention to Skeeter as he leaned negligently against the counter and whistled unmusically between his teeth.

The cowboys had ceased their conversation, and the place was quiet except for Skeeter’s tuneless whistle. Finally the storekeeper turned and looked at Skeeter, who slid a penciled list of the necessary groceries across the counter to him.

The storekeeper glanced down at the sizable list for a moment and then at Skeeter.

“Sheep outfit?” he asked.

Skeeter nodded, and the man shoved the list back to Skeeter.

“I’m all out of them articles,” he stated and turned back to his work.

Skeeter Bill turned slowly and looked around. One of the largest articles on the list was flour, and on a central counter were at least ten sacks. His eyes turned to shelving behind the storekeeper, where there were canned goods, baking-powder, salt. On the counter beside him were several strips of bacon.

Skeeter Bill considered his list carefully, checking off the goods in sight. He knew that the store had declared an embargo on the sheepmen. It was a

mean move and might be very effective, as Crescent City was the nearest supply point by at least thirty miles.

The storekeeper turned his head and favored Skeeter Bill with an ugly look.

“I told you once that I’m all out of them goods,” he repeated heatedly.

“I heard yuh,” grinned Skeeter, “but I thought I’d kinda hang around until yuh got a new supply.”

“Then you’ll have a —— long time, feller.”

“Oh!” grunted Skeeter. “I’ve got a mind not t’ trade with you a-tall. You look somethin’ like a storekeeper I knowed in Oklahoma, but I know you ain’t the same one, ’cause he got hung f’r givin’ short weight to a widder woman. I’ll leave the list with yuh, and I’m goin’ t’ weigh everythin’ before I pay yuh for it.”

Skeeter turned on his heel and walked out of the door, while the irate storekeeper sprawled across the counter and tried to swear. The cowboys, who had suggested the embargo, went out slowly, solemnly, choking back their unholy glee at the discomfiture of the storekeeper.

CHAPTER IV

SKEETER soon found that emissaries of the cattlemen had preceded him to every store, and in each place he was given to understand that they were out of all staple and fancy groceries. It was the first time that the cattle interests had thought of such a move, and they were jubilant over its success.

No one made any move to interfere with Skeeter Bill. He did not look like a shepherd. His faded clothes, high-crowned hat and high-heeled boots proclaimed the cowpuncher. The hang of his well-filled cartridge belt and the angle of his heavy, black-handled Colt were readable signs to the cattlemen.

Skeeter loafed along the street, cogitating deeply over just what to do, when a man rode into town and headed for the sheriff's office, in front of which Skeeter was standing.

The man was Ben Freel, the sheriff. One side of his head was a welter of gore. Several cowboys crowded around him, as he dismounted heavily and leaned wearily against the short hitch-rack.

"Wha'sa matter, Ben?" asked a cowboy. "Didja get bushwhacked?"

Freel nodded.

"Shepherd?" queried another cowboy anxiously.

"How in —— do I know?" snapped Freel. "Somebody bushed me, that's a cinch, and I want to say right now that this bush warfare has got to quit."

Freel went into his office, slamming the door behind him. Skeeter decided that Freel was decidedly more mad than injured. The cowboys showed little sympathy for Freel, but it gave them another talking point. Skeeter walked away from the group and went back toward the first store he had entered.

The storekeeper was alone this time. He seemed greatly peeved at the sight of Skeeter Bill.

"Yore stock of goods arrived yet?" queried Skeeter.

"No, by ——!" yelled the grocer. "You git out of here and stay out!"

He snatched Skeeter's list off the counter and shoved it under Skeeter's nose.

"You take your —— list and vamoose!"

Skeeter took the list and looked it over carefully, after which he picked up a sack of flour in his left hand and again looked at his list.

"Leggo that flour!" howled the storekeeper. "Leggo——"

He grabbed the flour in one hand and took a long swing at Skeeter's chin with the other. The fist described an arc, met no resistance and swung its owner half-around, causing him to let loose of the sack.

Skeeter swung up the sack in both hands and brought it down upon the unprotected head of the staggering storekeeper, knocking him to the floor in a smother of flour from the burst sack.

On the floor near him was a great coil of new, half-inch Manila rope. As the storekeeper struggled to his feet Skeeter back-heeled him neatly and broke all records for hog-tying a human being.

The storekeeper let out a yelp for assistance, but Skeeter shook the rest of the flour out of the sack and used the sack to gag his victim. Then Skeeter proceeded to stack up his list of necessities, working swiftly.

Estimating at a top figure, he placed the money on the counter and began carrying his purchases out to the wagon. Luckily no one was paying any attention to him, as most of the inquisitive ones were down at the sheriff's office trying to find out just what had happened to him.

The ancient gray looked upon Skeeter with disapproving eyes as it noted the amount of weight which was to be drawn back to the sheep-camp; but Skeeter's one big idea was to get out of Crescent City as fast as possible.

He climbed to the rickety seat, almost upset the wagon on a short turn, and rattled out of town. Several cowboys had come out of the saloon across the street and watched him drive away.

Skeeter caught a glimpse of one of these cowboys waving his arms wildly as he started across toward the store, and Skeeter knew that the cowboy had seen the half-loaded wagon and was going to find out what had happened to the storekeeper.

It was nearly three miles to the sheep-camp—three miles of crooked, ratty road; and it was like riding a bucking bronco to stay on that wagon

seat. Skeeter lashed the old gray into a gallop—or rather what resembled a gallop—and urged it to further speed with whip and voice.

As they topped the crest of a hill Skeeter looked back, but the pursuit had not started yet; so he yelled threateningly at the old gray, and they lurched off down the grade in a cloud of alkali dust.

Skeeter knew that the cowboys would probably follow him and try to recover the supplies, but he knew also that they would not get them without a fight. He had promised the Kirks that he would bring back the supplies, and Skeeter Bill meant to keep his word.

The old gray looked like an advertisement for a popular soap-suds powder when they skidded, slewed, and lurched down on to the sheep-ranch flat and stopped at the door of the little cabin. Skeeter yelped loudly, but no one answered his hail; so he fell off the rickety seat and began gathering up the packages from the rear of the wagon, while the ancient gray spread its legs wide apart and heaved like a bellows.

“Maud S,” said Skeeter, “you ain’t —— for speed, but yuh shore can lather a-plenty. ’F I had a razor I’d give yuh a shave.”

He started for the half-open door with his arms full of plunder, when he happened to look down at the ground near the low step, where the pump shotgun was leaning against the house, with its muzzle in the dirt.

Skeeter kicked the door open, placed the food inside, and came back to the gun. He looked it over and pumped out an empty shell. The gun had been fired recently, and a grin overspread Skeeter’s face as he visualized Mrs. Kirk shooting at a target to try the gun.

“Kicked her so danged hard that she dropped it and busted off across country for fear it might go off ag’in,” mused Skeeter; but as his eyes searched for a possible target he stared at the fringe of the old dry-wash, about fifty feet away.

Taking a deep breath, he walked straight out there and looked down at the body of a man. Skeeter did not know him. He was a big man with a deeply lined face, and his hair was slightly gray. He wore a faded blue shirt, nondescript vest, overalls, and bat-winged chaps. One of his arms was doubled under him, and that hand evidently held a six-shooter, the barrel of which protruded out past his hip.

Skeeter turned him over and felt of his heart. The man had evidently received the whole charge of buckshot between his waist and shoulders, and there was no question but that he was dead.

Skeeter squatted down beside the dead man with the shotgun across his lap. There was no question in his mind but that either Kirk or his wife had fired the fatal shot. Which one, it did not matter. They had only been protecting their rights; but would the law look at it in the right way?

Skeeter had become so engrossed in the problem that he forgot his wild ride from town. He knew that he must dispose of this body at once—wipe out all evidence of this tragedy—anything to get it away from the sheep-camp and out of the light of day.

The brushy bottom of the old dry-wash suggested the handiest spot, and without a moment's delay he swung the body around, climbed partly down the bank and hoisted the body to his shoulder. The loose dirt gave way with him, and he almost fell to his knees at the bottom, but he managed to right himself. As he plunged ahead into the brush he seemed to be surrounded by horsemen, some of them almost crashing into him.

He swung the body aside into a bush and reached for his gun, but looked up into the muzzles of four guns, and one of them was in the hand of Ben Freel, the sheriff. Two other cowboys came riding through the brush and stopped near them.

Freel spurred his horse ahead and looked down at the dead man.

“By ——!” he grunted. “Cleve Hart!”

Skeeter did not look up. The name meant nothing to him; he was thinking rapidly. He still had his gun. It was true that at least three six-shooters were leveled at him, but he might last long enough to make them sorry they had followed him.

“Take his gun, Slim,” ordered the sheriff, and one of the cowboys swung down and deftly yanked Skeeter's gun from its holster.

Skeeter glanced up at Freel and smiled wearily.

“I'm glad your man took m' gun, sheriff. I feel better now.”

“Yeah?”

Freel took the gun from the cowboy and dropped it into his pocket as he turned to Skeeter.

“Mind tellin' us about it?”

Skeeter glanced at the dead man and around at the circle of cowboys.

“No-o-o, I don't reckon I will, sheriff.”

“What did yuh shoot him for?”

This from one of the cowboys, who was riding a Lazy H horse.

Skeeter shut his lips tight and shook his head. Freel dismounted and examined the body carefully.

“Buckshot,” he said finally. “Riddled him.”

“The gun’s up there on the bank,” said Skeeter, jerking his head in that direction. “The empty shell is over in front of the shack.”

“You’re a —— of a cool customer,” declared the one called Slim.

“Ancestors was Eskimos,” said Skeeter seriously.

“If yuh ask me, I’d say he’s as crazy as a loon,” said another cowboy, who wore long hair and a chin-strap. “They say that’s what happens to sheepherders.”

Freel sent two of the cowboys to get the shotgun and empty cartridge shell, to be used as evidence, while he dismounted and slipped a pair of handcuffs on Skeeter Bill and ordered him to mount one of the horses.

“Mind doin’ me a li’l favor, sheriff?” asked Skeeter.

“Mebbe not,” growled Freel. “Watcha want?”

“Ask the boys t’ leave that bunch of grub alone. Yuh came out here t’ take it away from me, but yuh landed bigger game than tryin’ t’ starve a shepherd.”

“No, by ——!” interrupted the one called Slim. “We aim to bust up this —— sheep business, and starvation is better than bullets.”

“There’s a woman t’ starve,” Skeeter Bill reminded him.

Slim hesitated and shrugged his shoulders.

“We’ll let the grub alone,” nodded Freel. “A few days more or less won’t ruin the cow-business, I reckon.”

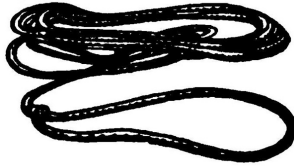
Slim favored Freel with a black look, but this moment the two boys came back with the evidence and gave it to Freel.

“My bronc will pack double, Andy,” said Freel to one of the cowpunchers. “You ride behind me, and the prisoner will ride your horse.”

“Awright.”

Andy did not relish this arrangement, but swung up behind the sheriff, and the cavalcade moved back toward town.

Skeeter glanced back toward the shack, where the ancient gray was still standing wearily before the open door waiting for someone to unhitch him.



CHAPTER V

CRESCENT CITY was deeply stirred over the killing of Cleve Hart, who, although not exactly popular, was the biggest cattle owner in the valley. The guilt of Skeeter Bill was unquestioned, as he had been caught with the goods. Unluckily for him the sheriff and posse had lingered a few minutes before giving chase to recover the shepherd's grub-stake, and this lapse of time had been sufficient for Skeeter to have killed Cleve Hart.

There was much talk of a lynching, headed by the boys from the Lazy H, but wiser counsel had pointed out the fact that the law would make no mistake in this case and that Skeeter Bill would pay the supreme penalty.

Skeeter Bill himself seemed indifferent. He refused to talk to the lawyer who had been appointed to defend him, and the lawyer did not argue the point to any great extent. He was the son of a cattleman, and to save the life of a shepherd would not react to his credit. Therefore he became counsel with the defense, rather than for it.

It was a week from the time of Skeeter Bill's arrest until the day of his trial, and he had had plenty of time to think over his predicament. Of Kirk and his wife he had seen nothing; which was not strange, because Crescent City was no place for shepherders to visit. Only a voluntary confession from them would exonerate him, for it would do Skeeter no good to try to pass the guilt to them—even if he had been so inclined.

Crescent City was crowded on the opening day of the trial, and the little courtroom was filled to suffocation. Never was a trial jury selected with less argument. The counsel with the defense used no challenges, and the prosecuting attorney passed each juror with few questions. Skeeter Bill smiled softly, as he studied the faces of the twelve men. They were all cattlemen.

"I've got about as much chance as a snowball in —," he told his lawyer in an undertone.

"It's your own fault," the lawyer reminded him sourly. "You wouldn't talk to me about the case."

"Well, everybody else did, I reckon—and they likely told the truth, as far as they could see."

The evidence was overwhelming. Every cowboy who had been with the sheriff on the day of the arrest took the stand and swore to the same story. There was no cause for delay in presenting the case to the jury, and the prosecutor, supreme in his knowledge that the prisoner was already convicted, opened his vials of righteous wrath and hinted that Skeeter Bill was guilty of every known crime against humanity.

At the height of his vituperative oratory he suddenly crashed to earth when Skeeter Bill, handcuffed, threw the sheriff aside, grasped the prosecutor with both hands, kicked his feet from under him, and hurled him over the railing into the front row of sight-seeing humanity.

In an instant the courtroom was in an uproar, but Skeeter Bill backed up against the judge's desk and made no further move. The prosecutor crawled back to his seat, torn of raiment and dazed of mind.

"All I ask for is a square deal," stated Skeeter to the court. "That lawyer is a —— liar, tha'sall."

"You'll get a square deal," declared the judge nervously, rapping on his desk. "Sit down, Sarg."

"Where and when do I get this here square deal?" queried Skeeter Bill. "With all the witnesses ag'in me and a jury of cowpunchers, where do I get off? You've got me cinched f'r murder, judge—why let that ganglin', horse-faced lawyer add t' my crimes?"

The prosecutor got quickly to his feet and wailed an objection, but the judge ordered him to sit down.

"I do not think there is any use of reviling the prisoner," declared the judge. "The evidence is plain enough, I think."

Skeeter Bill got to his feet and faced the court.

"Just a moment, judge. I reckon yuh got me cinched f'r this killin', but I'd like t' ask a question before that jury decides t' hang me, 'f I can."

"I think you have that right, Sarg," admitted the judge.

Skeeter turned to Freel.

"Mind swearin' t' tell the truth, sheriff?"

Freel walked to the witness chair, while his deputy edged in beside Skeeter Bill.

“Sheriff,” said Skeeter Bill slowly, “Cleve Hart had a six-gun in his hand when he died. Did you see that gun?”

“Yes.”

“Had it been fired?”

“Once,” nodded Freel. “There was one empty shell.”

“Tha’s all,” said Skeeter, and turned to the judge. “Yuh can only hang a man f’r murder, judge; and it ain’t exactly murder when the other fellow shoots too. Ain’t it sort of a question as t’ who shot first?”

The prosecutor jumped to his feet and objected at the top of his voice, but the judge turned a deaf ear to him as he instructed the jury.

Skeeter Bill expected little from those twelve hard-faced cattlemen as they filed out into the jury room to decide his fate. The judge had explained the difference between first and second degree murder, and had dwelt upon the possibility of self-defense, but Skeeter felt that the jury were in no mood to argue among themselves.

Fifteen minutes later they returned their verdict of guilty of murder in the first degree. For several moments there was intense silence in the courtroom; broken only by the voice of Judge Grayson—

“William Sarg, stand up.”

Skeeter got to his feet and faced the judge, who said:

“You have been found guilty of murder in the first degree. Is there any reason why the sentence of the court should not be passed upon you?”

Skeeter shook his head slowly. The jury had taken no cognizance of the fact that Cleve Hart might have shot first—had given him no benefit of any doubt.

“Go ahead, judge,” said Skeeter softly. “There ain’t nothin’ else yuh can do.”

Judge Grayson’s eyes searched the courtroom, passed over the stony-faced jury and came back to Skeeter Bill.

“William Sarg, I sentence you to life imprisonment at Red Lodge.”

Life imprisonment! Skeeter took a deep breath. He had expected a death sentence. The courtroom buzzed with excitement, and one of the jurymen swore openly. Skeeter felt the pressure on his arm and turned to find Freel looking him square in the eyes and saying—

“Sarg, I’m —— glad.”

Skeeter smiled at the irony of it all. Congratulating him on a life sentence! The judge was leaving the bench, and the jury had been discharged. The room still buzzed with conversation, and Skeeter heard one man say:

“—— such a judge! He ain’t got guts enough to hang a sheepherder!”

Skeeter turned and looked at this man. He was a small, thin-faced, almost chinless person with close-set eyes and a broken nose. His eyes dropped under Skeeter’s stare, and he turned away, walking with arms bent stiffly at the elbow and with a peculiar swaying motion.

“That’s Kales,” said Freel as Skeeter turned back. “He’s a gunman. I think he is working for some of the cattle outfits.”

Skeeter nodded.

“I’ve heard of him. Feller told me that Kales never missed his man. He will—some day. They all do.”

Freel took Skeeter back to his cell and locked him in.

“When do we make the trip?” asked Skeeter.

“I dunno.”

Freel shook his head.

“Soon, I reckon,” he added.

Freel went up the street and mingled with the crowds. There was no question that the sentence was unpopular among the cattlemen. Their tempers were worn to a frazzle over the drouth, the continuous heat and the sheep trouble, and a hanging might act as a safety valve. Freel caught the gist of a remark between Kales and one of the Lazy H cowboys, which hinted at a lynching.

There were open remarks about Judge Grayson being chicken-hearted, and some of them seemed to blame Freel for what they considered a miscarriage of justice.

Alone in his small cell, Skeeter Bill sat down and contemplated his future. He was thirty-five years of age, and in all probabilities he would live thirty-five years longer. His mind traveled back over the years he could remember as he tried to visualize the long years to come—years of being only a number, a caged atom.

“I laid down on the job,” he told himself bitterly as he thought of his capture. “Why didn’t I take a chance of shootin’ m’self loose from that gang? All they could ’a’ done was t’ kill me. Or why in —— didn’t I let that dead man alone?”

He shook his head sadly.

“I swore at that horse ’cause it didn’t have no speed; and t’ think of how it could ’a’ saved me by dyin’ half-way out there.”

But again Skeeter Bill shook his head. If it hadn’t been for him, Kirk or his wife would now be sharing this cell.

“Pals,” said Skeeter. “Bunkies—and him fightin’ f’r life. Livin’ and lovin’ thataway. ——! They deserve a chance, I reckon. But——” Skeeter lifted his head and spoke to the barred door—“I didn’t take their crime jist t’ save them. Nope, I wasn’t doin’ that—I was jist tryin’ t’ give ’em a chance t’ git away, tha’s all. I ain’t no —— hero; I’m jist unlucky, I am.”

Freel came back into his office, and in a few minutes he came back to the cell door.

“I dunno when we’ll make the trip, Sarg. There’s lots of wild talkin’ bein’ done, and we may have to sneak out of Crescent City.”

Skeeter grinned seriously.

“Seems kinda funny f’r me t’ have t’ sneak to the penitentiary, Freel.”

Freel laughed shortly.

“Is kinda queer. I don’t reckon they’ll try to take yuh out of here.”

“First time I ever was in jail that I didn’t want t’ leave,” grinned Skeeter Bill.

Freel turned and walked back to his office. He seemed nervous over the outcome of it all; but Skeeter Bill, if he was perturbed in the least, did not show it. He wondered whether any of his acquaintances outside the valley had heard of his arrest. News did not travel fast in that country.

His thoughts turned back to Mary Leeds and the town of Sunbeam. Would she ever know? Somehow he hoped she would never find out. Mary Leeds was nothing to him, he told himself. She knew him as an outlaw. Sunbeam knew him as a gun-fighting lawbreaker—even if he had been instrumental in cleaning up the place. No, she would not be at all interested in his future.

Skeeter shook his head sadly over it all. He was making a fitting finish, but there was little glory in it.

“I wonder where m’ spark is?” he mused. “I’ve got a fine chance t’ build it into a flame where I’m goin’. Yet I wonder why Mary Leeds called, ‘Skeeter Bill!’ when I rode away. Anyway I won’t need t’ worry about gittin’ a hair-cut no more, and a number ain’t no worse than a name.”

CHAPTER VI

SUNBEAM had been good to Mary Leeds. On the night that her father had been killed, several wealthy bad-men had died intestate, and Sunbeam had settled their estates without recourse to law.

But the life of the border mining-town palled upon her. She did not fit in somehow. The estimable Mrs. Porter had taken her into their home and had grown rather refined in her language, due to the instructive criticism of Mary Leeds.

“My ——!” exclaimed Mrs. Porter. “Ever since Jim Porter flirted openly with a stick of dynamite I’ve had t’ do everythin’ ’cept chaw tobacco; but now I reckon I’ve got t’ curry m’ fingernails, wear stockin’s and say, ‘Yessir’ t’ every hard-headed son-of-a-rooster that comes after his laundry.”

“But,” explained Mary, “you are a woman.”

“Tha’s so,” agreed Mrs. Porter dubiously. “I s’pose I am. I’ve got them charact’ristics. I kinda wish you’d stay here in Sunbeam. Me ’n’ you git along sweet and pretty, but after you’re gone I’ll be the only ree-fined female in this whole —— town. Mebbe I’ll forgit everythin’ you learned me, and start in swearin’ like ——.”

“I hope not,” sighed Mary. “You have been lovely to me, Mrs. Porter. I don’t know what I would have done without you and——”

Mrs. Porter lifted her homely face and looked closely at Mary, who was staring out of the half-open window. The rumble of a series of blasts shook the ground, and from over on the street came the bumping and rattling of a heavy freight wagon.

Mary Leeds was not beautiful, though not far from it. Her face was appealing in its delicate lines, and a pair of wistful, blue eyes looked out into the world from below a tangle of soft brown hair.

Mary turned and saw Mrs. Porter looking at her.

“You didn’t quite finish your statement, Mary,” said Mrs. Porter softly.

Mary’s eyes switched back to the window, but she did not reply.

“You kinda meant to say a man’s name, didn’t you?”

“A man?”

Mary did not turn her head.

“Yeah, a man; Skeeter Bill Sarg.”

Mary turned and looked straight at Mrs. Porter.

“Skeeter Bill? Why should I mention him?”

Mrs. Porter turned back to her wash-tub and thoughtfully lifted a dripping garment.

“I dunno why.”

She shook her head.

“ ’Course he didn’t do nothin’ for you,” she added.

Mary continued the stare out of the window.

“Funny sort of a feller, was Skeeter Bill,” mused Mrs. Porter. “I ’member that he killed Jeff Billings ’cause Jeff lied to him. And Jeff had some laundry with me which wasn’t paid for, and Skeeter paid for it. I offered it to him, but he wouldn’t take it.

“ ’Member how he saved you and the preacher at the Poplar Springs, after Tug Leeds and his gang had shot up the outfit to steal the horses? He brought yuh both back here, and backed the preacher t’ clean up Sunbeam.

“And Tug Leeds lied to you and the preacher about Skeeter, and made yuh think he was a awful bum. ’Member that, do you?

“And then mebbe yuh ’member how Tug Leeds framed it to have the preacher hold church in his danged honkatonk t’ disgust both of yuh, and how Skeeter Bill raised —— with the whole gang and saved yuh from bein’ stole by Leeds and his gang?

“ ’Member that some of that lousy outfit shot old Judge Tareyton, through the winder, and the old judge, with his dyin’ muscles, pulled the trigger that sent Tug Leeds t’ ——?

“And Judge Tareyton was your own pa, and Tug Leeds was the man who had sent him to the penitentiary and stole his name. ’Member all that, don’t yuh? Skeeter Bill was the man who engineered all that.”

Mary turned slowly and nodded dumbly.

“I know. I owe him everything, Mrs. Porter. He—he had been awful good to my old daddy, they say. He saved my life, I think. But he said he was a horse-thief and——”

“Y’betcha he did! Honest? Whooe, that ganglin’ outlaw sure was honest. If he’d ’a’ got killed in that entertainment they’d put up a monyment to him; but as it is I suppose some of these snake-hunters would kill him on sight.

“Human nature is kinda like that, Mary. Folks that pack a sawed-off shotgun for yuh when you’re alive, will chip in t’ give yuh a fancy tombstone and shed tears over yuh when you’re dead.

“Folks cuss me for wearin’ out their shirts on a old wash-board; but I’ll betcha if I died they’d all chip in and put me up a tombstone, real finicky, with a marble angel humped over a wash-tub, lookin’ at a marble shirt, and on it they’d engrave, ‘Not worn out, but —— near it.’ ”

Mary Leeds laughed at Mrs. Porter’s serious expression and dejected position over the wash-board as she held the dripping shirt in both hands and gazed at the ceiling.

“ ’F I go to heaven,” continued Mrs. Porter, “and they tell me that angels wear shirts, I’m sure goin’ to tell ’em that I know a lot of preachers that have got the wrong dope on things down here.”

Mrs. Porter slapped the shirt back into the sudsy water and sank down in a broken-backed chair.

“Aw, I’m sick of it all, so I am. Scrub, scrub, scrub, all the time ’cept when I’m ridin’ sign on a —— flat-iron! Miners bring in their flannel shirts so danged dirty that yuh can’t wash ’em—yuh have t’ cultivate ’em. Their socks has been worn so long that I have t’ picket ’em out, ’stead of hangin’ ’em on the line.

“Feller brought me six suits of underclothes last week, and I let ’em fall off the table. Know what they done? Three suits broke all t’ ——, and the other three was so badly cracked that he made me pay for ’em. I tell yuh I’m sick of it. How in —— can I get refined under them conditions, I ask yuh?”

Mrs. Porter gathered up her apron in both hands and buried her face within its damp folds while her shoulders shook with suppressed emotion. Mary went to her quickly and threw both arms around her shoulder.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! It is too hard. Do you really have to stay here, Mrs. Porter? Couldn’t you live just as well in some other town?”

“I s’pose so.”

Mrs. Porter’s voice was muffled.

“Goodness knows there ain’t many towns where men don’t git their shirts dirty,” she added.

“I didn’t mean that,” explained Mary softly. “Perhaps you could get into something else. Suppose you go back East with me?”

Mrs. Porter lifted her head quickly and stared wide-eyed at Mary.

“Go East with you?”

“Where there are lots of folks and——”

“Lots of shirts?” supplied Mrs. Porter. “Lord bless you, child, I ain’t got but eighty dollars t’ my name.”

“I have,” said Mary; “I have enough for us both.”

Mrs. Porter shifted her eyes and looked around the room. There was nothing attractive about the rough shack interior. Outside, a mule-skinner spoke in the only language known to mules, and a heavy wagon lurched past through the dust. Mrs. Porter shoved the hair back from her face and got slowly to her feet.

She lifted up the sodden shirt and slapped it against the wash-board.

“This here shirt belongs t’ Doc Sykes, the coroner. Kinda prophetic-like, so it is, ’cause I’ve told him that he was the last person I ever expected to do business with. Gimme room t’ wring, young woman, ’cause I’m sure goin’ t’ wind up m’ career in a big splash. You sure got somethin’ wished on to you when you issued a invite t’ me to go where men change their shirts once per week. Whooe!”

Mary Leeds laughed joyously and gave Mrs. Porter plenty of room for her last appearance as a laundress in a mining-camp.

CHAPTER VII

WHILE MARY LEEDS and Mrs. Porter prepared to leave Sunbeam, and while Skeeter Bill Sarg smoked innumerable cigarets and waited for the sheriff to take him to the penitentiary at Red Lodge, a disgruntled crew of cowboys and paid gunmen loafed around the Lazy H ranch.

It had developed that Cleve Hart was not sole owner of the Lazy H, and that the other owners, who were Eastern capitalists, were disgruntled over their investment, and ordered an immediate sale of the property and the discharge of all employees forthwith.

Nick Kales had sold his services to Cleve Hart without any agreement from the other owners; with the result that he was forced to look forward to about two weeks' pay at the rate of forty dollars a month, instead of the generous bonus due him as a professional gunman.

"Dutch" Van Cleve, a protégé of Nick Kales, was also a bit disgruntled over the outcome. The rest of the remaining cowpunchers, "Red" Bowen, "Swede" Sorenson, "Roper" Bates, and "Boots" Orson, faced a lean year, and none of them saved more than tobacco money out of their monthly salary.

The killing of Cleve Hart and the arrest and conviction of Skeeter Bill had quieted things to some extent, but it was only an armed truce. Cowboys rode dead-lines and managed to keep the sheep within a well-defined area; but the cattlemen knew that an adverse court decision would wipe out the dead-lines, and with it the cattle business.

Swede Sorenson had just ridden in from Crescent City, bringing the mail; and among it was a letter for Nick Kales, postmarked from the town of Wheeler.

Kales looked it over gloomily and put it unopened into his pocket. He exchanged a word or two with Dutch Van Cleve aside, and a little later they both approached Roper Bates, a saturnine, narrow-between-the-eyes sort of a puncher.

"Can yuh read?" queried Kales.

"Well," grinned Roper, "I ain't no —— professional reader, as yuh might say; but I *sabe* some of the alphabet."

“Yuh know how to keep your mouth shut, don’t yuh?”

“Now,” said Roper seriously, “you’re guessin’ me dead center. Shoot the piece, Kales.”

Kales took out the letter and handed it to Roper, who looked at it curiously.

“It ain’t never been opened,” he remarked.

“Me ’n’ Dutch can’t read,” explained Kales. “We’re askin’ yuh to decipher it for us; *sabe*?”

Roper took out the letter and laboriously spelled out the pencil-written message.

“It says,” began Roper:

“DEAR NICK: All set for a big one on Thursday the eighteenth. Make it look good. Number 16. Hits there about nine o’clock. Burn this up right away.

Very truly yours.

WHEAT.”

Roper finished and looked up at Kales, who was staring intently at him.

“What’sa idea?” queried Roper seriously.

Kales watched Roper’s face closely for several seconds and then took the letter from him. He touched a lighted match to one corner of the letter and envelope and watched them burn to a flimsy cinder.

“You know somethin’ now,” said Kales meaningly, “and there ain’t no use tellin’ yuh to keep your mouth shut.”

“Aw, ——!” grunted Roper. “You make me tired. If the deal’s any good I want in on it.”

Kales and Dutch exchanged glances. Dutch was long of face, crooked of nose and with a pair of round eyes which seemed to film over instead of blinking.

“Whatcha think, Dutch?” queried Kales.

“Aw’right,” nodded Dutch. “I don’t care.”

“What about the rest—Red, Swede, Boots?” asked Kales. “This job is big enough for all.”

“All square,” declared Roper. “All square, and all broke. Put it up to ’em, Kales.”

The three men drifted down to the bunkhouse, where the other three were playing seven-up, and Kales lost no time in feeling out the other cowboys.

“What are you fellers goin’ to do?” asked Kales. “She’s a long ways to the next range.”

“That’s the —— of it,” growled Red disgustedly. “I’m broke—flat.”

“You ain’t got nothin’ on me,” grunted Swede. “I don’t even own the saddle I’m ridin’.”

“What’s the answer to your question, Kales?” queried Boots Orson, who was a trifle more intelligent than the rest and felt that Kales’s question was not idle curiosity.

“A certain job,” stated Kales bluntly, “might mean a big stake or it might mean the penitentiary. Takes a lot of guts.”

“You’re talkin’,” reminded Orson softly.

“Am I?”

Kales’s eyes swept the circle of cowboys, but read only interest in their faces.

“You—show—us,” said Red slowly, spacing his words widely. “I’m game.”

“—— right!” breathed Swede. “Shoot.”

“Did yuh ever hear of Sunbeam?” asked Kales.

“Yeah,” nodded Swede. “Minin’-town about fifty miles from Wheeler.”

“Gold-minin’ town,” said Kales, as if disputing Swede. “Lot of the yaller stuff shipped out of there, but nobody knows when.”

“There ain’t a —— mind-reader among us,” grinned Red.

“That part’s all fixed,” explained Kales, nodding toward Roper. “He read the letter.”

“I read a letter,” agreed Roper, looking up from the manufacture of a cigaret. “It didn’t fix nothin’ for me.”

“Lemme tell yuh about that letter,” urged Kales. “That feller who wrote it is Pat Wheat, and an old bunkie of mine. He works for the express

company as a shotgun messenger. That's how he knows things, I reckon.

"Me and him have been workin' for a big stake, and he knowed I was here; so he tips me off. Pat will be ridin' shotgun on this shipment, and she's a cinch that we'll crack out of here with a lot of *dinero*."

"Hold up the train?" queried Red.

"You're — right. Cut off the baggage-car and take it a few miles. Won't have nobody to handle except the engine crew. Pat'll take care of the messenger."

"I *sabe* the place," grinned Roper joyously. "We can flag her down jist short of the S bridge, cut off the money-car and run down to the mouth of San Gregario Cañon. She's a dinger of a place to make a getaway.

"Have the horses planted there, and we can ride the rocky bottom of that dry creek for a mile. Never leave a track."

"How about the rest of the train?" queried Boots. "There's six of us. Passengers pack money and jewelry."

Kales nodded slowly and stared at the ceiling for a while before he said:

"Yeah, that might be a good scheme, at that. We'll cut the telegraph wire. Won't be a — of a lot of passengers, but it might pay to do it. If it was a reg'lar main-line train with sleepers, I'd say it wouldn't pay, but on a branch line like this it's a cinch to pile out or into them old cars."

"When do we git action?" queried Roper. "Did that letter say 'Thursday'?"

"It did," nodded Kales; "and this is Tuesday. We'll work out the details later."

"Can't come too soon to suit me," yawned Red. "Since Cleve Hart got bumped off it's been kinda slow around here."

"Hart was a — fool," declared Kales. "Any old time yuh start monkeyin' with women, you're a fool."

"Do yuh think that's why he got his?" asked Red.

"Cinch. He thought he'd run a blazer on that shepherd and take his woman, but he got his shirt filled with buckshot."

"Where'd this Sarg person figure in on the deal, anyway?" queried Boots, who was with the sheriff when they arrested Skeeter Bill.

Kales grinned, showing some very bad-shaped teeth.

“Sarg never shot Hart. I know a few things about that long *hombre*, y’betcha. He’s a pistol fighter, Sarg is; and a —— good shot. Do you think he’d pick up a shotgun when he had a loaded six-gun in his holster?”

“Sarg pistol-whipped Sunbeam town, so they tells me, and pulled out without a scratch. I don’t *sabe* what he’s doin’ down here, ’less he hired out his gun to the sheep outfits.”

“Do yuh reckon the woman killed Hart?” queried Roper interestedly.

“She shore did, pardner.”

Kales was emphatic.

“Hm-m-m,” mused Roper.

He had seen Mrs. Kirk, and Roper was not overloaded with scruples.

“Freel’s scared,” observed Swede. “He ain’t made no move to take Sarg to the penitentiary yet.”

“Them boys from the Tin-Cup outfit swore they’d hang Sarg if they got a chance,” stated Red, “and Freel ain’t takin’ no chances. They’re sore at the judge for not hangin’ Sarg.

“Course the sheep are closer to the Tin-Cup than to any of the other outfits, and if the law decides in favor of sheep—blooey! They’ll swarm plumb into Tin-Cup range. ’Course the law’ll only give ’em an even break with the cattle; but the —— law don’t stop to figure that cattle can’t live on an even break with sheep.”

“After that there sermon,” stated Roper piously, “the choir will rise and sing. What in —— do we care what the sheep do to Moon Valley? We’re leavin’ here; *sabe*?”

“And with freight all paid,” added Kales, grinning. “To-morrow we all pull out, eh? Me and Dutch pull out from Crescent City after we’ve planted the fact that we’re leavin’ for good. We’ll spring it that Roper and Swede left over Table Rock Pass t’day.

“Mebbe Red and Boots better stay here at the ranch. Might look bad if we all drifted at the same time, eh?”

“And suppose we all meet in San Gregario Cañon, down near the mouth of it, about dark on Thursday? Me and Dutch’ll have things framed, wires cut and all that.”

The rest of the gang nodded in agreement, except Roper, who said:

“Let Boots pull out with Swede, and I’ll stay here. I owe a few dollars in Crescent City, and I might want to come back here some day. I’ll ride down with you and Dutch and then come back here.”

“Well, that’s all right,” grunted Kales. “Fix it any old way you want to.”

And thus are honest men drawn into evil paths through the need of a few dollars. But the question still remains: Who is an honest man, who is broke, with easy money in sight?

Roper Bates had little stomach for a train-robbery, but he did have a little plan of his own. Money did not mean so much to Roper as a pretty face. He had seen Mrs. Kirk, and the memory of her caused him to calculate deeply.

Roper was not an ignorant person, but a queer kink in his mental make-up caused him to believe that it was inconsistent that this pretty woman should be the wife of a despised sheepherder. To him it was very unreasonable; a condition to be remedied at once. He did not take the woman’s position into consideration at all.

Roper was no handsome hero; rather he was a homely cowpuncher; but his mirror, if he ever used one, only reflected Roper Bates, which was sufficient for Roper Bates. He was a top-hand, a good pistol-shot and took a bath in the summer. All of which raised him far above the level of sheepherders.

He had no intentions of being at the mouth of San Gregario Cañon at dark; but he did not mention this fact, as it was nobody’s business except his own. He was free, white, and well past twenty-one. Also, on this particular Thursday he had imbibed freely of the juice that cheers, and the world was made up of pastel shades.

He lounged past the jail and almost ran into one of the Tin-Cup punchers, known as “Jimmy Longhair,” who seemed to be making an indifferent getaway from the rear of the jail. Jimmy was a long-haired puncher who had been with the sheriff at the capture of Skeeter Bill.

“Hyah, Hair,” greeted Roper jovially. “How’sa dandruff?”

Jimmy Longhair glared evilly from under the floppy brim of his sombrero, but made no reply. He was a trifle touchy about his hair, but did not want to get tough with Roper Bates.

“Whatcha tryin’ to do—break in the back door?” continued Roper, grinning.

“None of yore — business!” growled Jimmy.

“Go to the head of the class,” gulped Roper. “I betcha I know what yuh was tryin’ to do. You Tin-Cup snake-hunters want to lynch Sarg, and when yuh find that Freel won’t let yuh, yuh sneak around tryin’ to shoot him through the back winder.”

“Aw-w-w, —!” disgustedly. “No such a — thing.”

Roper rocked on his heels and considered Jimmy Longhair appraisingly.

“Listenin’?”

Jimmy proceeded to roll a cigaret, which gave him an alibi to neglect an answer. Then the door of the sheriff’s office opened and shut, and Freel came past them. He barely looked at them, but neither gave him more than a passing glance.

“Listenin’,” declared Roper again. “Jist like a — cholo. I’d be ’shamed.”

“You go to —!” growled Jimmy.

“I betcha,” nodded Roper soberly. “I betcha m’ life.”

Whether Roper was willing to bet his life on the truth of his statement or in agreement with Jimmy Longhair’s order, made no difference to either of them. Roper turned on his heel and went after more bottled cheer, while Jimmy Longhair secured his bronco and hit the dusty road toward the Tin-Cup ranchhouse.



CHAPTER VIII

WHILE the rest of the Valley of the Moon folks moved along in their own dumb way, Skeeter Bill chafed in the confines of his small cell. Old Solitaire had beaten him something over two hundred times, which also got on his nerves to a certain extent. Freel had told him that his stay was not to be much longer, which did not serve to brace his spirits to any extent.

Skeeter Bill had gone over every inch of his cell trying to dope out a scheme to escape; but that jail was not built for any such hope. Skeeter knew that he did not have one chance in a thousand to miss the wide doors of the penitentiary.

Freel brought in his supper, but did not seem in any mood for conversation.

“Anybody’d think you was the one goin’ t’ prison,” observed Skeeter. “My gosh, yo’re gloomy, Freel.”

“Yeah? I hadn’t noticed it, Sarg.”

Freel sat and watched Skeeter eat his supper, and took away the dishes without a word. There was no question in Skeeter Bill’s mind that Freel was worried over something.

Perhaps, he thought, there was danger of a lynching. Freel had told him of the threats that had emanated from the Tin-Cup ranch, and Skeeter had heard enough about the Tin-Cup gang to know that they were not given to idle gossip. Their immediate range was almost in smelling distance of the sheep outfits.

The Tin-Cup gang had declared openly that a prison sentence was far too lenient for a sheepherder who had killed a cattleman, and that they were willing to go on record as saying that Skeeter Bill would never serve one day in the penitentiary for this crime.

Because of this threat Freel had delayed taking Skeeter to the penitentiary. He did not want to lose his prisoner to a mob of lynchers, and he knew that a battle might result in dire calamity for the house of Freel.

As long as Skeeter Bill was behind the strong walls of the jail he knew that the Tin-Cup outfit would not try to take him. They were no fools, and knew that the jail was built to withstand a heavy assault.

Skeeter Bill had stretched out on his bunk for the night, when Freel came to the cell door without a light and spoke to him. Skeeter got up, and Freel ordered him to dress.

From without came the dull rumble of thunder, and a weak flash seemed to light up the room a trifle.

“Goin’ to rain?” asked Skeeter.

“Hope to —— it rips things loose,” said Freel softly. “Suits me fine. Dressed? Put this on.”

He handed Skeeter a full-length slicker coat, which he put on.

“Gimme your right hand,” whispered Freel, and Skeeter felt the circle of steel click around his wrist as Freel snapped the handcuff.

Another click showed that Freel had locked the other cuff to his own left wrist.

“Come on, easy,” ordered Freel, and they went softly to the back door, which Freel unbarred, and they passed out into the night, which was as black as the proverbial black cat.

Gusts of wind filled the air with clouds of dust, and from the western range came the thudding roll of heavy thunder. The drouth of the valley of the Moon River was about to be broken.

Freel led Skeeter Bill wide of the town, the lights of which were blotted out in the dust-clouds and dark. They stumbled across the railroad track and swung back toward the depot, where Freel led Skeeter in behind a pile of old ties.

Lightning flashed across the sky, but even its light came to them in murky flares, owing to the dust.

“I reckon that —— is about to bust,” said Freel.

“Let her bust,” grunted Skeeter. “This is the first time I was ever timid about —— bustin’.”

“Couldn’t have picked a better night,” declared Freel with much satisfaction.

“That’s right,” agreed Skeeter. “I allus said it would be a wet night when I went to the penitentiary. I don’t mind sneakin’ out of the pen, but I hate like —— to have t’ sneak into one.”

“Rather be lynched?”

“Danged ’f I know. That’s kind of a foolish question, don’tcha think? I ain’t never talked with no folks after they’ve stretched hemp. It may be a — of a lot of fun, but I wasn’t raised t’ look upon it as a pastime.”

“Train comin’,” grunted Freel as the headlight glowed far down the hazy distance and to their ears came the faint whistle of a locomotive.

Slowly the train ground to a stop at the station, and Freel led his prisoner to the front one of the two coaches. These cars were not vestibuled, but had open steps. Forty miles farther on, at the town of Cinnabar, they would connect with the main line, where the passengers might secure sleeping-car accommodations for the trip eastward.

Through a whirl of wind and dust Freel and Skeeter Bill entered the smoking-car, where even the swinging oil lamps were dimmed by the dust, which seeped in through the window-casings and doors.

With a lurch the train started ahead again; but Freel seemed undecided about sitting down. Not over half a dozen men were in the smoker, and none of them paid any attention to Freel and Skeeter Bill.

“— the dust!” choked Freel. “Let’s try the rear car; it can’t be any worse than this one.”

The wind fairly tore the door-knob from Freel’s hand, and they groped their way across the connecting platforms, a roaring, creaking, clattering maelstrom of wild elements and protesting wood and metal.

Into the door of the rear car they went while the door crashed shut behind them, and weaved their way down the narrow aisle. A heavy lurch threw Skeeter almost into an occupied seat, and the jerk of the handcuffs swung Freel with him.

For a moment Skeeter balanced with his one free hand against the back of the seat, almost circling the neck of one of the occupants; and the face that stared up at him was the face of Mary Leeds.



CHAPTER IX

AT the approach to the S bridge, about two miles from Crescent City, four men—Kales, Bowen, Van Cleve, and Orson—crouched near the track. Swede Sorenson had been left with the horses at San Gregario Cañon, and Roper Bates had never shown up.

A swirl of wind and rain caused them to hug the side of the fill, while overhead the lightning crackled wickedly. The great mass of storm-clouds seemed fairly to press against the earth, and the flashes of lightning seemed to bring only a gleam from the glistening rails.

“——’s recess!” swore Kales as he shielded a lantern inside his slicker, trying to light it.

The others crowded around him as he managed to get it lighted, and Van Cleve gave him a red handkerchief to tie around the chimney.

Kales braced himself against the wind and fought his way to the track, where he placed the danger signal; but before he could get back to the rest, the wind hurled the lantern upside down, smashing the chimney.

“What’ll we do now?” yelled Bowen into Kales’s ear. “We can’t light it again!”

“Build a fire on the track!” yelled Van Cleve.

“Try it!” replied Kales bitterly. “You’d have a —— of a sweet time. Looks like we’d have to pass it up, boys.”

“They’d never see a lantern in this storm, anyway,” cried Orson.

For several moments there was silence as each man tried to figure out some scheme for stopping the train. Suddenly the figure of a man brushed past Kales’s arm and climbed past him on to the road-bed. Several other men followed him closely—bulky, indistinct figures in the pall of rain, their footsteps drowned out in the roar of the elements. A few feet past, and they were blotted out.

“Who in —— was that?” roared Kales into Bowen’s ear.

Bowen had no more idea than Kales had, and the other two added their questions.

“Sheriff and some men, do yuh think?” asked Kales.

“Mebbe Bates got drunk and talked too much,” volunteered Van Cleve. “—— him, he never showed up!”

“I betcha he’s got a gang to double-cross us!” yelled Orson. “Roper’d do that.”

“—— ’em, they’ve got a light,” swore Kales. “Look!”

Like a tiny pin-point of red, a light glowed down nearer the end of the bridge. It flickered as the storm beat down, and at times it disappeared entirely when the heavy wind howled out of the depths of Moon River.

“Roper must ’a’ told!” declared Van Cleve.

“But the —— fool knowed we’d be here,” argued Red at the top of his voice. “Mebbe he talked too much, but didn’t tell about us goin’ after the stuff.”

That sounded more reasonable to Kales, and it began to look as if there might be a battle over the treasure.

“What’s our move, Kales?” yelled Orson. “It’s goin’ to mean a battle, and the sheriff might ask questions of wounded men.”

Kales had slid a Winchester carbine from under his slicker, and now he humped forward, resting it across the wet rail. For an instant the red light seemed to glow brighter, and the rifle report seemed weak in all that roaring world; but the red light glowed no more. It is doubtful if the report of the rifle could be heard fifty feet away.

Suddenly the elements seemed to combine in one mighty, roaring crash; and Kales and his men were flung against the bank of the fill, as if hurled and held by a mighty hand, and a solid wall of rain descended upon them.

For a moment they were stifled; but after the mighty deluge and roar there came a space of silence, as if the storm were preparing for another mighty onslaught; and in that brief space of silence, while the world seemed white from the lightning’s glow, there came the splintering grind of tearing timbers and the hiss and roar of wild waters.

“My God!”

Kales’s voice was a scream.

“The bridge! It’s goin’ out!”

“To —— with it!” yelled Bowen. “That old cloud——”

But the rest of his voice was swept away in the rush of wind, and the four men huddled low under the meager protection of the fill.

But Kales managed to grasp Bowen by the arm and yell into his ear:

“The train, you —— fool! It’ll go into the river; don’t yuh understand? Nothin’ can stop it!”

Kales sprang to his feet and staggered on to the track just as two indistinct figures appeared out of the murk, coming from toward the bridge. They had discovered their shattered lantern and had come to investigate.

One of them fired at Kales, and the report of the gun sounded like the weak pop of a toy pistol. Kales staggered back as he swung his carbine and fired. More men were coming out of the gloom, and Kales’s men began shooting blindly.

Kales had been hit through the shoulder. After firing one shot his heel caught in the rail and he fell backward off the road-bed. Another whirl of rain blotted out the world, except for short, orange-colored flashes which seemed to dart here and there.

Kales got to his feet, dizzy and sick, fighting to stay upright. He was a gunman, an outlaw, a man without conscience; but the thought of the train running off the rail-ends of that ruined bridge, plunging into the swollen torrent, was as a nightmare to him.

Blindly he started down the track toward town, stumbling, weaving in the wind, which tore at his slicker with the tenacity of a bulldog. His left arm was useless, but with his right hand he clutched his six-shooter, while his lips repeated continually, as if he was afraid he might forget—

“One shot—close to trucks.”

CHAPTER X

IT was as a dream to Skeeter Bill—this looking into the eyes of Mary Leeds; and the awakening came when Freel yanked sharply on the handcuff. It was then that Mary Leeds shifted her eyes and saw that Skeeter Bill was linked to this other man. His eyes shifted to the other occupant of the seat and looked into the face of Mrs. Porter, erstwhile washer of shirts for Sunbeam town.

“Skeeter Bill Sarg!” exploded Mrs. Porter. “Well, I’ll be everlastin’ly hornswoggled!”

“Yes’m,” said Skeeter foolishly; “me and you both.”

“Skeeter Bill,” parroted Mary, reaching out to him as if not believing her eyes.

“The same,” nodded Skeeter. “I—I——”

“C’m on,” ordered Freel, pulling on the handcuff.

Mary looked wonderingly at Freel and up at Skeeter.

“Me ’n’ him are kinda close pals,” said Skeeter with a smile. “There’s a tie that kinda binds us to each other.”

“I—I don’t understand,” faltered Mary.

“F’r ——’s sake, whatcha handcuffed for?” demanded Mrs. Porter.

“Well——” Skeeter squinted at the storm-drenched window—“well, I’m takin’ a long trip f’r murderin’ a man.”

“You never did!”

Mrs. Porter got to her feet and turned on Freel, who did not understand what it was all about.

“You never murdered nobody!”

Mrs. Porter fairly snorted her unbelief.

“Yuh might ’a’ killed a man, but he had an even break with yuh, boy.”

Skeeter smiled and shook his head.

“Anyway, it’s too late t’ argue about it, Mrs. Porter. How’s everybody in Sunbeam?”

Mrs. Porter did not seem interested in that question, for at that moment the shrill warning shriek of the locomotive whistle came to them, and they were all hurled into confusion, when the engineer threw his engine into reverse and opened the sand-box.

Mary Leeds and Mrs. Porter were thrown forward into the rear of the forward seat, while Skeeter Bill and Freel sprawled into each other in the aisle. There came a series of lurching jars which threatened to splinter the old coaches, and the train jerked to a standstill.

Freel and Skeeter were clawing blindly to get back on their feet when the rear door was flung open and two men came in—two masked men carrying six-shooters. Freel lurched sidewise against the arm of a seat and whipped out a gun from his shoulder holster. One of the masked men fired at him, and the shot swung Freel back a trifle; but he fired deliberately, and the man who had shot him went down.

Another shot thudded into Freel; but he was shooting calmly, slowly; and the other man lurched back against the rear door, dropping his gun. His hat fell off, disclosing the long locks of Jimmy Longhair.

A shot was fired from the other door, and the bullet smashed into a basket of fire-bombs near the rear door.

“Tin-Cup gang,” said Freel hoarsely. “They—got—me.”

He swayed back into Skeeter, who caught him in both arms, swung him up off the floor and lurched for the back door, which had swung open, letting in a flood of rain and wind. Jimmy Longhair swayed into him as he went past; but Skeeter Bill hurled him aside, sprang on to the platform, kicked at another man who was coming up the left-hand steps, and sprang out into the darkness just as another bullet buzzed past his head.

Skeeter Bill had expected to strike solid ground within a short distance; but he seemed to be falling through great space, whirling in a pall of wind and rain.

Suddenly he shot feet first into the whirling river and seemed to go to a great depth—down—down—down until his lungs shrieked with the pain of it all; but he still kept both arms locked around the unconscious sheriff.

Then they seemed fairly to shoot out of the depths and were into the air again; out in a whirling world of floating bush, stumps, and trees. It was

impossible for him to see where they were going; but he realized that the train had stopped on the bridge, and that he had deliberately jumped into Moon River.

Then something drove him sidewise, fairly hurling him through the water, and the roots of a tree whipped him across the face. Skeeter tried to grasp it with his free hand; but it eluded him, and in floundering for it his feet touched bottom and he felt a slackening of the rush of water.

“That dangd tree shoved me out of the current,” he told himself. “Whatcha know about that?”

Holding the sheriff tightly to himself, he moved carefully to the left, feeling with each foot. They were still neck-deep in the flood, but there was no longer any pressure against him.

Once he went into a hole over their heads, but got out quickly and felt the willows on the bank brush against his face. The bank was fairly high; but he managed to get Freel up ahead of him, after which he crawled out and lay flat on his face for several minutes, trying to collect himself.

Bill turned Freel over on his back and felt of his heart. It was still beating, but jerky.

“Pardner, I betcha yo’re water-logged quite a lot,” gurgled Skeeter. “I know well that I am. But you’ve likely got enough holes in yore carcass to drain yuh pretty quick.”

Carefully he searched the sheriffs pockets until he found the key to the handcuffs. His wrist was cut and torn, but he chuckled with joy as the cuff opened easily and he was free once more.

“Now let ’em take me,” he grunted wearily as he searched the sheriff for a gun; but there was none.

He had lost the gun in the car.

Skeeter got to his feet and tried to figure out which way to go. He was going back to see Kirk and get a gun. That was the least Kirk could do for him. He was going to win free; going to get a horse and a gun and the valley of Moon River would see him no more.

He moved slowly away into the brush, feeling his way carefully. Suddenly he stopped. The idea had just struck him that he might make folks think he was dead. If he removed the handcuff from Freel and threw him in the river, who would know that they had ever been linked together? Mary Leeds and Mrs. Porter would in all probability never be questioned. And if

they did, they would, or possibly might, tell a white lie to help him out. It was worth chancing.

He felt his way back to Freel and started to lift him up. It would be a simple matter to drop him over the bank. Freel would never suffer—never realize, because he was already unconscious, perhaps dying.

But suddenly the words of old Judge Tareyton came back to him:

“I know how yuh feel, Skeeter Bill. God put a spark of something into all of us—a spark that flares up once in a while. It will build a big flame for you—if you’ll let it.”

“That’s right, judge,” said Skeeter, staring into the darkness and rain, speaking aloud, but all unconscious of it. “Mebbe this is my spark workin’. Bein’ a murderer don’t set me free, old-timer. Yuh can’t lie to yourself and get away with it.”

Swinging the sheriff’s unconscious body up in his arms, he stumbled away through the brush, going by instinct for the higher ground, while behind him the river roared as if in anger at being cheated.



CHAPTER XI

KALES'S men did not long dispute with the Tin-Cup gang. The gang was not worth the candle to them, as they did not intend to battle for a chance to hold up the train, and also they did not know who the Tin-Cup gang were.

While they believed that Roper Bates had talked too much and had given away the secret of the big gold shipment, the Tin-Cup gang fought to keep any one from stopping them from taking Skeeter Bill off the train. Jimmy Longhair had heard the sheriff tell Skeeter that he was to leave very soon, and, with the gang planted near the bridge, Jimmy had watched the back door of the jail and had seen Skeeter and Freel come out.

“Monk” Clark, the owner of the Tin-Cup, had sworn to “get” Skeeter Bill, and Monk was no idle boaster; but he did not reckon on interference.

The train was into them and lurching back against the reversed engine before they knew just what damage they had suffered; but Monk rallied his men and swung into the train, as it stopped on the last remaining arch of the bridge, with the pilot of the engine almost hanging out over the flood.

When Monk boarded the rear car, it was only to find that Skeeter Bill and the sheriff had gone overboard and that Jimmy Longhair and Benny Harper were down and out from the sheriff's six-shooter.

Things were looking extremely bad for the Tin-Cup gang, and Monk lost no time in herding his men off the train, leaving their wounded. The train backed off the bridge and stopped, but the Tin-Cup gang were already mounting and riding away. There was no question in the mind of Monk Clark that Skeeter Bill and Freel had died in the flood.

He gathered his men to him and delivered his orders:

“Boys, I don't know how many people seen or recognized us, nor how much we're goin' to be blamed for this; but we might as well be hung for goats as for sheep. Let's finish the business by wiping out every sheep-camp in the country. Make it one big night, and to —— with to-morrow.”

Without a reply his men spurred ahead with him. They were already in bad and were willing to go the limit now.

Inside the train, all was confusion. No one seemed to know just what had happened; but the engine-crew knew that a warning torpedo had exploded just in time to prevent them from going into the river.

When the train backed off the bridge and stopped, Mrs. Porter and Mary Leeds got off the rear steps. They were both dazed over the swift succession of events, and Mrs. Porter swore piously when they heard someone say that the sheriff and his prisoner had jumped into the river.

Without knowing why they did it, both of them clawed their way alongside the train, trying to get back to the bridge; and when half-way the length of the train it started backing toward Crescent City, leaving them alone in the rain.

The beams of the receding headlight faded out in the storm, leaving them in total darkness. Neither was dressed for wet weather, and the drifting rain drenched them in a few minutes.

“Oh, why did he jump?” queried Mary Leeds, staring into the distance, where the waters hissed against the piling of the bridge.

“He took a chance, child,” soothed Mrs. Porter. “When yuh look at it ca’m-like, the river ain’t no worse than livin’ out your life in the penitentiary.”

“But he couldn’t have been guilty,” insisted Mary.

“Not of murder,” agreed Mrs. Porter wearily; “but mebbe things broke so he couldn’t prove it. Skeeter Bill would shoot, y’ betcha. Prob’ly looked like murder to the law. You kinda liked Skeeter, didn’t yuh, Mary?”

“I don’t know,” said Mary wistfully. “He is only a big, rough man, who does not deny that he is a lawbreaker, but he is honest and—when he smiles —”

“I know what yuh mean,” said Mrs. Porter softly when Mary hesitated. “Bill was all right, y’ betcha. Why, he never wore a shirt over a week, and he allus took off his hat t’ me. I’ve seen him take off his hat t’ honkatonk girls, too. Seems like he respected women—all of ’em—thataway.”

Together they stood in the drenching rain and thought of Skeeter Bill. Finally Mrs. Porter said:

“Well, we ain’t doin’ poor Skeeter any good out here. God rest his soul, and that’s about all I can say. I wonder how far it is back to a town.”

Mary shook her head.

“I don’t know. Somehow I have no desire to go anywhere. I feel so tired now.”

“You need a good shot of booze,” declared the practical Mrs. Porter. “We’ll both catch a dandy cold in this rain. Come on, let’s slop back to some town.”

They started slowly down the railroad track, picking their way over the ties, which seemed to rise up and catch their feet. They could only see a few feet beyond them; but the storm seemed to be breaking, and already there were rifts in the clouds, where light strips hinted at a moonlight soon to come.

They had gone only about a hundred yards when they heard the crunching of gravel ahead of them, and a huge, misshapen thing seemed to rise up out of the brush beside the track and flounder out in front of them.

The two women clutched at each other in fear until a voice came to them

“Pardner, you’re harder t’ handle than a salamander, and yuh weigh a ton.”

“Skeeter!” called Mary wildly. “Skeeter Bill!”

“Huh!” grunted Skeeter and turned to meet Mary, who was stumbling down the track to him.

“You!” he panted. “You!”

And then wonderingly—

“Don’t we meet in the dangdest places, ma’am?”

“You’re not drowned?” asked Mary half-hysterically.

“No’m, I don’t reckon so—not yet. Howdy, Mrs. Porter.”

“Well, Bill Sarg!”

Mrs. Porter was half-crying.

“Well, you!”

“What’sa matter?” queried Skeeter. “And what are you folks doin’ out here in the wet? Where’s the train?”

“It went,” said Mrs. Porter, waving one arm down the track. “We—we went to look into the river, I guess.”

“Well,” laughed Skeeter, shifting the weight of Freel’s body, “I had all the looks I wanted. I jumped into the darned thing—me ’n’ the sheriff. I dunno how he liked it. Reckon it was all right, ’cause he slept through it all.”

“Wasn’t he shot?” asked Mrs. Porter. “Them two men was shootin’——”

“Hit him twice, I think.”

“But what was it all about?” asked Mary.

“Me,” chuckled Skeeter. “Them fellers wanted t’ take me away from the sheriff and make a tree decoration out of me.”

“Hang yuh?” exclaimed Mrs. Porter.

“Yes’m, I suppose they had that in mind. They kinda hate shepherders.”

“Was you herdin’ sheep, Skeeter Bill?”

“Nope. It was just a case of bein’ nice and handy to a sheep outfit, and no way t’ prove a alibi. Of course them fellers ain’t particular, Mrs. Porter. ’F they hated a laundry and caught me washin’ m’ shirt——”

“Whoop!” exploded Mrs. Porter. “Don’t drag the dirty shirts into this, Skeeter Bill. Whatcha goin’ to do with the sheriff? ’F they catch yuh ag’in, won’t they send yuh to the penitentiary?”

“Yes’m—’f they don’t lynch me first; but I’ve gotta get help for the sheriff.”

“Well, yuh ain’t goin’ back to town,” declared Mrs. Porter. “You never murdered nobody, and you’re a fool to shove your neck into a handy rope. Vamoose while the travelin’ is wide open.”

Skeeter considered the idea thoughtfully.

“You can go to another country,” added Mary Leeds.

“Well, I’ve gotta get this sheriff—I know what I can do. By cripes, I’ll pack him to Kirk’s camp and let him haul Freel t’ Crescent City. ’F I ain’t mistaken, I can travel to the right and hit that sheep outfit dead center. You folks keep straight down the railroad, and you’ll hit Crescent City.”

“Not me!” declared Mrs. Porter. “If you’re goin’ huntin’ for a sheep-camp in the dark, I’m goin’ along.”

“I shall go, too,” said Mary firmly.

“Whatcha goin’ to do?” grumbled Skeeter. “Two t’ one, and I’m loaded down. It ain’t reasonable—not any; but mebbe you’re just as well off. It’s a

— of a trip, any old way yuh take it. C'm on. We've gotta get out of this cut before we can start across-country."

It was at least two hundred yards to where the cut opened into more level country. Just before they reached the end of the cut a bulky object seemed to drag itself across the rails and halted in the center of the track.

The two women hung back, not realizing that it was a man; but Skeeter Bill plodded on with his burden until he reached the prone figure stretched between the rails.

"More danged cripples around here!" exclaimed Skeeter Bill, peering down at the man. "Who are you, pardner?"

"I'm Kales," panted the man. "Nick Kales."

Skeeter eased his burden to the ground.

"Kales, eh? I 'member you, Kales. You said that the judge didn't have any guts, 'cause he didn't hang me."

But Kales had collapsed again and did not answer.

"Must 'a' been one of the gang who tried to hold up the train," said Skeeter. "Got plugged for his trouble."

Skeeter dug into Kales's pockets and secured matches, which he proceeded to light in order to examine Kales's hurts.

"He sure got plugged," nodded Skeeter. "I dunno how many times he got hit, but it looks like his gun busted and tore his right hand all to thunder. Hm-m-m!"

"Almost got enough to start a hospital," observed Mrs. Porter.

Skeeter was searching Kales's pockets again. In the outside pocket of the slicker he found a full bottle of whisky. He drew out the cork and forced some of it into the outlaw's mouth. Kales strangled and tried to sit up.

"Here, take a drink," urged Skeeter, and succeeded in getting a fair-sized drink down Kales's throat.

"Feel better?"

Kales coughed and tried to get to his feet.

"Hang on to yourself," advised Skeeter. "Take it easy until yuh feel better."

But Kales got to his feet and clung to Skeeter, talking incoherently.

“Can yuh walk?” asked Skeeter.

“Walk?” muttered Kales. “Walk?”

“Yeah—move your feet for’ard and back and carry yore body along at the same time. I betcha he can,” continued Skeeter; and then to Mrs. Porter: “Can yuh kindly help hang on to him? I reckon we’ll add him to our collection.”

“He came here to lynch you.”

Mrs. Porter was a trifle indignant at the idea of taking Kales along.

“Yeah, tha’s a fact,” admitted Skeeter Bill; “but he fell down on the job. Let’s go.”

He swung the inert Freel back across his shoulder and started off down the track, with the stumbling Kales hanging to the sleeve of his coat and being assisted to some extent by Mrs. Porter. Bringing up the rear came Mary Leeds, wanting to be of help to someone, but unable to decide just where to begin.

CHAPTER XII

ROPER BATES had consumed considerable whisky that day, but had not succeeded in getting so drunk that he forgot his plans. It was after dark when he rode away from Crescent City, heading toward Kirk's sheep-camp.

The fact that a big storm was coming did not bother Roper Bates. His mind still carried a picture of the pretty woman at the sheep-camp, and he was sufficiently filled with liquor actually to believe that he was going to do her a real favor by taking her away from her plebeian husband.

The last quarter of a mile he rode in a whirl of dust while the thunder jarred the world about him; but he was storm-proof. He dismounted near the door, and his horse immediately moved into the shelter of the cabin wall.

The door was not barred; so Roper Bates surged inside and shut the door behind him. The cabin was lighted with a single lantern, which swayed from a rafter, and it took him several moments to get his dust-filled eyes accustomed to the dim light.

The pretty woman was sitting on the edge of the built-in bunk, staring at him. There was some one in the bunk, who moved restlessly and coughed dryly.

“What do you want here?” asked the woman hoarsely.

“Me?”

Roper Bates wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He did not know what to say just then. From overhead came a crashing snap of thunder, and the woman seemed to crouch lower on the bunk. Successive flashes of lightning made the room bright with a white glare.

Roper moved in a little closer and stared at the man in the bunk. He could see the man's face now; it was very pale.

“What's a matter—sick?” asked Roper thickly.

The woman nodded dumbly, and turned to put her hand on the sick man's forehead. She turned back and repeated her question—

“What do you want here?”

“I—dunno.”

Roper Bates really did not know. Somehow he seemed to forget just why he had come there.

“Been sick long?”

Roper jerked his head toward the sick man.

“Three days and nights,” nodded the woman. “I haven’t had any sleep, and no one comes here.”

“Three days and nights,” parroted Roper. “You been settin’ there all that time?”

“I haven’t slept,” she corrected him wearily.

“Nobody to help yuh?”

Roper shook his head, as if answering his own question.

“Nobody? For ——’s sake!”

He moved in close to the side of the bed and looked down at Kirk.

“He’s the sheepherder, ain’t he?”

“Yes—and my husband,” defiantly.

“Uh-huh—your husband,” agreed Roper thoughtfully. “A sheepherder for a husband.”

Mrs. Kirk got up from the bunk and faced Roper Bates.

“What difference does that make?” she demanded. “We took this job together. If he’s a sheepherder, so am I. No matter if he does herd sheep—he’s as good as you are.”

“Good as I am,” parroted Roper thoughtfully.

“He had to live in the hills, and there was nothing else for him to do. We had to live.”

“Had to,” agreed Roper slowly.

“And he’s my husband,” repeated Mrs. Kirk, very near to the verge of a breakdown, “and I love him more than anything in the world.”

Roper peered closely at her and looked at the man in the bunk.

“More’n anythin’—in—the—world! Well, I’ll be eternally ——!” blurted Roper.

It was beyond his comprehension; yet he could get a glimmering of the idea.

“And nobody ever comes here,” said Mrs. Kirk bitterly. “They hate a sheepherder so much that nobody cares what becomes of us.”

“Ain’t it ——?” agreed Roper. “Now, ain’t it, though?”

The little cabin shook in the heavy wind, and the rain beat in through the walls and the patched window-panes.

“Stormin’ outside,” observed Roper vacantly, and grinned at his own wit as he added, “and some of it’s comin’ in out of the wet.”

Suddenly he turned to Mrs. Kirk.

“You ain’t scared of me, are yuh?”

“No, I am not afraid of you. Why should I be?”

Roper did not say, but studied the face of the sick man for a while before he looked up at Mrs. Kirk.

“Yuh say yuh love him—more ’n—anythin’—even if he is a sheepherder?”

“God knows I do. Why do you ask me that question?”

“And yuh ain’t afraid of me?”

“Not one bit,” declared Mrs. Kirk. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Stay and help yuh all I can, ma’am. I ain’t one of them lousy persons which looks down upon a sheepherder. I reckon yore husband is quite some top-hand, when he’s up and doin’ his stuff.”

“Jim is my pal.”

“Whatcha know?” grunted Roper. “Whatcha know? Ma’am, you lay down and take a nap, and I’ll take care of him.”

There was one home-made rocking chair in the room, and Mrs. Kirk sat down in it.

“I can not sleep, but it is a godsend to have someone here to talk with,” she said wearily.

“Yes’m,” nodded Roper slowly. “Nobody ever called me that name before but it’s all right, I reckon.”

He slowly rolled a cigaret, and as he drew his lips across the edge of the paper he glanced at Mrs. Kirk. She had fallen asleep, with her head pillowed in her arm.

For a long time Roper stared at the floor, with the unlighted cigaret between his lips. He was trying to solve a problem which has never been answered; nor will it ever be, "Why does this woman love this man?"

Roper studied the face of the sick man. Kirk was a very ordinary-looking man. He was not big. Roper shook his head. It was a problem far beyond his ken.

He sifted the tobacco out of his cigaret paper and humped over with his chin in his hands. He had come there to take that woman away from her undeserving husband; and here he was, acting as nurse to that very husband.

For the better part of an hour he sat there like a statue, thinking of things that had never entered his head before. He did not want that woman now, and he wondered why he had ever wanted her. Where did he ever get the idea of taking her away from her husband?

Suddenly he heard the thudding of horses' hoofs as a body of horsemen drew rein at the doorway. A man's voice cursed openly—

"Git out of this, you —— shepherders!"

The voice aroused Mrs. Kirk, and she sat up, staring around. Somebody stumbled over the step and grasped the door. Roper Bates knew what it meant. The cattlemen had come to clean up the sheep-camps.

Suddenly the door was flung open, and three men filled the doorway. Quick as a flash Roper Bates threw up his six-shooter and fired at the lead man, who had a Winchester rifle leveled from his shoulder.

The man seemed to spin on his heel, and the rifle was discharged into the ceiling, while the other men shot back with him as they jerked him out of the doorway. The door swung shut behind them, and Roper Bates's last shot splintered the edge of it as it closed.

The room was full of powder-smoke. Mrs. Kirk had darted to the bunk as if to try to protect her husband, while Roper Bates was half-kneeling in the middle of the room, stuffing cartridges into his six-shooter.

"Got me in the leg," he grunted; "but I made 'em pay for comin' in without knockin'."

He got carefully to his feet, yanked a blanket off the bed, and managed to stumble over to the window, where he flung the blanket across the rough frame, cutting out the view from outside.

A bullet flicked in through the window and tore a slash in the blanket, but the latter remained in place. Roper was hopping on one foot along the wall, getting close to the door, when a man called from without—

“—— you, we’re comin’ after yuh!”

“Come on!” challenged Roper. “Open that door and grab a harp.”

Several bullets splintered through the door following his defiance, and one of them bit deeply into Roper’s ribs. He swayed closer to the door, but did not waste lead in reply.

Mrs. Kirk saw that Roper had been hit hard and started toward him, but he waved her back.

“Oh, why don’t you let them in?” she begged. “They will not hurt you. Why do you fight for us?”

“This ain’t no job for a woman and a sick man,” he stated hoarsely, “and it’s ’bout all I’m good fer.”

“Why did we ever come here?” said Mrs. Kirk weakly.

Roper turned his white face toward her and shook his head.

“Ma’am, I’ve asked m’self that same question. Down in Indiany, they farm with a plow instead of a six-gun. But I never left there of my own accord. I was only three year old, and m’ folks kinda hoodled me along with them.”

Roper was deadly serious. He was bleeding badly and barely able to brace himself against the log wall.

“If you don’t come out of there you’ll wish to —— yuh had!” yelled a voice.

“And if you come in here you’ll wish t’ —— yuh hadn’t,” answered Roper.

Another bullet splintered the door near the latch and thudded harmlessly into the wall.

From without came the sound of earnest conversation, and a voice called again.

“We’re goin’ to stampede your sheep, and if you ain’t out of there when we come back we’ll dynamite your shack.”

There came the sound of horses speeding away over the wet ground. Roper walked dizzily back to the table, where he sat down heavily in the rocking chair.

“We must get out of here.”

Mrs. Kirk was nervously looking around the room, as if debating just what to save from the promised dynamiting.

“Tha’s all right,” grunted Roper dazedly. “Don’tcha worry. Them jaspers ain’t got no dynamite; but I’m bettin’ they’ve got some respect for a sheepherder now.”

“But we must get to a doctor—for—you.”

“Never mind me, ma’am. Ain’t nobody worryin’ about me. I’m jist Roper Bates, cowpuncher. Got a hole in m’ leg and one in m’ bellows, but I’m feelin’ fine, y’ betcha—betcha.”

Roper Bates sank lower in his chair, and the heavy six-shooter fell to the floor.



CHAPTER XIII

IT was a sadly bedraggled party which picked its way through the dark. There were no lights to guide them, no trail nor road. Skeeter Bill, under the double burden of Kales and Freel, traveled by instinct. Kales babbled meaningless things and wanted to lie down, but Skeeter doled out bad whisky to him and steadied him on one side, while Mrs. Porter guided him from the opposite side.

Through mesquite and sage they blundered along, sliding into washouts partly filled with muddy water, falling over rocks, crashing into brier patches, where the women left sections of their clothes.

As in a dream Mary Leeds followed. She had no sense of direction, and her feet had long since lost any sense of feeling. She was reduced to a mere dumb creature, following the man she loved. Ahead of her he struggled; a huge, queer-shaped hulk, uncomplaining, patient.

“Ain’t you tired, Skeeter Bill?” asked Mrs. Porter.

“Years and years ago,” laughed Skeeter; “but I’m sure paralyzed now. Mr. Kales, I wish you’d watch where yo’re puttin’ yore feet. I don’t mind walkin’ on m’ feet, but I hate like —— t’ have you doin’ it.”

From afar came the sound of firing as the Tin-Cup gang rounded up and stampeded the sheep. Skeeter stopped and listened for a moment and hurried on.

“I’m scared,” admitted Skeeter. “Scared that somethin’ is happenin’ to the pals.”

“Who are the pals?” panted Mrs. Porter.

“Man and his wife. He’s sick and she’s stickin’ to him. Shepherder.”

Skeeter shifted his burden slightly.

“They ain’t jist husband and wife—they’re pals—bunkies,” he went on. “*Sabe* what I mean, Mrs. Porter?”

“I think so, Skeeter Bill.”

“Dangest thing I ever seen,” said Skeeter. “Kinda gives a feller a new idea of a wife. ’F a feller had a wife that was a pal t’ him—— Say, by cripes, we found the shack!”

Just beyond them loomed the outlines of the little sheep cabin, but without a light showing.

“Lemme do the talkin’,” said Skeeter. “It ain’t safe to be a stranger around here.”

Skeeter went close to the door and called:

“Mrs. Kirk! Yoohoo! Mrs. Kirk!”

For several moments there was silence, and then—

“Who is it?”

Mrs. Kirk’s voice sounded very weak.

“Skeeter Bill Sarg, who went after the groceries.”

The splintered door creaked, and a faint light came from the interior.

“Why, I—I——” stammered Mrs. Kirk, astonished beyond measure to hear his voice.

She stepped aside and stared white-faced at Skeeter and his burden and at the others with him. Skeeter stared at Roper Bates, sprawl in the chair, and at the form under the blankets on the bed.

He lowered Freel to the floor and propped Kales up between the table and the wall. Mary Leeds and Mrs. Porter were staring at Mrs. Kirk while Skeeter Bill chafed his benumbed arms and neck and haltingly introduced them.

“What’s he doing here?” asked Skeeter, pointing at Roper Bates.

Haltingly Mrs. Kirk told of what had happened a short time before, while Roper Bates roused sufficiently to look around dazedly. He looked from Mrs. Kirk to Skeeter Bill and nodded weakly.

“Pals,” he whispered. “Him—and—her.”

“Y’betcha, pardner,” nodded Skeeter, and walked over to the bunk, where he looked down at Kirk.

Bill went back to Freel and examined him. The sheriff was still alive, but unconscious. Kales was still mumbling incoherent things, but was too weak to do more than hold up his head.

“Kirk’s better off here than anywhere else,” stated Skeeter Bill; “but I’ve gotta git the rest of the cripples to a doctor pretty danged quick. Yuh still got the old horse and the wagon, Mrs. Kirk?”

Mrs. Kirk nodded, and Skeeter turned to Mrs. Porter.

“You keep house here while I hitch up.”

“But you can’t go back to town,” declared Mrs. Porter. “They’ll——”

“I betcha they will,” smiled Skeeter; “but it’s a case of three t’ one. ’F I don’t hand these three men over to a doctor they’ll all die.”

Skeeter patted Mrs. Porter on the shoulder as he started for the door.

“Mebbe they’ll only send me to the penitentiary, yuh see.”

It was only a few minutes’ work for Skeeter to hitch up the old horse and drive up to the door. He carried the three men out of the house and placed them in the wagon-box on an old quilt.

“You and Mary stay here with Mrs. Kirk,” said Skeeter to Mrs. Porter. “I’ll see that somebody comes after yuh in the mornin’.”

He turned to Mrs. Kirk and held out his hand.

“ ’F I don’t see yuh ag’in—good luck t’ you and yore pal.”

“Well, we’ll sure see yuh, won’t we?” queried Mrs. Porter quickly.

“I shore hope so, but yuh can’t sometimes always tell. Mebbe I better tell you folks good-bye, too.”

“Aw——!” blurted Mrs. Porter inelegantly and turned back into the shack, while Mary Leeds came slowly up to Skeeter and took hold of his sleeve.

“Skeeter Bill, can’t I go with you?”

“I——Mebbe yuh better not,” softly. “She’s a rough old road, and yuh can’t tell what might——”

“Does a pal mind rough old roads, Skeeter Bill?”

Mary was looking up into his face, a world of yearning in her eyes. Skeeter’s hand came up and touched her drenched, wind-blown hair for a moment, and he shook his head.

“There are no rough roads to a pal,” said Mary; and without a word Skeeter Bill helped her on to the rickety seat.



CHAPTER XIV

CRESCENT CITY was greatly excited over the events of the evening. The storm had taken a great toll in property, and the town was filled with ranchers whose places had been flooded in the big cloudburst.

The train had backed into town, bringing two badly wounded men and a tale of a narrow escape from going into the river and of a mysterious hold-up, in which the sheriff and his prisoner had perished in the river. And to cap it all, a wounded sheepherder had ridden into town and told of a gang of raiders who had destroyed his camp and herd.

Jimmy Longhair and Bennie Harper, the two men who had been shot by the sheriff, were stretched out in the Moon River saloon and gambling-house while a doctor worked over them. The place was filled with hard-faced cattlemen who argued and declared pro and con.

Among those present were Bowen, Van Cleve, and Orson. Swede Sorenson was still in San Gregario Cañon, unable to cross the river back to the Lazy H, and not knowing what had happened to their well-laid plans.

None of the three had been hurt in the skirmish with the Tin-Cup gang, and had walked back to Crescent City. None of them had the slightest idea where Kales was; but they were under the impression that Kales had been shot. They did not know whether to stay in town or to make a getaway while the going was good.

Judge Grayson, who had been summoned, was greatly affected over the news of Freel's death. He tried to get some kind of a statement from Longhair or Harper, but both of them refused to talk. They were both from the Tin-Cup ranch, but they would say nothing to implicate any more of their outfit.

The train crew were in the saloon, adding their voices to the general hum of conversation. It had been a narrow escape for them, and they were willing to admit that they were very fortunate to be alive.

"I heard that torpedo," stated the engineer, a grizzled old veteran, "and I hossed over the old Johnson-bar. The wind usually blows away the sand, but I guess the Lord was with us this time, 'cause it stayed on the rail. We sure upset folks a-plenty, but stopped with the pilot hangin' out over the water. Wouldn't have been a chance in the world except for that torpedo."

“Who placed the torpedo?” queried the judge. “And what do you mean by a torpedo?”

“It’s a little metal case which is fastened to the rail,” explained the engineer. “It’s flat on each end and high in the center, with lead straps to clamp onto the rail. When the engine wheel hits it, the thing pops loud. Two of ’em is a slow signal, ordering you to go cautious, but when only one pops, you better stop quick.”

“I understand,” nodded the judge. “But who placed that one on the rail?”

No one seemed to know.

“I don’t know who put it there—” the engineer shook his head—“but I do know that he saved a lot of us this night.”

“Amen to that,” agreed the judge.

Suddenly there was a commotion at the door, excited voices, the scrape of footsteps; and in came Skeeter Bill, carrying the sheriff in his arms. The crowd parted and let him through. He placed the sheriff on the floor, turned, and went back out of the door, while men crowded around and looked down at Freel, who was still alive.

Before any one had time to call the doctor from his labors with the other two men Skeeter came back with Kales. He placed him with Freel and went back without a word.

“My God!” exclaimed the judge piously. “What next?”

Back came Skeeter Bill again. This time he was carrying Roper Bates, and following him was Mary Leeds. Skeeter placed Roper on the floor and stood aside as the doctor came bustling through the crowd, answering someone’s hail.

Men looked queerly at Skeeter, but no one made any move to interfere with his freedom. Swiftly the doctor worked in his examination. Bowen, Orson, and Van Cleve moved close together and watched closely, hoping against hope that Kales had not, and would not, tell what he knew.

“Any chance for them, doctor?” asked the judge.

“Yes, I think so. Freel is badly hurt, but is suffering mostly from loss of blood. This other man”—indicating Bates—“has been hit twice, but I think he will recover. This third man has a nasty hole in his shoulder, and he appears to have lost nearly all the fingers on his right hand. Perhaps his pistol exploded. Who is he?”

“Name’s Kales,” said a bystander. “Hired gunman.”

Kales stirred and opened his eyes, looking curiously up at the circle of faces.

“Did it stop?” he whispered weakly. “The train?”

“It stopped in time,” said the judge.

“Dropped—my—gun.”

Kales spaced his words widely, and frowned heavily as if in deep thought.

“I knowed that it took one torpedo to stop the train.”

He stopped and took a deep breath.

“Women and children—men—the—bridge—gone. No—gun—so—I
—”

Kales tried to smile but only succeeded in contorting his homely face.

“The wind was too strong—blew—the—cartridge—off—the—rail—so
—I—”

He licked his lips and tried to lift his injured hand, but the effort was too great.

“I—I held it on the rail.”

“God!” cried the engineer wonderingly. “He lost his hand from holding a cartridge on the track.”

“A hired gunman,” said Skeeter Bill softly. “A paid killer.”

“Where did Roper Bates come in on this?” demanded a bearded cowman.

Roper Bates was trying to sit up, and one of the crowd assisted him while another gave him a drink of liquor.

More men were coming into the door, clumping heavily in their wet boots. They shoved to the front—the Tin-Cup outfit, with Monk Clark at their head. He looked at Skeeter Bill and blinked his eyes rapidly. It was like looking at a ghost. His eyes switched to the three men on the floor, and Roper Bates was looking up at him.

Clark’s men had halted behind him. One of them pointed at Skeeter and said:

“There’s the —— murderin’ sheepherder, Monk! He didn’t drown.”

Mary Leeds moved closer to Skeeter, and he put an arm around her.

“Murderin’ ——!” gasped Roper Bates. “He only killed a man, Monk. You and your gang tried to kill a woman. If I hadn’t been there you’d ’a’ done it, too.”

The man who had given Roper Bates the drink was forcing a drink between Freel’s lips, and Freel choked over the fiery liquor. The man lifted Freel’s head a little higher, and Freel’s eyes slowly opened.

For a full minute he studied the crowd, and his eyes shifted to Skeeter Bill.

“What—happened?” he muttered. “They—shot——”

“I jumped into the river with yuh,” smiled Skeeter, “and then I packed yuh plumb over to the sheepherder’s shack and then brought yuh here.”

Freel digested this as he studied Skeeter closely.

“You unlocked the handcuffs—when?”

“After I got yuh out of the river.”

“And—you—stayed?”

Skeeter’s mind flashed back to the bank of the river, in the drenching storm and darkness, when he started to toss the sheriff back into the flood.

“Yeah,” said Skeeter slowly. “I stayed.”

“You—had—your—chance,” said Freel painfully.

“I know I did.”

Skeeter’s voice held no regrets.

“I could ’a’ got away, Freel,” he went on. “But you wasn’t to blame for what was bein’ done t’ me. You was only doin’ your duty.”

Freel motioned for another drink, and the man gave him a generous portion.

“Duty!”

Freel’s voice was so low that the crowd shifted in closer to hear what he was saying.

“I was doin’ my duty, Sarg? No, I wasn’t. I was glad the judge gave you life, instead of the rope. I’ll tell you why.”

Freel's eyes shifted around the crowd, and he nodded.

“Remember the day Cleve Hart was killed? I got shot that day—just a scratch. I was in that sheepherder's cabin when Cleve Hart came. He—they told me he had said things about the woman who lived there.

“I picked up the shotgun and came out. Maybe he didn't recognize me, but he shot. I killed him and rode away.”

“You killed him!” exclaimed the judge. “You?”

“Me,” admitted the sheriff. “I—got—scared—afterwards. I'm—a—coward, judge.”

Men looked at each other in amazement, and many of them looked at Skeeter Bill, who had his arms around Mary Leeds and was staring into space.

“Judge,” called Freel softly. “Listen to me, judge. Will you find McClelland? I think he's in Cinnibar now. Tell him I said to take these —— sheep out of the valley of Moon River right away.”

“Why, how can you order them out?” asked the judge.

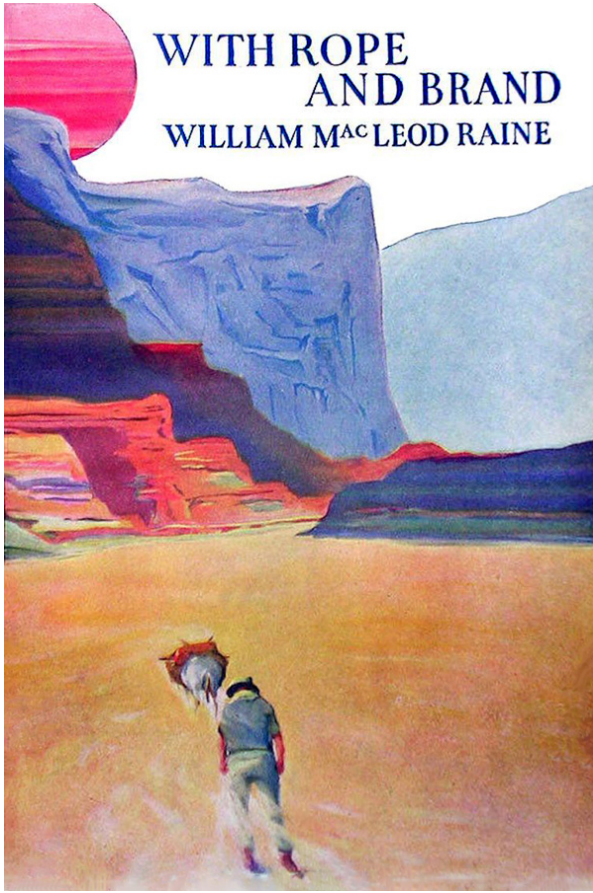
“They—belong—to—me, judge. I—I—didn't—know—they'd—start—so—much—trouble.”

Skeeter Bill moved slowly toward the door with his arm around Mary Leeds, and the Tin-Cup gang, yet to pay for their misdeeds, removed their hats as the lanky cowpuncher and the girl went past, paying no heed to any one.

Outside, they climbed on to the rickety seat, turned the old gray horse around, and started back toward the sheep-camp. The old wagon creaked in every joint, protesting against such continuous service; and the old gray horse shuffled along over the wet, misty road, taking its own gait, while two figures sat very close together on the lop-sided seat—two pals who had found each other in the storm.

WITH ROPE
AND BRAND

WILLIAM M^{AC}LEOD RAINE



WITH ROPE AND BRAND

CHAPTER I

THE CATTLE QUEEN OF THE NOCHES

NEVER had Arizona given birth to a more inviting morning. The air was balmy with spring. Sunshine from a blue sky flooded the land—not garishly or oppressively, as it would do three months later—but with a mellow softness, which filled every creeping and growing thing with the instinctive love of life.

Through the open window came to Wilma the click of windmill, the call of a mating quail, the occasional faint, far lowing of cattle.

She was an outdoor dweller, a little pagan sun worshiper, who, through all her twenty years, had drawn strength and vitality from the free, open air of the unfenced hills. But to-day, she resolutely trod down the impulse to call for saddle and horse, and ride into the divine morning—trod it down under the firm little feet which made her sewing machine whir with rapid motion. She was making herself a new riding skirt, and, with characteristic decision, was holding herself to her task until it should be done.

For Wilma Wescott had a will of her own, as everybody on the Map of Texas Ranch could have testified. She might be given to heady gusts of temper, but, in the main, she ruled herself as she ruled others. It was part of the discipline of her position that she had learned not to yield to every whim. For responsibility had been thrust upon her by the death of her father when she was only a slip of a girl, and though the broad shoulders of her foreman, Bob Marcy, had borne most of the burden, she was too independent not to claim a share of it. She had but to look out of the window to the land waves, falling back to the horizon's edge, to know that all this was hers. Literally, her cattle fed on a thousand hills.

Had she looked out, she might have seen a rider descending from the crest of one of these waves along the white ribbon of road which disappeared into a depression. It was Sandy, coming back from Noches with the mail.

But she did not look up. The machine whirred on and on, stopping only when she needed to adjust the seams or run a basting thread. So, before she knew that Sandy was within five miles of her, he was standing in the room, holding out a bundle of letters and papers.

She ran her eye over these, in business fashion until she came to an envelope which was postmarked the Philippines. This brought a glow of warmer color to her cheeks, even though she laid it aside, and looked first at all the rest of her mail. But the joy of that letter was in her heart, even while she busied herself with the others. She would not read it indoors.

Stepping to the porch, she called to Sandy to saddle her pinto. Five minutes later, she was galloping into the sunlit hills, with her unread letter in her bosom.

Not in ten years had the country been so green and lovely as it was now. There had been many winter and spring rains, so that the *alfilaria* covered the hills with a carpet of grass. Here and there, she crossed little, muddy streams, pouring down arroyos on their way from the mountains. These all ran into the Del Oro—a river which was dry during most of the year, but which was now full to its banks.

She followed the Del Oro into the cañon of the same name—a narrow gulch, with sheer, precipitous walls. Never before within her memory had the stream been so full. The narrow trail along the bank scarce gave the pony footing.

Here Wilma read her love letter from the young lieutenant of cavalry to whom she was engaged. A more experienced person might have found something to lack in the letter—something of selfishness and egotism, that cropped out in spite of the writer. But this girl found it all it should be. He had been her first lover, unless she counted Bob Marcy; and, though she had not seen him for three years, she remembered his dark good looks and the gallant bearing which had made him her hero.

They had become engaged then, and, with his regiment, he had been transferred from the Arizona fort to the Philippines. From that time she had had only his letters and a photograph to fill the place of his reality. But now he was coming home; he would be back on the very next boat. He must be on the way now, already close to San Francisco.

So intent had she been on her letter that the first roar of the rushing waters came upon her with merely a dazed surprise. She looked back, and the danger of her situation flashed upon her. A wall of water was roaring

down the narrow cañon to engulf her. There had been a waterspout somewhere in the hills.

Wilma drove the spur home, and her pony dashed forward. Some two hundred yards in front of her the walls fell back, less sheer. If she could reach the place, there might be a chance to clamber up beyond the reach of the torrent.

Of that wild dash for life she could never remember afterward anything save the overwhelming sense of peril. She knew that the pinto was pounding forward with the best speed that was in him, but there was no doubt that the flood at his heels was racing far faster than he. The roar of the advancing wall of water grew louder as it swept resistlessly upon her. She gave a cry of terror, swung from the saddle, and attempted to climb the rock face.

Catching hold of outjutting ledges, and even of cactus bushes, the now desperate girl went up like a mountain goat. But the waters swept upon her, waist high, and dragged at her. She clung desperately to a ledge of quartz which her fingers had found, but the suck of the wave carried her feet from beneath her. Under the strain, her fingers relaxed, and she slid slowly down.

A rope descended over her outstretched arms, and tightened under her shoulders. She felt the pain of a tremendous tug, which seemed to tear her body in two. She was dimly aware that somebody was shouting to her, and lowering himself down the cañon wall toward her. A strong arm went round her. Slowly, she was pulled from the water, which fought and wrestled for her. She knew that her rescuer was working laboriously up the cliff face with her. Then her perceptions were blurred.

“I’ll never make it this way,” the man told himself, aloud, as he stopped, panting, half-way up.

In fact, he had come to an *impasse*. Even without the burden of her weight, the sheer, smooth wall rose insurmountably above. There was only one thing to do, and he did it. Leaving her unconscious body in a sort of trough, formed by the meeting of two strata of rock, he retraced his steps, worked toward the left, and so reached the top, after a bit of stiff climbing. Here he found, as he had expected, his cow pony, with its feet braced and the rope taut. From experience of many a roped steer, old Baldy had learned that the first rule was to bear hard on the rope. It took but a minute for the powerful young man to draw up the girl and put her on the grass. When Wilma recovered consciousness, it was to look into his troubled face, as he bent over her.

“Bob!” she murmured, in faint surprise. “Where am I!”

But her eyes were already answering her own question. They took in the rope under her arms, and followed it to the horn of the saddle, around which the other end was tied. Back they came to the brown, weather-beaten face that looked down into hers.

“You saved my life, Bob,” she said.

“Not me, Wilma. Old Baldy did it. I could never ’a’ got you out alone. When I roped you, he backed off same as if you had been a steer, and pulled for all there was in him. Between us, we got you up.”

“Good old Baldy!” She let it go at that, for a moment, while she thought it out. “If you hadn’t been right here, Bob——” She finished her sentence with a shudder.

She could not guess how that thought stabbed him, for he replied cheerfully: “I heard you call, and we came on the jump—old Baldy and me.”

She covered her face with her hands, and shuddered again. “Oh, Bob, it was awful!” She began to give way to short, staccato sobs.

Bob Marcy put an arm around her shoulders, and soothed her gently, as he had been wont to do with a nervous horse. “Don’t you mind, Wilma. It’s all past now. Forget it, little girl.”

“It was like some tremendous wild beast—a thousand times more powerful and greedy than a grizzly! And it leaped at me, and—oh, if you hadn’t been here, Bob!”

She caught at his hand with both of hers, and clung to it.

“If a fellow sticks around enough, he is sure to come in handy some time,” answered Bob lightly.

“I don’t know what I would ever do without you,” she cried, a little hysterically. “You run my ranch for me; you take all the trouble of it from me.”

“That’s what a major-domo is for,” he told her.

“You’re the best friend I’ve got,” she went on. “I want you always to be my friend, no matter what happens. Don’t let anything come between us.”

“I’ll be your friend, all right, all right, Wilma. And I reckon there won’t anything come between us, little girl.”

She did not answer him at once, but, with his help, arose, and slipped the rope from her waist. She was still a little unsteady on her feet, and leaned on him while she crossed to the white-faced broncho which had helped to save her life. She put her arms around the pony's neck and relieved her overstrained nerves by beginning to cry softly into its mane.

Marcy wisely left her to herself, and began to wind up the lariat. Presently, she recovered her composure, and began to gentle the horse.

"You helped him to save my life, Baldy. Even he couldn't have done it without you. How can I ever pay you for it?"

Her foreman had an inspiration. "He's yours from this minute, Wilma. You can pay him by taking him for your saddle hawss. Old Baldy will never ride on the round-up again. We'll give him a heroism medal. He's earned a good-service pension that keeps him from rough work."

Without looking at him, the girl answered gently: "Thank you, Bob. I know I'm taking from you the best company in Arizona, but I can't help it."

"A cow pony is a cow pony, but a broncho that saves the life of the cattle queen of the Noches country is a hero, ma'am."

"And what about the man who saves her life?"

"Oh, sho! I didn't do nothin' to speak of. We'll forget that."

Still she did not look at him. "I won't. I'll never forget, not so long as I live. Bob!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I've got something to tell you."

He waited for her to speak, but she seemed to find a difficulty in beginning. When she did find words, it was to pave the way.

"You spoke of something coming between us. Nothing can, unless you let it."

"Then we're *tillicums* to the end, for I'm not going to let anything come between us," he told her, with cheerful confidence.

"I—I'm going to be married!" she blurted.

Wilma did not need to look at him to know that he was hard hit. She felt that she had struck at the heart of her friend with a knife.

"When, Wilma?" he asked, after a long moment's silence.

“I don’t just know. Next week, or the week after, I think. Lieutenant Fordham should reach San Francisco this week. He is on the *City of Seattle*, and it is due about Saturday.”

She stole a little look of pity at him, for she was very tender of heart toward this slim, brown man, who for years had stood between her and all annoyances. His steel-gray eyes were fixed on the distant Galiuros, but what he might be thinking she did not know.

“I’m waiting to hear you wish me joy, Bob,” she said gently.

“Little Boss, I wish you all the joy there is in the world,” he said, quite as gently, looking straight at her.

“But you don’t believe I’ll get it,” she reproached.

“You’d get it if I could bring it about.”

“You can help. Be friends with Lieutenant Fordham.”

He busied himself about tightening the saddle girth.

“You don’t like him, Bob—you know you don’t like him. You never did,” she accused.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why don’t you? I didn’t think you would be so narrow. He never did you any harm, did he?”

“No, he never did me any harm.”

“Then why don’t you like him? I want to know why.”

He had been looking again at the blue hill line, but he brought his gaze back to her at this. “I’ll tell *him* why, if you like, after he gets here, Wilma.”

“Do you know anything against him?”

He hesitated for a moment. “No, I don’t *know* anything against him. Put it that I’m jealous, Wilma, and let it go at that.”

“You can’t be friends with me and not with him,” she warned.

“Then I’ll certainly have to try and be friends with him,” he said, smiling. “You feeling all right now, Wilma?”

“Yes—I’m all right.” Impulsively, she put a hand on his arm, and looked up into the sun-baked, masterful face. “I don’t want to lose you, Bob. We’ve been good partners all these years, haven’t we?” she asked, with the faintest tremolo in her voice.

“Sure we have, Little Boss, and we’re going to keep on being.” He took her little hands in his big, strong ones. “You ain’t losing me. I ain’t ever told you, but you know I care a heap for you. I’m going to go right on caring, no matter who marries you. If he don’t like it, I can’t help it.”

She nodded happily. “He won’t care. He’ll be glad you do—and so will I. You’re like my big brother. There isn’t any one in the world I trust like you.”

“That’s good hearing.”

“And now, how are we going to get home?”

“You’re going to ride, and I’m going to walk,” he told her.

Her eyes dilated, for this brought to her mind something which she had forgotten. “Oh, Bob! My pinto! Do you think there is any chance that it may be alive?”

He shook his head, as he helped her to the saddle. His eyes fell on a stain of red, running down from the wrist of her gauntlet. Perhaps he was not unwilling to divert her from the subject that was troubling her.

“You’ve hurt your hand,” he cried.

“It must have been when I caught at the cactus. I hadn’t noticed it till a minute ago.”

He took her hand, and gently slipped off the leather glove. The cruel thorns had torn the flesh in a dozen places; he drew them out one by one. Wilma winced, but set her teeth to stand the pain without crying out. After he had taken out the last of the thorns, he tied her handkerchief around the hand, and carefully drew the gauntlet on again.

“That will have to do till we reach the ranch,” he said, with his sympathetic smile. “You’ll have to game it out till then, partner.”

She guided the pony with her left hand, while he strode beside it, with the easy grace which was the expression of his sinuous strength. They were ten miles from the Map of Texas, but he kept the pace without apparent effort, never wavering from that steady, powerful stride.

“Were you ever tired in your life?” she asked once, with a little sigh.

He stopped at once, full of self-reproach. “Now, ain’t that like me! Pluggin’ ahead, and never thinking about you. Of course you’re plumb wore out, with all you’ve been through. We’ll rest here under those cottonwoods.”

He lifted her down, for she was already very stiff and sore from her adventure. Her outdoor life had given her a supple strength and a wiry endurance, of which her delicate rose color furnished no indication, but the reaction from the strain was upon her. She looked pathetically white and exhausted to her foreman, whose heart was full of contrition. In the pleasant sun glow, she fell asleep, without any intention of doing so; and it was two hours later that she opened her eyes.

Looking round, she saw Marcy lying flat on his back, fifty yards away. "I've been asleep," she called.

He leaped to his feet, and walked across the sand to her. "I suspected it," he said, with a smile.

"I feel like a new woman, now."

"Like one of them suffragettes?"

"You know that isn't what I mean. I'm myself again. Funny how a little hardship took it out of me so much! If you're ready, we'll start for home, Bob."

An hour later, they reached the ranch. Bob got his mail, and retired to the foreman's adobe cottage. One of his letters, too, was postmarked the Philippines. It was from his cousin, Tim Ballard, a sergeant in Lieutenant Fordham's company, announcing that the regiment was ordered home. One short paragraph of it had the effect of clamping Marcy's lean jaw like a vise.

I hear "Rotter" Fordham is leaving in the transport ahead of us, to get married at once. If he's going to marry that pretty little girl that owns the Map of Texas, it's a damned outrage. You ought to tell her he's a scoundrel, Bob. Of course, it's none of my biz, but I'll wise you to one thing—he ain't on the square. You can most always tell when an officer is the right sort by the way the men feel toward him. We all detest this fellow, for fair. But that ain't what I'm getting at now. Rumors have leaked down from the officers' mess that I can't prove, but that are sure true. It seems he was treasurer of a fund for the benefit of the families of any officers in the regiment that might be killed. He got to gambling, and squandered it. When this was discovered, of course, the deuce was to pay. He saved himself by getting his people at home to dig up. They did it by mortgaging their home, the story goes.

When Marcy read this, he vowed that there was one girl at home whom Fordham should never marry. This letter merely confirmed the suspicions of the man's unreliability which he had always entertained. While at the Arizona post, this lieutenant had contracted debts which had hung on for years without settlement. Bob had heard a vague story, too, of how Fordham had robbed a settler in the Santa Rita mountains by winning his confidence and getting his money to buy mining stock which he knew to be worthless. But who the victim was, he had never discovered.

If the man's marriage to Wilma were to be prevented, his character must be laid bare to her by proof. The trouble was that Marcy had nothing but suspicions to go on. He knew his little mistress too well to go to her with suspicions which he could not back. The only way to shake her trust in Fordham would be to bring overwhelming proof of the latter's unworthiness. Until he could do that, he was resolved to keep them apart, at any cost. For it would be like Wilma, in her hot resentment of any disloyal thought to the man she loved, to marry him first, and ask questions afterward.



CHAPTER II

SHANGHAIED

LIEUTENANT FORDHAM drew a deep breath of pleasure as the *City of Seattle* plowed straight forward through the Golden Gate. His long exile was at an end. There before him lay home—God’s country—and the girl who was counting the hours until he should be with her. He knew perfectly well that Wilma Wescott idealized him.

There were some pages in his past which must stay blotted out. Even as a young man, he had been careless about money matters, and the tendency had grown on him. At the Point he had once come very near to getting expelled, by reason of a borrowing episode, which even he had recognized as pretty shady business. He was lucky that Wilma had not heard about that Tucker affair of the mining stock. He had just finished putting an ocean between himself and another of these “mistakes,” as he called them. He would take precious good care it never reached the ears of his intended.

Anyhow, he meant to pay back his sister the loan she had advanced. Once married, he promised himself, he would be as scrupulous as the old colonel of the regiment himself.

Fordham tramped the deck lightly, carrying himself with the jaunty ease which West Point had given him. Beside him walked a young woman who does not come into this story; she had been merely a pleasant acquaintance of the voyage. There had reached her ears a story of his defalcation of some regimental trust fund; but she had felt that, even if it were true, one ought to pass a light sentence on a repentant sinner.

“You look happy,” she told him, now, with a keen little glance. “I wonder why.”

“Do your wondering out loud,” he suggested smiling in his meaning, indolent fashion.

“These are the first symptoms I have noticed, but—you aren’t by any chance going home to be married, are you?” She flashed it at him so suddenly that he told the truth instantly.

“By happy chance, I am.”

“Tell me about her,” she commanded.

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll show you her picture.”

What she looked at was the photograph of a high-spirited girl, with dusky long-lashed eyes, beneath which lay softly indicated shadows. The features were piquant and finely chiseled, and the modeling of the half profile from ear to chin somehow suggested the lean lines of a gallant race horse. Dark hair, soft as corn silk, parted over the forehead and waved down in ripples. Not smiling, but just ready for it, the girl seemed vibrant, impulsive as a boy, but tender as a woman—a creature of unsuspected depths of passion.

The young woman looking at the picture was herself a fine type of American girl. Her first thought was: “She is too good for him.” But this was swiftly effaced by the more generous decision that perhaps a fine wife was what this weak young fellow needed to ballast his lack of moral power.

“She is very charming, lieutenant. I congratulate you.”

“I congratulate myself. She is too good for me,” was Fordham’s reply.

Three hours later, the lieutenant said good-by to his acquaintance as he stepped down the gangway to the custom-house wharf; and she passed at once out of his life. It took the young man some time to pass the customs, and arrange about having his baggage sent through to Tucson. By this time it was dark, and a misty rain was falling.

A street loafer volunteered to go out into the wet, and get a cab for him. The lieutenant nodded, and, upon the man’s return, gave him a quarter.

“Occidental Hotel,” he said to the cabman as he got in.

The door was shut by the street loafer after he had been tipped, and the cab drove off. Fordham did not know San Francisco very well; besides, the mist fogged the windows so that he could see nothing. Some twenty minutes later the cab stopped and the door opened.

As Fordham stepped down, he was surprised to see before him a dark wharf against which the waves were lapping. Before he could speak something heavy crashed upon his head and dazed him. He was thrown, gagged, and dragged into a building on the wharf. Here he was stripped of his uniform, and dressed in the dirty slops of a longshoreman; after which he was handcuffed and dragged to a boat, which lay at the end of the wharf. Into this he was pitched.

By this time he was beginning to recover from his daze, but it was too late for him to offer any effectual resistance.

A seaman was at the oars, and, as soon as the street bum had stepped in, he pulled out into the mist. Presently a ship's side loomed hazily through the fog. To this the boatman pulled. A rope was flung down from the ship, and Fordham was hauled up as though he had been a bale of hay. His captor followed.

"What does this mean?" the army officer demanded of the first man he saw on the deck.

The man grinned at him. He was a big, thick-set figure, whom Fordham took to be the captain. "It means you've shipped for a cruise, son," he said.

"That's a lie," cried the victim wildly. "I'm Lieutenant Fordham, of the Seventh——"

The big man nodded to a couple of sailors, as he interrupted calmly: "Don't use such language, or you'll get the rope's end, my hearty. Below with him."

The sailors seized Fordham, dragged him to the companionway, and pushed him down the steep ladder into the hold. He fought furiously, but to no avail; for the men who held him were big Swedes, with iron muscles toughened by years of hard labor. They propelled him forward, and into a cubby-hole of a storeroom, which they locked on the outside.

Meanwhile the captain and the man who had trepanned Fordham drew to one side. A roll of bills was transferred to the pocket of the former from that of the latter.

"Understand, captain—I don't want this man hurt. He is to be kept out of the way for a couple of weeks. That's all. I'm paying you to take good care of him."

"That's all right, sport. I'll give him a high old time. He'll be a first-cabin passenger, and don't you forget it. We'll give him the best the *Mariposa's* got, and learn him a heap." The man winked at his mate as he spoke, but the landsman did not catch the wink.

"That's all right, then. So-long, captain."

The street vagrant returned to the boat, and was pulled ashore. After feeing the boatman, he disappeared into the mist. At once he shook off the crouch and shuffle which he had assumed, then tossed from him the goggles and the scraggy mustache which concealed his face.

“That ought to hold Lieutenant Fordham for a couple of weeks. By that time we’ll be right ready to give him the surprise of his life, when he turns up for that ‘Welcome, home!’ he’s banking on,” he said aloud, to the fog which encompassed him.

Meanwhile Lieutenant Fordham lay locked in the small room into which he had been thrust. His first fury had given way to a serious unease. What could it mean? Was he to be taken out from land, and murdered? But, if so, to serve what purpose? It was not possible that he had been trepanned, as he had heard stories of drunken seamen being shanghaied, merely to fill the ship’s roll of seamen.

He remained for hours among ill-smelling ropes and oils, while the ship plunged forward into the choppy seas outside the harbor. Toward morning he fell asleep and was awakened by a flash of light which proved to be a lantern in the hand of a sailor standing in the doorway.

“Step lively, mate. You’re to go on deck with me.”

Fordham followed the seaman up the steps to the deck and looked about him. One glance showed him that they were well out from the harbor; for only one or two ships were to be seen, and these on the distant horizon. The ship was a three-masted schooner and she was slipping forward on a freshening wind like a foxhound on a hare’s scent.

A thick-set, powerful figure paced to and fro on the quarter-deck, occasionally bellowing an order in a voice like a bull’s roar. The captain was getting canvas set for the fresh breeze of the open sea, which was catching him astern; and the sailors were jumping to obey his orders. The pounding of sails and the singing of cordage would have told Fordham that the ship was scudding fast, even if the heeling of the schooner and her forward leaps had not made it plain.

“By God, she’s walking, Tom!” he heard the captain call to his mate.

Fordham stepped across the deck, and confronted the skipper. “Are you the captain of this ship?” he demanded angrily.

The captain stood with feet wide apart and grinned. “You guessed it right first shot, sport. Anything I can do for you?”

“What does this outrage mean? I am an officer of the United States Army, and I’ll make you pay dear for this.”

“You look like an officer of the U. S. Army,” returned the red-faced ruffian, still grinning impudently at him. “I’ll tell you what you are. You’re a

drunken beachcomber, signed up as a seaman on the *Mariposa* for the voyage. Get that?"

"It's a lie!"

The captain's gnarled fist shot out, and Fordham went backward, as though he had been kicked by a mule.

"That's twice you've told me that," bellowed the seaman. "Now, tell me again, if you want some more of my fist to eat."

But Fordham lay quite still. The captain beckoned to a sailor and ordered him to draw up a bucket of water and throw it over him. Under the shock of this the lieutenant shivered back to life.

But when he had gathered his dazed wits together, he decided not to open again the discussion with the captain. He had plenty of courage, but he knew that the cards were, for the present, stacked against him. He would wait for a new deal.

His chance came later in the day, when a tramp freighter passed the *Mariposa*. At the time, Fordham was working on a windlass with another man. He saw that the two ships were going to pass within a hundred yards of each other. Swiftly, he stooped, unlaced his shoes, and kicked them off.

"What's up, mate?" the sailor asked, in surprise.

For answer, the lieutenant jumped to the ship's rail, and steadied himself by a rope.

"Ship ahoy! Man overboard!" he shouted, and at the next instant he had flung off his coat, and dived into the blue Pacific.

He had timed his dive nicely. The *Mariposa* could not at once turn from her course and come about, but the advancing steamer slowed down, and lowered a boat. Fordham was a good swimmer, and ten minutes later he was hauled aboard the steamer's cutter. Its captain met him as he landed, dripping on the deck.

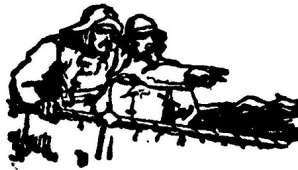
"What in heaven did you jump for, man?" he demanded.

"Because I've been shanghaied. I'm a lieutenant in the United States Army, and those crimps knocked me on the head, and took me aboard. Look at my hands, sir. Are they those of a common seaman? Examine my underwear, and the initials on it. The W. F. stands for Wallace Fordham. Do sailors before the mast wear silk hose?"

The captain heard, and believed. Nevertheless, he waited to hear the other side of the story; for one of the boats of the *Mariposa* had already been lowered, and was shooting across the waters toward them. But the story put up by the mate of that schooner was so lame that the captain of the steamer had little hesitation in refusing to give up Fordham. He was perhaps impelled to this partly by the sentiment of his passengers, all of whom were in sympathy with the man who had dared to plunge into the sea to regain his liberty.

Next morning, Wallace Fordham was again in San Francisco. He sent a telegram to Wilma, telling her that he had been shanghaied, but was now safe. Also, he gave his story to the newspapers, all of which played it up on the front page. In this he committed an indiscretion; for a passenger on the Coast Line special, just arriving in Los Angeles, bought a morning paper, and read an Associated Press dispatch, telling of the shanghaiing of a United States officer. He had intended to leave at once for Tucson, but, after reading the story, he changed his mind.

“I think I’ll wait here for Lieutenant Fordham,” he told himself, with a grin.



CHAPTER III

BUCKY O'CONNOR

LIEUTENANT BUCKY O'CONNOR, of the Arizona Rangers, whistled softly as he moved to and fro about his packing. His blue Irish eyes were warm with anticipation of the pleasure in store for him. Within six hours he would have three pairs of soft arms about his neck. He was quite sure that never man had such a wife and such children as his.

Bucky had earned the vacation upon which he was about to enter. For six months he had been hard at work, patrolling the border, running down rustlers, and putting bad men out of business. There had been nights by his lonely camp fire when he had lain awake and lived his holiday in advance. Now, at last, he was to enjoy it in reality. He finished buckling the straps of his suit case, and looked around, to make sure that there was nothing he had missed. At this moment the telephone bell rang.

He stepped to the receiver, called "Hello!" and was presently talking over the long-distance wire to Bob Marcy.

"I can't do it, Bob. My vacation begins to-day. You'll have to get somebody else," the lieutenant said, after he had heard what was wanted of him.

"Nobody else will suit Miss Wescott, Bucky. She's read a good deal about your skill. Now, you've got to make good. This fellow that's missing is a close friend of hers. Put your vacation off for two weeks, and look into this for her. Be a good fellow, now."

In the end, Bucky gave way. He was under obligations to Marcy for having pulled him out of the Colorado, once, when it was in flood. Besides, Bob was his friend, and had the call on his services. One hour later he took the train for Tucson.

Marcy was waiting for him at the station when Bucky swung down from the coach. Bob grinned, and hit him a tremendous thump on the back. They had been side partners in their old punching days on the Hash-knife; they had been bunkies in the late Cuban unpleasantness, in a company of Teddy's Pets. Each of them knew that the other would go the route.

Bucky was an officer in the Rangers, and Bob was foreman of the biggest ranch in the Noches country. Respectable men both, so far as surface indications showed; soft of speech, and hunting trouble from no man. But at bottom each of them was of that frontier type which believes that the law must be kept only when it does not run counter to justice. They played the game to the limit, and, if it were a desperate one, always with fair play, an amiable grin, and no malice to the opponent. If necessary, each could kill, with unhurried, confident regret.

“I knew you’d show up, old hawss,” said Bob, by way of greeting.

“Yes, I always was a durned idiot,” O’Connor agreed cheerfully. “What’s the row, anyhow? Howcome it you’ve lost a gent with shoulder straps?”

“I ain’t lost him any,” sighed the foreman. “I sure wouldn’t miss him till Gabriel toots his horn in the mo’ning. It’s my boss. She’s for the coyote strong, and she wants you to return him with care, right side up.”

“You used a word, Bob. It goes, does it?” Bucky let his innocent blue eyes travel casually over his friend’s face.

“It goes. He’s a man, Bucky—no quitter, mind you. But he sure did frame up the deck on my little boss. He ain’t on the level, Bucky; and he’s made her think he’s about the finest thing that walks. I figure it out that she’s entitled to know him for just what he is. That’s a point I’m expectin’ to prove, one of these days. Yes, ‘coyote’ goes.”

“If he ain’t dead, you aim to prove it,” Bucky corrected.

“Oh, he ain’t dead a little bit. No such luck.”

“You know that, do you?”

“ ’Course I don’t *know* it. I don’t *know* Miss Wilma’s sittin’ in a surrey, back of the depot, waitin’ for us. Mebbe she’s eloped with an English dook since I left her, but I don’t figure it’s likely. Same way with Fordham. He ain’t the kind to croak this early in the game. Consequence is, I figure he ain’t croaked. You can bet a house and lot in Tombstone that I’m right, too, son.”

Bucky was led to a rig, in which sat a young woman with more than her share of good looks. She gave him one businesslike glance as they shook hands at the introduction then suggested that he jump in and go with them to the hotel. It was not until they were in a private room that she introduced the

matter upon which she had sent for him. Bucky observed with approval that she came to it as frankly and as directly as would a man.

“I want you to find Lieutenant Fordham. I am engaged to be married to him, and he has disappeared. He has met with foul play, somehow.”

“You have evidence of that?” questioned Bucky mildly.

She produced two telegrams, and spread them on the table before him. The ranger looked them over, and observed that they were dated on the seventeenth and the nineteenth, respectively. They were from San Francisco.

Just passed the Golden Gate. Expect to get ashore to-night.

So read the first, which had been sent by wireless from the bay, and transferred to the wires at a San Francisco station. The second was longer.

Have been shanghaied, but escaped. Details later. Am coming right through.

Leave Los Angeles to-morrow night twenty-second on Sunrise Limited. Reach Tucson Saturday 6:30 A. M. I'm wigwagging the old story.

The messages had the name of Wallace Fordham at the bottom, but it occurred to Bucky to ask a question.

“Have you any proof that these messages were really sent by him, Miss Wescott?”

She hoisted the red flag again, but looked directly at him.

“Yes. He used to wigwag me from the fort. That's what the reference means. Nobody knew that he did; it was a secret. Besides, he was seen on the Sunrise Limited, later, by several people who knew him by sight.”

“Then it is sure he started from Los Angeles. That limits the field of search. How much farther can we limit it?”

“He was last seen about eleven o'clock Friday night, as he retired to his berth. The porter is quite sure about the time. When he went to call him in the morning, so that he could rise in time to get off at Tucson, the berth was empty. He thought at first Lieutenant Fordham must be in the dressing room, but it turned out he was not. A search showed that he was not on the train.”

“How many stops did the train make during the night?”

“That brings us to the mystery. It didn’t stop once. It’s a through train, and takes up water as it goes. Between eleven o’clock and five-thirty in the morning, the time he was called, the limited had not stopped once.”

“That reduces the chances to three. Either he threw himself from the train, was thrown from it, or was on the train when it reached Tucson.”

“He was not on the train. It was searched thoroughly before it reached here. Besides, how could he have been on it? He would have got off here, of course.”

“Has the track been examined between here and the place where the train was, about eleven o’clock the night before?”

“The porter remembers that the train was passing through Mesa when the lieutenant retired. Every foot of the track between that place and Tucson has been gone over thoroughly. No body has been found, and no sign of a place where a body might have fallen—though, of course, that isn’t proof that it didn’t fall.” It was Marcy who spoke.

“I feel sure Lieutenant Fordham has not been killed,” said Wilma, in a low voice. “And I am equally sure he did not kill himself. He is not that kind of man.”

“You don’t know of any possible reason why he might have wished to hide himself, or disappear, Miss Wescott?” asked the ranger.

“No—there could be no such reason,” the girl answered indignantly.

“Or any reason why any body should wish to get rid of him?”

“No.”

Bucky hesitated an instant before he plunged into his next question. “You have other admirers besides Lieutenant Fordham, Miss Wescott?”

A faint color came into her cheeks. She looked at the ranger in a doubt which might easily become resentment. But his quiet eyes met hers without the hint of knowingness or impudence. Evidently, he sought information merely to clear up the situation.

“Must we discuss that?”

“I think we must. It is necessary to look at all the possibilities and all the motives. I’m going to ask another private question. Was your marriage to Lieutenant Fordham to have been soon?”

“Next week.”

“So, if any body had any interest in preventing it, he would have had to move at this time.”

Wilma shook her head decisively. “No. None of—of my friends are villains.”

“Still, if you don’t mind, I shall have to ask for a list of them. If for no other reason, than that we may clear them of complicity.”

Wilma did not look at her foreman, but that young man knew that she was embarrassed partially on his account. With a smile, he came to the rescue.

“I expect I can furnish that list, Bucky. Most of the boys on the Map of Texas are on it. So’s their foreman.”

Bucky detected the faintest beginning of a dimple in Miss Wescott’s cheek, and knew that the danger point was past. He put an arm across his friend’s shoulder, and laughed aloud.

“I expect Bob is the guilty man, ma’am. Shall I arrest him for you, right now?”

“Don’t you need some evidence?” she asked, with a little sidelong glance at her foreman.

“Suspicious character, ma’am. I ought to know, seeing that I used to frolic with him in couples when I was a youngster.”

“Then you must arrest yourself, too,” she laughed. But the laughter died almost instantly from her face, and she added quickly: “I depend on you to find Lieutenant Fordham. Don’t spare any expense, please; and let me know whenever you have a clue. Remember that I shall want to hear all about what you find out, at once.”

Bucky nodded. “I suppose you came in to Tucson to meet Lieutenant Fordham, you and Bob?”

“I came to meet the train, but Bob was in Los Angeles with a trainload of cattle we had sent out from the ranch. He got back next day,” the young woman explained.

Not by the flicker of an eyelid did Bucky show that this news interested him. Nevertheless, it did interest him mightily. Certain facts and conjectures grouped themselves in his mind as bearing, at least, a possible relation. If Lieutenant Fordham left San Francisco on the nineteenth, he must have

reached Los Angeles on the twentieth. What was he doing in that interval of two days, before he left the latter city?

Bob Marcy was a rival of the lieutenant. He disliked and distrusted him, and—he was the kind of man who would go a long way to prevent the woman he loved marrying a scoundrel. The question was—had he traveled that distance, or part of it? He would stick to the primal ultimate code of the fighting man, but within that code he would go the limit—perhaps even to homicide, if necessary—once he had convinced himself of the rough justice of his course.

It would be like him, too, if he were guilty, to send for the best officer available, and watch him go to the task of ferreting out the criminal, always with that irrepressible twinkle in his quiet eyes. There was nothing too audacious for Bob Marcy to do, after he had set himself to it.

This passed through the ranger's mind while he chatted quietly with Wilma, letting his innocent eyes travel smilingly toward Bob from time to time. It was not until they had left the mistress of the ranch, and were walking back to talk with the station agent, that Bucky touched casually on the subject.

“So you've been to Los Angeles, Bob?”

“That's what you heard my boss say.”

“I suppose you didn't run up to Frisco while you were on the coast, to see the Kid Moffatt fight.”

Marcy let his eyes twinkle for an instant upon his friend. “Are you asking that in your official capacity, or jest to pass the time o' day, Bucky?”

O'Connor laughed. “I'll withdraw the question if it's a leading one.”

Bob lit a cigar before he answered. “No need to do that, Bucky. You're welcome to the information. I was in Frisco, and I didn't have time to take in the scrap.”

He tossed off the news with a smiling, debonair jauntiness which invited his friend to make the most of it and go to the devil.

Bucky met his smile with another, equally devil-may-care. “Did you have time to take in the shanghaiing, Bob?”

Their eyes met steadily, dancing gayly; but in both pairs was a hint of something relentless, something indomitable. Both understood that a challenge had been given and accepted.

“Ain’t it up to you to find that out for your own self, Bucky?” asked Bob pleasantly.

“I reckon it is, Bob. Well, no hard feelings.”

“Sure not. Go to it. Mebbe you think I’m the white-haired lad that roped this lieutenant coyote, and mebbe you can make it stick. I got no kick coming; only, I reckon I won’t talk for publication any more, son.”

“What in Mexico did you send for me to take this case for, anyhow? Think I’m going to enjoy sending you up to Yuma for about ’steen years?”

“This is my boss’ show. She wanted you, so I got you. Seems like she just had to find out howcome this Fordham to leak out of the landscape. And while we’re on the subject, I’ll put up a little bet that there’ll be a heap o’ dust kicked up on the Yuma road before I travel it with your bracelets on, Bucky,” the foreman answered calmly.

“If that’s only a bluff, I hope you get away with it,” the ranger said, as they turned in to the station.

Marcy grinned. “You can’t tell whether it’s a bluff till you get the right cards to call it.”

“I may get ’em, Bob. I notice aces coming my way in the deal.”

With which, enough having been said, they dismissed the subject and passed fraternally into the office of the agent.



CHAPTER IV

A LEAK IN THE LANDSCAPE

BUCKY carefully drew nothing of importance from the agent in the presence of Marcy, but he took occasion to return alone, later in the day, and satisfy himself on one or two points.

The first was that a thorough search of the train had been made at Tucson. The agent was certain that the missing man had not got off at that city, and he was equally certain that Fordham had not remained on the train. He dropped casually the information that the limited had made a special stop at Papago—a water tank, some few miles beyond Tucson, to let off a sick man, who had been accompanied from Los Angeles by a friend.

Five days later, Bucky took the limited on its westward trip. The train crew was the same that had been in charge at the time when Fordham had disappeared. From the Pullman car conductor Bucky learned the names of all the people who had berths in the car on the trip between Los Angeles and Tucson. It appeared that the stateroom had been occupied by the invalid and his friend who had got off at Papago. It had been engaged in the name of Samuel Slack. The sick man had been so weak that he had kept his room all the time. Meals had been served for him in the stateroom.

“What kind of a looking fellow was he?” Bucky asked.

“I didn’t get a right good look at him. He was all bundled up from the night air when he came into the car, and he was bundled up same way when he left. It was still kinder nippy when we pulled into Papago, and I reckon he didn’t want to take any chances of catching cold. A lunger, with one foot in the grave, I figured him out to be.”

“And his companion?”

“He was a big, husky, red-headed guy with a long, yellow mustache. I didn’t notice him very particularly. Most of the time he stayed in the stateroom with his sick friend.”

“What time did you go to bed the night before you reached Tucson?”

“Must have been about one o’clock I guess.”

“And the porter kept watch the balance of the night?”

“Yes. That’s his duty.”

“From where he sat, could he have seen without trouble any body going into or coming out of Lieutenant Fordham’s berth?”

“Yes. It was near the other end of the car, but he could have seen, all right.”

“Who slept above Fordham?”

“The upper wasn’t occupied. We didn’t have a very full car.”

“And in the morning you found the window of his berth just as it had been the night before?”

“That’s right. There was a double screen in it, like the porter left it. All the windows of the car were the same way.”

“Which goes to show that he didn’t throw himself out of any of them,” concluded Bucky.

“It goes to show nobody else threw him out, either. Of course it ain’t proof; but I want to tell you that by the time any body had opened a window, taken out a screen, thrown the body out, put back the screen, and closed the window, all in the little space there is in a berth, somebody must have wakened up and heard the noise.”

“You think, then, that they dragged him into the vestibule, pulled up the trap, and flung him down the steps,” suggested the ranger.

“I don’t think anything,” the conductor answered doggedly. “How could they do that, with the porter sitting right there in the aisle, and both doors of the car locked? No, sir—I give it up! If I believed in spirits, I’d think the devil got him and sent him through the roof in smoke, the way they do it in the moving-picture plays. All I know is this—he didn’t go out through a window; he didn’t go through a door; and he wasn’t on the train next morning. So there you are. Go to it, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, of Arizona.”

Bucky thought of the phrase which Bob Marcy had used, and drawled aloud, with a smile: “He must have jest natcherally leaked out of the landscape.”

“I’ll swear it looks like it, lieutenant. Of course, I know he didn’t; but, then, I know, too, it ain’t reasonable to think he could have got out any other way.”

Bucky drifted back to the rear of the car, and sat down beside the porter on the back seat. For a few minutes they chatted easily on whatever topics

came uppermost in their minds. Gradually, Bucky directed the subject toward the matter which interested him; and Mr. Jim Budd, porter, began to tell what he knew, under the gentle compulsion of this young man's friendly questions. He told all that he could remember about his passengers on the last eastbound trip. Those that lived most vividly in his memory were the ones who had been most generous of tips.

"I tell you, colonel, the gen'l'man in the stateroom was a prince. He done cut a five-dollar bill in two when we lef' Los Angeles, and told me he'd gimme the other half when we reach Papago, if I'd leave him and his sick friend alone till he rang for me, and then come a-jumpin'. I done carried his meals in to the sick gen'l'man. He suttently ate a heap for so sick a man, too."

Thus Jim discoursed, unaware that this gay and irresponsible youth beside him was taking in every word with avidity.

"And when was it you fell asleep that night, Jim—about three in the mo'ning?" the ranger asked presently.

The porter turned reproachful eyes on him. "Me! I never done fell asleep, Colonel Bucky! I ain't de kin' to fall asleep on duty. No, sah! My eyes was a-starin' wide open all night—honest, they was."

Bucky dropped a hand pleasantly on the negro's shoulder, and laughed. "Tell that to the company, Jim. But just between you and me, don't you sometimes take forty winks?"

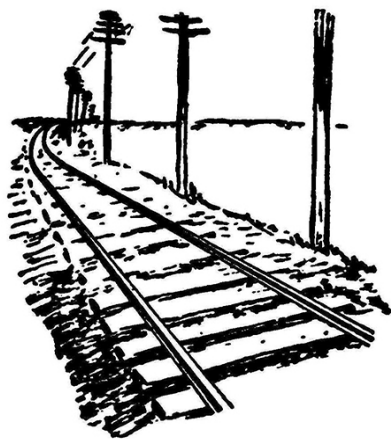
"No, sah!" Budd shook his head indignantly. "I wouldn't sleep on duty. Now, that's the straight goods, colonel."

Nevertheless, Bucky took the liberty to doubt privately. He dropped a dollar into Jim's hand to refresh his memory.

"Co'se I didn't sleep—not what you could call sleep—but I might 'a' jes' took a nap with my eyes open, you un'erstan'. I say I might 'a' done it, but I don't recomember that I did."

"It doesn't matter if you did, Jim; I reckon you're entitled to sleep somewhere on the line between Los Angeles and Chicago."

With which Bucky left him, to have a talk with the train conductor. At Maricopa he had the limited stop to let him off. A few hours later he took a freight back and passed through Tucson in the night. The gray of early morning was beginning to tinge the sky when he dropped off at Papago.



CHAPTER V

BUCKY CUTS AN OLD TRAIL

FROM BUCKY'S feet the ground swell fell away in waves which lost themselves in an ocean of space, until the hilltops huddled into the undulant skyline. Only where the setting sun was sinking brilliantly into a saddle between two purple peaks, did the unfeared gulf find any barrier. Here mountains had struck root, and rose in sharp acclivity from the foothills.

Toward these O'Connor had been riding all day. Now, his field glasses were focused upon them. For somewhere in that rock wall, he believed, there was a gateway through which men had passed, with Wallace Fordham as their prisoner.

Los Animas Cañon it was called, and through it ran a precipitous trail to the Los Animas peaks. Somewhere in this untrodden region, Fordham and his captors had disappeared. So, at least, Bucky suspected; and he was bent on testing his theory. Many men knew vaguely of this cañon, but few peace lovers had trodden its crooked paths. The gossip of the country spoke of it in whispers, and, apart from its evil reputation, nature had hedged it about. Secret were the ways in, almost impassable in winter, difficult at all seasons. This was the one part of Arizona which Bucky did not know like a thumbed book, and this even though most of his work had been on the border.

The ranger lowered his glasses reluctantly. "Must be near, if my map's anyways right. That's surely Point o' Rocks over there, and the cañon opens up opposite it. I reckon I'll have to go higher," he said aloud, after the manner of men who live much alone with vast horizons.

Lifting himself to the saddle he headed for Point o' Rocks. From its west face, this was a cone thrust skyward; but, taken from the plains side, a ridge buttressed it, making possible a scramble hold for the pony to the very foot of the rocks which gave the place its name.

Here Bucky slipped to the ground, trailing the rein, and climbed the boulders to the flat rock at the summit.

A magnificent view unfolded itself beneath the open turquoise sky, lined here and there with a cloud fleece, from which rained down a filtered sunset

light upon the tawny hilltops lying in the slumbrous haze of Arizona. But scenery was just now at a discount with the ranger. He saw only a rockrift in the wall before him—a thread which wound into the mountain's heart and lost itself there. He had but to follow that, and in time he would come to Los Animas Park—a mountain valley, hidden snugly on all sides by high peaks and ridges.

Yet, after he had descended, even with his exact knowledge of the position of the cañon's mouth, Bucky did not find it easily. One hill was a replica of another, the contour of one hollow exactly like the next. Darkness had fallen before he stumbled on the trail behind a jutting stratum of rock, which might have been a half-open gate across the narrow draw leading to the gulch.

He unsaddled and picketed, waiting for moonlight before attempting the ascent. Since there was no water for his broncho, he could not camp here. Five miles up the cañon was a grassy valley, nothing more than a widening of its bottom; and here there was water, if his map were true. He would take it easy, and go up, after a bit, by the light of the stars.

This he did, giving his sure-footed broncho the rein to pick its own way. The ascent was rough and steep, in places so bad that Bucky dismounted and walked. He judged that he had been going for something less than two hours, when the trail began to climb the wall, and came out on the plateau above the cañon. From this elevation, the peaks were visible in pale, mystic splendor, awe-inspiring in the silence which wrapped them; and the bottom of the gorge was lost in a sea of purple, which the moonlight failed to penetrate.

Before the ranger lay a saucer-shaped valley, bathed in a cold, silvery lights. Here, close at his feet, nestled the buildings of a ranch.

“Must be the Tucker place,” Bucky told himself, as he descended to it.

A gruff, lank old mountaineer, just awakened from sleep, opened to his knock, and at once invited him to spend the night, after the hospitable Western fashion.

“Had any supper?” he asked.

“Yes. I ate before I struck the cañon.”

“Ellen has gone to bed, but I'll knock you up something if you're hungry. Say the word, seh.”

“Thanks, no—I’m not a bit hungry. Just show me a place to sleep. I won’t keep you up any longer, Mr. Tucker.”

Bucky had ridden far, and he fell asleep as soon as he struck the bed. It was late when a knock aroused him, next morning. The rattle of knives and forks told him that the table was being set. He arose and dressed.

A young woman was in the dining room when he entered. She was dark, self-contained, and competent. Her features were irregular, and her mouth too large for beauty; but her fine coloring, and the soft abundance of her dark hair, went far to strike a balance in favor of good looks. Moreover, she was supple, deep-chested, and strong, moving with the long, easy stride given only to those who have an abundance of vital energy. At Bucky’s appearance in the doorway she raised her eyes and looked frankly at him, with a little bow of welcome.

“Miss Tucker, I presume. My name is O’Connor,” he said, by way of introduction.

“I have often heard of you. A friend of ours knows you well—Lyn Stott.”

“Oh, you know Lyn? Fine boy. He’s riding for the Map of Texas now, isn’t he?”

A faint access of color flowed into the girl’s cheeks. “Yes. This week he is up in the hills here, doing some assessment work on his foreman’s mining claim.”

Bucky’s casual eye was on her. “You saw him come up?” he suggested carelessly.

The flush in her cheeks deepened. “He happened to drop in on us next day.” She showed just enough self-consciousness to make it easy guessing why Lyn had happened to drop in.

“I remember Bob Marcy told me something about a prospect he has up here. Just where does it lie?”

“It is about five miles northwest of here.”

“Maybe I’ll drop in and see Lyn. He and I always hit it off pretty well. He’s a lad to tie to.”

She glanced at him shyly—a little gratefully, Bucky thought. It was easy to divine a romance, with young Stott in the rôle of hero.

At this juncture her father and her brother came in, and they sat down to breakfast. Talk ran along easily, mostly of cattle and the topics akin thereto. It was toward the close of the meal that the old rancher asked Bucky for the latest quotations on beef steers.

“We only get mail up here about onct a week,” he explained.

Bucky, not remembering, drew from his pocket a copy of the Los Angeles *Times*, which he had bought on the train. The rancher took the paper, but did not turn to the market-report page. Something had caught his gaze—something that interested him mightily. The ranger was surprised to see that all the geniality had been swept from his face. His eye gleamed frostily, and he flushed purple.

Jim Tucker looked at him curiously. “What’s the matter, dad?”

For answer, his father thrust the paper at him, with a sputtered oath. Ellen was at the moment standing behind her brother, with a plate of hot cakes. She leaned over his shoulder, and read the headlines which had disturbed her father.

LIEUT. FORDHAM VANISHES AGAIN. POLICE HAVE NO CLUE TO STRANGE MYSTERY

There was a fierce blaze in the girl’s eyes. “Oh, he’s back, is he?”

“Read it out,” ordered the father.

Jim opened the paper to read, and from inside it dropped a photograph, which, somehow, had been drawn with it from O’Connor’s pocket. Bucky arose quickly, to recover the picture, but Ellen stooped and picked it up. She was about to hand it to him when her eyes fell upon it, and fastened there. She stood panting as though she had been running; then flung it upon the table, with a hard laugh.

“By God, it’s Fordham!” her father burst out.

“Yes, it’s Fordham. You know him, I see.”

“Know him? Yes, seh, I allow we know him! About twenty-three hundred dollars’ worth,” the old man retorted.

“What are you doing with his picture, seh?” asked Jim.

“Some one gave it to me.”

“What for?”

It was Wilma who had given it to the ranger, in order that he might recognize her lover if he should see him. But Bucky preferred not to say so, just now.

“That’s a leading question, isn’t it?” he said, with a laugh.

“I know what for,” cut in Ellen swiftly. “It’s to help him recognize him. We all know Lieutenant O’Connor’s business; he has been employed to find Lieutenant Fordham. He can’t deny it.”

“Since I can’t, I won’t,” laughed Bucky. “You’ve called the turn, ma’am. It was given me for just that.”

“Who gave it to you?” asked Jim.

“If you don’t mind, we’ll not put a name to the party.”

Again Ellen guessed the truth, and broke in. “Lyn Stott told me he was going to marry Miss Wescott, of the Map of Texas. Don’t you see? She gave it to Lieutenant O’Connor.”

“Suppose we shift the ground a little,” suggested the ranger. “You know my secret. Let me in on yours. How comes it that this family has such a genuine interest in Lieutenant Fordham? I think twenty-three hundred dollars was mentioned. Does any body care to explain. Of course, I ain’t urging you any.”

Ellen looked at her father, who nodded sullenly.

“It was three years ago,” she began. “I was teaching the school at Willett’s Creek, when he came up with a party, to take observations. They camped right close to the schoolhouse, and he got into the way of dropping in about four o’clock. Well, we got to be quite friendly. I was studying geometry by myse’f, and he helped me out when I got stuck.” The girl looked across at Bucky with eyes which dared him to misinterpret.

“This ain’t any love story, understand. If he had any notions of turning a country girl’s haid, he got over them mighty sudden. But he had a nice, open way with him, and I was plumb idjit enough to think him the best friend I’d ever had. By and by, he let out about a mine he knew of that was a sure winner, some of the stock of which he had a chance to buy dirt cheap. He didn’t have the money himse’f, but he was going to try and interest some friends, because it was the opportunity of a lifetime. The end of it was I sent for Jim and paw. Between us we just had twenty-three hundred dollars saved, to buy a bunch of cows. It had taken us seven years to save it, and his

glib tongue got it all away from us for stock he knew wasn't worth the paper it was written on!"

"That ain't the worst of it," old Tucker burst out, with a bitter oath. "Later we found out this slick friend of ourn didn't buy the stock for us at all. Years before, he had bought it at one fourth the price he charged us. He knew now it was no good, so he unloaded on us, pretendin' all the time he was buying it for us."

"Can you prove that?" demanded the ranger.

"We sure can. We got a bunch of correspondence here with the president of the company. According to his story, Fordham always had played crooked, ever since he first went into the proposition."

Jim smote a heavy fist on the table, so that the dishes jumped. "I'd like to meet up with the coyote some day on the hillside! I'll bet I'd take that twenty-three hundred out of his hide before we separated, unless he's a better man than I am."

The father came to another phase of the situation. "If you're looking for this fellow, what are you doing up in this neck o' the woods? You wouldn't be likely to find him here, unless he's looking for trouble."

Ellen offered a suggestion quietly. "Suppose he didn't come of his own free will, dad. Suppose he was *brought*."

"How brought hyer? Why should any one bring him hyer, of all places?" her father asked. "If he's hyer, I want to know it!"

"Since Lieutenant O'Connor is looking for him here, perhaps he can tell us why any body might bring him," answered Ellen, with her dark eyes full on Bucky.

That young man smiled genially. "The Tucker family is doing the guessing right now, Miss Ellen. I'll not interrupt."

"Then we'll do it in private," the young woman answered, like a flash. With that, she beckoned her father and brother outside, after she had excused their departure to their guest.

From where he sat, Bucky could hear them fiercely debating the situation. It was plain that they were not in agreement. Ellen's low, insistent voice seemed to be urging some course, at which the men demurred obstinately. When at last they returned, Bucky observed that harmony had not been reached. The girl was flushed and protestant, the others triumphant and decided. It was plain that they were bent on pursuing some plan of

operations which did not suit her. She hung back, and let her father come forward and explain so much as he wanted to explain.

“We’ve had our little family talk, Mr. O’Connor, and we’ve figured out our little guessing contest. Mebbe we’re right; mebbe we’re wrong. We won’t go into that, because it won’t interest you. Anyhow, there ain’t no hard feelin’s this side of the fence, no matter what happens.”

“None here, either.” Bucky allowed himself a grin. “Ce’tainly looks like all Arizona will be out hunting this vanished gent with the shoulder straps, before we end up. What’s the matter with us joining forces?”

“No—I reckon not. You ain’t hunting him for the same purposes we air,” the old man answered grimly.

“What is your purpose, gentlemen?”

“I don’t want to appear oncivil, but—that’s our business.”

“I was just wondering whether it’s mine, too. You see, I’ve guaranteed to deliver him safe and sound at Tucson.”

“Some guarantees ain’t wuth the paper they’re writ on,” Jim opined cheerfully.

Bucky arose, looking at them out of quiet steady eyes. “Still, I reckon I’ll try to make mine good. And don’t forget one thing, gentlemen. I’m not Bucky O’Connor any longer—I’m the law. I’m the United States Government, by reason of my office. Private vendettas don’t go—even in the Santa Rosa—when Uncle Sam takes a hand. Don’t forget that.”

Thirty minutes later Bucky left, having nodded a pleasant good-by to his hosts. His hostess was nowhere to be seen, though he thought he had glimpsed a flutter of white skirts climbing the steep hill behind the house. The road circled at once into the hills by a stiff roundabout ascent, which brought him at last to the saucer rim above. He had just stopped to breathe his blown pony, when Ellen Tucker appeared from among the rocks at the side of the trail.

She, too, was breathing deeply, as if she had been climbing hard to reach him in time. “I want to have a talk with you,” she panted.

“Take your time, ma’am,” said the ranger, as he swung from the saddle.

“I want to know where you stand. Suppose I help you get Lieutenant Fordham. Is that all you want? Will you see that the men who kidnapped him get protection?”

“I’ll do my best to arrange it that way. One of my best friends is in on this business, or else I’m guessing ’way wrong.”

“You mean——”

“We won’t name any names, Miss Ellen. No—I didn’t mean Lyn Scott.” He smiled. “Though I agree with you that he’s in, too.”

“I didn’t say so,” she flashed.

“No, ma’am—but you’re thinking it mighty hard. Now, let me tell you something. The man at the bottom of this kidnapping used to punch cows with me. We two mostly hunted in the same pair, those days. We went up San Juan Hill together. Do you reckon I want to get him into trouble? You better believe not. But he knows I got to go through with this, no matter how bad it hits him. If he didn’t know that, he’d be a poor kind of a white-livered quitter. And he’s miles from being that. But if it can be done, I’ll play this hand so as not to hurt him.”

“And Lyn, too?” she demanded.

“Don’t worry about Lyn. He’s safe, no matter how this figures out. This friend I’ve been telling you about will see to that.”

“Then I want to tell you what I think.”

Smilingly, he took the explanation out of her mouth. “You think Lieutenant Fordham is at Bob Marcy’s mine, and that Lyn is guarding him there. Isn’t that what you think?”

She nodded. “I heard horsemen pass in the night, and looked out. There were three of them. Lyn was the only one I made out. Next day, when he called, he mentioned that he had come up alone by Santa Rosa Cañon. I knew that wasn’t true, but I could not see why he should lie to me. Now I know why.”

“Sure. He had to say what he was told to say.”

“But that isn’t all. I told dad and Jim. You know how they hate Lieutenant Fordham. They’re going to surprise Lyn to-night, and take his prisoner from him. They’re Southerners, and awful hot-headed.”

Bucky saw the point. Her anxious face told him, plainly as words, what she feared would happen to Wallace Fordham if her folks should lay hands on him. They were as elemental as savages, and their revenge would be swift and sure.

Bucky looked away, with narrowed eyes, and began to whistle as was his fashion when he was thinking out a problem. When at last he turned to the girl, a gay smile had displaced all the wrinkles of thought in his face.

“You’re a good rider, Miss Ellen,” he suggested, sure of his answer.

“Yes.”

“Then I’ve got a plan that’s sure a jim-dandy. It keeps your folks out of mischief, lets Bob and Lyn out from paying for their foolishness, puts the kibosh on Fordham’s matrimonial plans, and gives you a revenge warranted to gall his collar ample.”

“Sounds too good to be true,” was her comment.

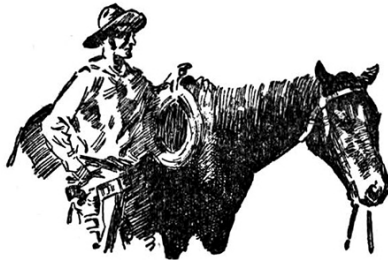
He leaned forward, and explained it to her in three sentences. Before he had finished the first, her eyes were shining with delight. For, if they could pull it through, the plan had all the merits which Bucky claimed for it.

“How did you ever think of it?”

“Looks right good to you, does it?”

“If we only can do it.”

“Shake on it, pardner.”



CHAPTER VI

THE TWO LIEUTENANTS

A MAN with the roll of a cowpuncher came singing down the trail which led from the Sure Thing shaft to the bunk house below. He was young, could digest a government mail sack if it were served up to him, was in love, and reasonably sure of the lady. Wherefore, he made the air shudder with discord, as a slight testimonial of his appreciation of the great adventure, life.

“For it’s up and away at break of day,
It’s saddle and cinch and ride;
It’s gallop like the devil——”

He broke off, to stare in surprise at the young man who was seated comfortably on the bench in front of the bunk house.

“Where in Mexico did you come from, Bucky?” he wanted to know, not altogether easy in his mind.

“Me? Oh, I just dropped up to see you, Lyn. Course, I know two’s company and three’s a crowd, but I thought I’d risk it, under the circumstances.” Bucky let his gaze travel innocently to the dinner bucket, which the vaquero was carrying.

“Two!” stammered Lyn, taken aback.

“Why, yes—two, Lyn. You ain’t entertainin’ but one guest, are you?”

“Guest!”

“That’s what I said, Lyn. You turning hard of hearing in your old age?”

Lyn essayed a laugh, and searched for a match, having rolled a cigarette. “Why, Bucky, I ain’t got any guest up here, excep’ you.”

“I didn’t mean you had him in your vest pocket.” Bucky’s amused glance went back to the dinner bucket. “Been picnicking all by your lone up to the mine, Lyn?”

Stott gazed helplessly at the dinner bucket, and repeated. “Picnicking!”

“You’re getting to be quite a parrot, Lyn,” Bucky mocked amiably.

“What’s eatin’ you, Bucky? I’m up here doing Bob Marcy’s assessment work.”

“Sure, you are. Let’s mosey up to the mine and see how you’re getting along with it.”

“No—I’m going to take a day off, and visit with you,” interrupted his friend hastily as O’Connor arose to take the trail.

The ranger’s eye was blank and innocent. “You need a rest, Lyn. Didn’t I hear you was sick?”

“Me? No—I ain’t been sick.”

“Funny. They told me you was a mighty sick man—hadn’t got but one lung. The air in these hills is fine. Mebbe you’ve grown another. You don’t look so *awful* sick.”

“I tell you I ain’t been sick,” retorted Stott, with uneasy impatience.

“The porter and the conductor on the limited both gave it to me you was pretty sick—all but your appetite. That was right healthy. But you sure were a sick man—couldn’t leave your stateroom a minute. Did Bob take good care of you?”

“Nobody never told me you had bats in your belfry, Bucky, but I reckon you’re sure locoed,” muttered Lyn, much disturbed. He would have given a good deal to learn how the ranger came to know so much that happened to be true.

“Mebbe so. How did you find Los Angeles anyhow? Still up and coming?”

“I ain’t seen Los Angeles for two years, and then some.”

“That’s a lie,” announced Bucky genially and impersonally to the world at large.

“Oh, well.”

“You reached Tucson Saturday mo’ning, on your way from Los Angeles.”

“You seem to know it all,” Stott assured him satirically, but in deep amazement. “Who saw me get off at the depot at Tucson, since you’re so blamed well acquainted with my movements?” he added, as a triumphant after thought.

“Nobody. You didn’t get off *at the depot*. A brakeman booted you off in the yards, as the train was slowing down.”

Stott’s eyes grew large with wonder. He was gathering his wits for a denial, when his friend stopped him.

“No use, Lyn. I’ve got you hog-tied with proof. Sit right down here on the bench, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Lyn sat down obediently. “I reckon Bob Marcy told you about it,” he said ruefully.

“No.”

“Then I’m blamed if I see——”

“We’ll come to that, Lyn. We’ll begin at Los Angeles, and take for granted the San Francisco shanghaiing. I suppose, though, you were the hackman that drove Fordham to the wharf—weren’t you?”

“You’re telling *me* this story, Bucky. Besides, you were going to begin at Los Angeles.”

“So I was. After you were wrapped up like a mummy, so that nobody could get a chance to see what you looked like, and after Bob had fixed up in his red wig, et cetera, you took a hack for the depot, to connect with the limited. You were so blamed feeble that Bob had to support you to your stateroom. Correct me if I go wrong.”

“Fire ahead.”

“Correct so far, eh? Well, we’ll draw a veil over this turrrible sickness that had wasted Lyn Stott, a fine healthy boy, till he had to be wrapped up like the aforementioned mummy, to protect him from the night air. Anyhow, you-all had a sympathetic nurse in Bob, and you pulled through till about three A.M. Saturday morning. About that time you and Bob decided you’d shuck your sickness, and let another man have it for a spell.”

“Prove it! Prove it!” demanded Lyn.

“We ain’t talkin’ about proof, now. I’m telling you a story, son. So, Bob he goes out and hunts up a candidate to be it. The man in lower four looked some good to him, so Bob—after he had first made right sure the porter was asleep—invited himself into that berth, and poked the end of a six-gun against lower four’s tummy, at the same time that he jammed a handkerchief into his mouth.

“Lower four didn’t want to play, but I reckon Bob persuaded him. Anyhow, he soft-footed it back to the stateroom, with Bob’s gun in the small of his back to emphasize the joke. Still lower four didn’t want to be it, but that six-gun worried him a few. He kicked some—but in a whisper, you understand. He got into the sick man’s clothes, while you went back to the berth, and gathered up his and slung them into a suit case. Out of another suit case you got some worn-out clothes that would do for a hobo. Then you unlocked the door of the sleeper, and stepped into the vestibule.

“You stayed right there in the vestibule till the search began. Then you pulled up the trap, let it down after you, and doubled up on the lower step, hanging on to the outside handles. Nobody noticed you there, of course and when the train slowed down near Tucson, you dropped off, just as a brakeman started for you. Am I guessing them good, Lyn?”

“I don’t have to witness against myse’f, do I?” demanded Stott, with an uneasy grin.

“Sure, you don’t. But, to finish the story. Bob and lower four stayed right in their stateroom during the search for Lieutenant Fordham. Lower four was so blamed sick Bob persuaded him to go to bed and turn his head to the wall, like he was asleep. When the conductor came to the door, Bob shooed and pointed to the bed.

“‘Sleeping like a baby,’ he explained. They told him in a whisper what they were looking for, and then went out, after just a glance around. Probably Bob removed the gag then from lower four’s mouth. He left the train at Papago, lower four with him. Bob had to support him as they went out; and I’ll bet my hat that in Bob’s hand, under the cloak that covered the sick man, was that old reliable six-gun, poking against lower four’s ribs till the train was out of sight on its hike east. Horses were waiting at Papago, and——”

“They weren’t, either. There weren’t any horses waiting,” denied Stott triumphantly.

“I stand corrected! There weren’t any horses waiting, then, but about three hours later, Lyn Stott comes up with three, and it’s everybody for a ride. I reckon lower four didn’t want to ride any, but Bob was the doctor, anyhow, and he made him see that the outside of a horse is fine for a sick man. So he was reasonable, and rode. About eleven that night, you passed the Tucker ranch, and I reckon about one in the mo’ning you reached the Sure Thing here, with that poor sick man you was both so careful of.”

“So you think Lieutenant Fordham is here now, do you?” Lyn wanted to know.

“Well, that’s my fool notion, Lyn.”

“And you’d like to see him?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“Good enough. You shall.” A revolver had suddenly seemed to leap to the cow-puncher’s hand, and was pointing at the ranger. “We’ll go right up and see him now, Bucky. What’s more, you may have a long talk with him. I’m going to leave you with him all day and all night!”

Bucky laughed until the tears came into his eyes. “The notions you boys get! Going to keep me here till Bob comes, are you?”

“That’s what.”

“And when do you expect Bob?”

“Either to-morrow or the next day.”

“He’ll be here sooner than that, Lyn. I’m looking for him about midnight.”

“What’s that?” snapped the other.

“I’ve just sent a messenger for him. Oh, put up that gun, son. You couldn’t drive me away. I’m here to stick till things happen.”

“What things?”

“Several things. First off, we’ve got to expect an attack to take your prisoner.”

“An attack! Who by?”

“By your friends, the Tuckers.”

“They don’t know he’s here.”

“They didn’t, but they do now. Miss Ellen has gone for help, and we’re to hold the fort till it arrives. She doesn’t want her folks getting into trouble on account of Fordham.”

Lyn nodded. “Sure, she wouldn’t. She despises him like he was a rattler, but she wouldn’t be for gun play from her folks, I expect. Where’s she gone for help?”

“Gone to get Bob Marcy and one of his friends.”

“Huh! She could ’a’ got help closter ’n that.”

“I need that friend of Marcy to round things out.”

“You ain’t got any jokes in this deck, Bucky? Where do Bob and I get off at? You figurin’ to give us a ticket to Yuma?”

“That’s what I’m figurin’ for you *not* to get. You two boys have tied yourselves up tighter ’n a wet knot. I don’t know why you two should be so anxious to wear stripes.”

“Bob had his reasons, and I had mine. And we wasn’t calculatin’ on stripes—nor ain’t yet, Lieutenant Bucky O’Connor.”

“I know all about your reasons,” Bucky grinned. “Miss Wilma was his, and Miss Ellen Tucker was yours.”

“Did she tell you that?” asked Lyn eagerly.

“No, she didn’t. You go and do your own courtin’, son. All I’m saying is that you sat in this game on Miss Ellen’s account—to pay off an old debt for her and her folks. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” agreed Lyn. “And to keep the skunk from marrying Miss Wilma till she’d had a chanct to size him up right.”

“I reckon you’ll make good on both counts. Now, take me up to the mine, and let me have a talk with Lieutenant Fordham. I’ve got to get him to promise not to push the case against you boys.”

“Huh! I see him promising that—and keeping it, if he does.”

“He’ll keep his word if he gives it, Lyn. He’s an officer in the United States Army. And I think I see a chance to get the promise out of him.”

“Go to it, then.”

They climbed the trail to the shaft, down which the cowpuncher lowered O’Connor in the bucket.

“Look out for him. He’s a bad actor,” Lyn called down after the ranger.

“We’ll get along fine,” was the answer.

From the foot of the shaft Bucky picked his way along the roughly hewn tunnel, flashing his electric searchlight as he went. The tunnel was not a long one, and the end of it had been boarded up, so as to make a room of which the door was padlocked on the outside.

“Lieutenant Fordham,” said the ranger, as he unlocked the door.

“Yes, sir,” returned a voice sharply, from the inside darkness.

“I want to have a talk with you. Just a moment, and I’ll have this door open.”

Even as Bucky spoke, the man inside charged, smashing the door forward before him as he leaped. Its heavy timbering caught O’Connor on the forehead, and flung him back against the wall of the tunnel, stunned and helpless. Instantly, Fordham was upon him, had dragged him to the ground, and relieved him of his revolver. The ranger lay like a log, inert and lifeless.

Fordham arose, breathing heavily, found the flashlight, and turned it upon the white face of his victim.

“Hello! This is a new one,” he said to himself. “I’ll remember that face, with the rest, when I send them to the penitentiary.”

After examining the revolver carefully, to make sure that it was in working order, the officer stepped forward to the shaft, and got into the bucket.

“Ready to come up, Bucky?”

“All right,” Fordham called back.

Slowly the windlass turned, and the bucket rose. It was more than half-way to the top when Bucky recovered consciousness and staggered to his feet; it was within three or four revolutions of the surface when the ranger reached the foot of the shaft.

“Lyn!” he called up sharply.

The windlass stopped.

“Let the bucket down. You have the wrong man in it.”

“What!”

“Fordham’s in the bucket.”

Stott braced his windlass, and peered over the edge. Six feet below him, a revolver pointed at his head.

“Don’t move,” ordered Fordham crisply.

Lyn’s eyes grew big. “What in time are *you* doing there?”

“Haul me up, or I’ll put a bullet through you.”

Lyn kicked out the brace, and, with his weight on the handle, leaned over again. “How’s that, lieutenant?”

“If you don’t pull me up at once, you’re a dead man.”

Lyn laughed grimly. “Fine! I’ll beat you to it about five seconds.” He raised his voice, and called down to the ranger. “Get out from under there, Bucky. The lieutenant’s going to shoot me up. When he does, of course, I’ll have to turn loose, and he’ll come down some sudden. It’s going to be another of them elevator accidents, looks like.”

Fordham swore softly to himself. The man had him dead to rights. If he killed the fellow, the bucket would go flying down, and he would be crushed to a pulp.

“No—I reckon you’ll have to go back and finish your visit with Bucky,” the man at the wheel announced, with a grin.

The bucket descended again, and Fordham stepped furiously from it at the foot of the shaft. He covered O’Connor at once, and ordered him to throw up his hands.

Instead, Bucky put them into his trouser pockets. “Keep your shirt on, lieutenant,” he advised, with a smile. “Better wait till you find out why I came down, before you shoot holes in me.”

“I’ve had enough of this, my man! Ever since I stepped ashore at Frisco, it’s been going on. It stops right here!” said Fordham, with blazing eyes.

“That’s what I thought. Miss Wescott must be of our mind, too, I reckon, or she wouldn’t have sent me to find you.”

“Miss Wescott!” The name snatched the officer from his rage on the instant. “Did you come from her?”

“Yes, seh. She put me on this case to find you.”

“And who are you?”

“Bucky O’Connor they call me, of the Arizona Rangers. At your service, seh.”

“How did you find out where I was?”

“It’s my business to find out things. I put two and two together.”

“I’m under obligations to you, my man. I’ll see you’re well paid,” Fordham replied patronizingly.

“Don’t worry about my pay. I expect mebbe I’ll get it without you collecting for me,” drawled the Arizonian, his cool gray eyes fixed on Fordham so quietly that the latter lost his impulse to patronize.

“If you are ready, we’ll get out of this hole, Mr. O’Connor. I want to hurry and put those villains that kidnapped me under arrest.”

“I forgot to say that this rescue carries conditions with it,” the ranger explained.

“What conditions?” demanded Fordham, with an edge to his voice.

“I’ll agree to put you face to face with Miss Wescott within twelve hours, if you’ll agree to take no action whatever against the men that kidnapped you.”

“Nonsense! I’ll do no such thing. I’m going to put these ruffians in the penitentiary. Once I’m above ground, and free, I can easily find Miss Wescott.”

“Just so—once you’re above ground and free,” Bucky agreed.

“Then give orders to have me hauled up, my man.”

“If I were your man, I would.”

A flash from the electric lamp showed the gleam of Bucky’s own revolver pointed toward his heart.

“You’ll do as I say—understand that! If you don’t, you will not live to leave here.”

The ranger produced from his vest pocket a case, and from that a card. This he presented to the other, who flashed the light upon it. What he read was merely

LIEUTENANT BUCKY O’CONNOR ARIZONA RANGERS

“You may murder me, of course, lieutenant, but not without knowing what you are doing. And I don’t think it would be wise.”

Again Fordham knew that he had been given check.

It was one thing to kill an unknown ruffian who had kidnapped him; it was quite another to shoot in cold blood an officer who had come to rescue him.

“You say you’re an officer of the rangers. Is it your business to protect criminals from punishment?” demanded the army man hotly.

“In this case, it is. If I’m to do anything for you, it will have to be on those terms. I’ve persuaded the man above to let you go, but it ain’t

reasonable to expect him to do it, if you're going straight to lodge an information against him and his pardner."

"I don't see what was the need of persuading them. Why didn't you bring your men, and rescue me by force?" Fordham asked sullenly.

Bucky prevaricated. "I might have done that, but, you see, Miss Wescott wanted you alive, and I couldn't take chances."

"And if I won't promise?" the other demanded.

"I shall have to leave you here. You'll be perfectly safe, and at the end of a couple of weeks you will be released, after your captors have escaped to Mexico. You won't be able to punish them, anyhow, but, of course, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing it wasn't your fault."

"And you would leave me here two weeks?"

"Don't you reckon I had to make some promises before they let me down to see you? I ain't ever lived in any other, but in this world folks have to compromise things, I've noticed."

"Why are they holding me here? I've never found that out."

"I don't know any more than you do. But I have a guess coming, same as you have. Mine is that it's a scheme to break up your marriage to Miss Wescott."

"But how?"

"Looks like they're holding you here till they get some evidence they're looking for against you. That's only my guess, you understand."

Bucky, watching Fordham in the gloom, saw this thought grow on the lieutenant and take hold of him. He could almost see photographed on the face the anxiety, the doubt, the grip of the resolution to strike, before his enemies could move, by marrying Wilma at once and stopping their plans.

The young man turned to him, and nodded. "All right. I'll agree. Let's get out of here."

"Have I your word of honor, Lieutenant Fordham, not to push the case against your kidnappers?"

"Word of honor—yes, sir. Not because I want to, but because I have to."

"Then I'll go up first, and explain this to the man above."

Bucky called to Stott, and was hauled to the surface. The bucket descended again, and brought up Fordham.

Lyn grinned amiably at him. "No hard feelings, lieutenant," he said.

Fordham turned his back on him, without a word. "Have you horses, so that we can get away at once?" he asked of the ranger.

O'Connor drew him aside. "We'll have to wait till night, seh. The Tuckers have got word you're up here, and they've closed the pass to us. In the darkness, we can slip over the hills, but it wouldn't be best to try it in the light."

Reluctantly, Fordham assented.

"We'll slip back into the hills," Bucky continued. "Then, if they take a notion to look for you here, they won't find you."

"I've no objection to their finding me," Fordham answered haughtily.

For Lyn's benefit, Bucky let his right eyelid lie flat on his cheek for an instant. "Of course not, but we don't want trouble with them. It might reach Miss Wescott's ears."

With a little gesture of impatience, Fordham delivered himself into the hands of the Arizonian. "All right. We'll do whatever you say."

"That's right. I'll keep my promise, all right. You'll see Miss Wescott on schedule time."

With which, all three descended the trail toward the cabin.



CHAPTER VII

INTO THE HILLS

MISS WESCOTT was out on Baldy, watching her foreman superintend a cut of beef steers for a Kansas City buyer. The cut had been made, and she was turning back toward the ranch house, when she saw a rider heading in her direction. It gave her a momentary surprise to see that this rider was a woman, for petticoats on the range are few and far between. She presently discovered that it was not only a woman, but a young and good-looking one.

Plainly, the newcomer had ridden far and hard, for her pony was travel worn and dejected.

"Is this Miss Wescott?" she asked, after she had drawn up her pony.

"Yes," returned Wilma pleasantly. "I think we have not met before."

"No. My name is Ellen Tucker."

Wilma drew off her gauntlet, and offered her hand. "I'm glad to meet you, Miss Tucker. I have often heard of you."

"Not from Lieutenant Fordham?" the mountain girl asked sharply.

Wilma glanced at her in surprise. "No. From my riders and others. Do you know Lieutenant Fordham?"

"I ought to," Ellen answered, with a bitter little laugh.

"What do you mean by that, Miss Tucker?" The owner of the Map of Texas stiffened in her saddle, and looked haughtily at Ellen out of her direct, fearless eyes.

"I mean that he cheated me out of eight hundred dollars I earned school-teaching. I mean that he cheated my father and brother out of fifteen hundred they had saved from seven years' work. That's what I mean."

Wilma caught at her saddle horn to steady herself. "Is this true?" she asked quietly.

"I'll take my Bible oath on it," was the fierce, quick retort.

"And when?"

“Just before he left for the Philippines—in March and April, three years ago.”

A swift calculation showed Wilma that this must have been when Fordham had been sent into the Santa Rosa Range, in command of a detail, to make observations. If this young woman’s story were true, her lover was a scoundrel. She would not believe it. All her loyalty was alert to defend him.

“Tell me about it—the whole story,” she demanded.

Ellen told her.

“Have you any proof?” Wilma asked crisply.

Miss Tucker produced the stock, some letters from Fordham, and two from the president of the company.

“Is this all?”

“No. I made up my mind to run the thing down while I was at it. Jim and I went to the fort. He had just left for the Philippines, but we found out a good deal about him. He had been gambling, and had heavy debts everywhere. He had to have the money he got from us, or be broke from the service. It seems he had signed notes he simply had to make good. He used our money to do it with. A Captain Rogers there knows all about it. Ask him.”

“So far, I have only your word for it. I can’t believe it true—I don’t.”

“You have only my word that my father and brother are planning to kill him to-night, but it’s the truth, just the same.”

“To kill whom—Wallace Fordham?” demanded Wilma, eyes dilating.

“Of course. And they’ll do it, too, if we don’t stop them. I don’t care for him; he’s only a hound. But I don’t want them getting in trouble over him.” A still, deep fire of passion lay banked in the dark eyes of the girl from the hills. For a moment, she looked as primeval as the wild forest creatures.

“Is—Is Lieutenant Fordham the prisoner of your people?”

“No, but they know where he is. They are going to capture him to-night.”

“And why are you telling me this?”

“That we may save him. Lieutenant O’Connor sent me to bring you and Mr. Marcy there. He has promised to look out for him till we arrive.”

Bob Marcy cantered across the plain toward them. Wilma called to him, as soon as he was within hearing.

“Lieutenant Fordham has been found, Bob. We’re going to set out at once to join him.”

“Did Bucky find him?” the foreman asked, with an expressionless face.

“Yes. He’s looking for trouble from some enemies of Lieutenant Fordham, and he has sent for us to come at once.” With which, she introduced him to Ellen Tucker, and told him what the girl had told her.

Half an hour later, they reached the ranch. Fresh horses were saddled while they snatched a hasty lunch. In a few minutes, they were in the saddle again, on the road to the Santa Rosas.

Just after sunset they unsaddled, to give the horses a rest. Already they were well up in the foothills, and knew that they would reach the scene of action two hours before midnight. After he had taken care of the horses, Bob came to the place where the two young women sat in a hostile silence.

“I’ve got something to show you over here, Wilma. I’ve found what makes your saddle gall the pony’s back.”

Wilma understood that he meant more than his words implied, and she followed him through the semi-darkness to the place where her buckskin grazed.

“I’ve got to tell you something, Little Boss. You’ll hate me for it, but I cayn’t help that,” he said.

“What is it?” she demanded quickly.

“It was me that kidnapped Lieutenant Fordham and took him into the hills.”

“You!”

He nodded. “Yep. I had him shanghaied in Frisco, and after he got away, I took him from the train to my mine, and left him there.”

“And—why?”

“To keep you from marrying him.”

“To keep me from marrying him!” she repeated. “Why—it’s absurd! Are you mad, Bob?” She caught his arm and shook it. “What do you mean? Do you think I’ll tolerate such interference? I never heard of such a thing in my life. Never!”

“No, ma’am—I reckon not.”

She swept on, in a gust of rising anger. “Is that all you can say for yourself? I want to know what you meant by such unwarranted insolence. I want to hear your defense, before I tell you to get out of my sight forever.”

He took from his pocket the letter he had received from his cousin, found the paragraph that referred to Fordham, and struck matches while she read it.

“Why didn’t you let me see this? Am I a child, that I wasn’t to be trusted to decide it for myself? And did you expect to keep him hidden forever?”

“Tim was coming home on the next boat. I was going to have him tell you all he knew. But you are so impulsive. If I had come to you with this, you would have gone right to Fordham with it. When he said it was a lie mebbe you would have married him, just to show you trusted him. That’s your way, Wilma. You’re mighty impulsive, and you won’t hear a word against any of your friends. Wouldn’t it be a heap more that way in your lover’s case? Anyhow, I wasn’t going to take the chance, girl. I love you too well for that.”

“And I hate *you!*” she cried, in a shaken voice. “You treat me as a child; you humiliate me. You deceive me and make me unhappy. I wouldn’t have believed it of you, if any body else had told me. No, I wouldn’t. Oh, go away and leave me alone! I don’t want to see any of you any more.” She broke down and buried her face in her hands.

Bob, much moved, hung there for a moment, then slipped away into the darkness. He would have given much to comfort her, but he knew it was not to be. For Wilma was in a turmoil of conflicting emotions.

The moon peeped over a hilltop, squatted on it, then rose slowly into the heavens. By its light, Bob saw dried tears on Wilma’s face when she returned. She was, however, quite composed and frozen.

“We will go now,” she said, in a small, cold voice.

Bob saddled, and they resumed the trail. Conversation had ceased entirely. They rode in single file. The way was always rough, and sometimes steep and dangerous.

Once Bob caught at the bridle of Wilma’s horse, when it slipped on the edge of a ravine. The pony’s hind quarters had slid down the incline, with a rattle of gravel. Instantly, Marcy had swung his pony, and his arm had shot forward to the bridle.

Wilma merely said “Thank you,” in the iciest of voices, and turned her horse’s head sharply, so as to disengage the bridle from Bob’s hand.

After that, he rode behind her watching like a hawk to see that she was not in danger, but refraining very carefully from assisting her, either by hand or by advice.



CHAPTER VIII

BOWED OUT

LYN STOTT sat before the stove in the cabin on Marcy's claim, and read the week-old *Times*, which Bucky had left there. He was, at that moment, so far as this story goes, the centre of the universe—the focal point, toward whom three parties were converging from different directions.

Of these, old Tucker and his son, Jim, were the first to reach the scene of action. Their method of approach was as cautious as if they had been stalking a deer. Jim crept forward to the window, and, after glancing inside, motioned to his father to come forward. The old man joined his son, and also looked in. They saw a bored cowpuncher yawn, look at his watch, and speak aloud to himself.

"Seems like it's about time something was beginnin' to happen. I'm right tired of Lyn Stott's company," was what he said.

This might almost have been their cue, for at this moment the door opened, and the Tuckers stood before him. Each of them carried a rifle, and was garnished with revolvers.

Lyn glanced up in amiable welcome. "I'm ce'tainly glad to see you-all. Sit down, Jim. Take a chair, Mr. Tucker."

"No—I reckon not, Lyn. We're here to see your prisoner," Jim spoke up.

"My prisoner!" Stott looked the picture of innocent surprise. "I reckon you'll have to guess again, gentlemen. I ain't got any prisoner."

"We know better. He's up at the mine, I reckon."

"Honest, I ain't got any prisoner up at the mine."

"Seeing is believing, Lyn. We'll go up and see. You can come along."

They took the trail, Tucker in the lead, Lyn next, and Jim in the rear, with an eye on the cowpuncher.

"You're wasting your time, gentlemen," Stott assured them.

"Well, it's *our* time," Jim answered grimly.

At the shaft, Tucker flung one sharp question at Lyn, as they started to lower his son. "Is Fordham armed?"

"Fordham ain't down there, I keep a-tellin' you. But if he was my prisoner, and was down there, you can bet he wouldn't be armed."

They lowered Jim. Five minutes later he was back at the foot of the shaft.

"He ain't here," he called up.

"That ain't news to me. I told you he wasn't," grinned Lyn.

"Where is he, then?" demanded old Tucker.

"Can't say. This morn'ing I kinder heard you might drap up, so Bucky and Fordham pulled their freight."

They retraced their steps as far as the house. As they passed the corral, Lyn observed in it two horses which had not been there when they had passed it, a quarter of an hour before.

"If you'll come in a few minutes, gentlemen, I'll tell you where I think you might be able to find Fordham," he told the visitors.

With this, he fell back, and let them pass through the doorway before him. At the same instant a pleasant voice gave clear orders.

"Hands up, gentlemen! No monkey business! Lyn, just relieve them of their hardware. That's the idea. Stack it on the bed here."

Before they could take in what had happened, the Tuckers had been disarmed. They stared at Bucky in dazed surprise. He was sitting astride a chair, one arm across the back and in his hand a revolver, carelessly poised.

Suddenly, the old man's wandering gaze fell upon Wallace Fordham, and a spasm of fury swept his face. He made a motion as if to throw himself upon the man whom he hated, but a movement of Bucky's hand restrained him.

"Wait a few minutes, Mr. Tucker. We're going to talk this thing all over, and settle it to-night," observed the ranger.

Wallace Fordham broke in furiously. "So you've betrayed me! You promised me I would meet Miss Wescott if I came here with you. Instead you mean to deliver me into the hands of my enemies."

"Do I? Wait and see, lieutenant. When I make promises, I keep them. Sit down, Mr. Tucker. You, too, Jim."

“I reckon we’ll stand,” the old mountaineer answered stiffly. “Then, when you get through with us, we’ll go. Another time, we’ll settle with this coyote, Fordham.”

There came to Bucky the sound of galloping horses, carried from a distance by the wind. The sound died away again, and he knew that the party had fallen to a walk, and were climbing the trail to the house.

Fordham, too, heard the beat of hoofs. He had reasons for not wishing to meet Wilma in the presence of the Tuckers. He arose hurriedly, and spoke to O’Connor.

“I think I’ll go down the trail and meet Miss Wescott,” he said, in a low voice.

“You’ll stay right here, lieutenant,” Bucky told him quietly.

“Do you mean that I’m still a prisoner?” Fordham fired up.

“I mean that I stand by the agreement. I promised her I would turn you over to her safe and sound. It happens I can’t leave here right now on account of a business engagement so you’ll have to stay, too. You’ll meet her here, just like I said you would. You’ve waited three years. I reckon you can stand five minutes more, lieutenant.”

As it turned out, Fordham had not that long to wait. Bob Marcy’s big figure filled the doorway, and at once made room for Wilma. Ellen stood in the shadow of the night, just behind her.

“Wilma!” cried Fordham, stepping forward, with arms outstretched.

Miss Wescott slipped aside, and left Fordham face to face with Ellen Tucker. He was completely taken aback, and looked with a white face from one girl to the other, as though asking what it meant. Slowly, his arms fell to his sides.

Ellen laughed scornfully. “I have come to ask you about that mining stock you sold me.”

“Was it—didn’t it turn out——”

“It turned out absolutely worthless, as you very well knew it was when you sold it to me!”

“I’m sorry, but you are mistaken when you say I knew it was worthless. I thought it a very good buy at the price. What object could I have had in selling you worthless stock?”

“Because you owned it yourself. You lied to us in pretending you didn’t. And you sold it to us at four times what you paid for it.”

“But I didn’t own it.”

She had him, now, and flashed the proofs before his eyes. He could only falter that there must be some mistake, but his flaming face cried aloud the truth of her charge. Having established her point, the girl very deliberately turned on her heel and joined her father.

Fordham turned to Jim Tucker a face of contained fury. “Perhaps you would like to take this matter up with me personally, for I denounce this as a lying conspiracy.”

Young Tucker took a step toward him, but Marcy flung the mountaineer sprawling into a chair. “Not now. If you want to mix later, I’ve got no objections,” he said.

“But I have,” spoke up Bucky. “We’re going to settle this thing once for all, right here in this room, before us all. Lieutenant Fordham, have you any explanation you care to make?”

The officer knew that he had his back to a wall, and that he could not hope to reinstate himself in the eyes of the girl to whom he was engaged. Wherefore, he took refuge in a sullen dignity.

“There is only one person in this room who has a right to explanations from me. To her I will give them, and to nobody else. I am not on trial.”

Wilma stepped forward. She was very white, and her great eyes were fixed steadily on him. “Very well, I am ready to listen to explanations.”

“When we are alone,” he added quickly.

“Not so. You have been accused publicly. Let your defense be public.”

“I am an officer and a gentleman. I do not need to defend myself before people like these,” he said haughtily.

“You are an officer, but—are you a gentleman? I think that is at issue,” his affianced returned steadily. “There are other charges. I should wish them all taken up and refuted here.”

“I decline to do so. These people are conspirators. They have kidnapped me, maltreated me, threatened my life. I have nothing to say to them, except that I shall put them behind the bars of the penitentiary.”

“Your word of honor, seh,” Bucky reminded him suavely.

“Obtained on false pretenses. You have tricked me, sir. I do not consider it binding.”

“Just as you say. But before you move in this matter, be sure, seh, your own record is clean. If you strike, we strike. We shall expose the matter of a certain trust fund in your care while in the Philippines. We’ll break you, sure as fate. You can’t push this case and stay in the United States Army.”

Fordham looked at Wilma, with almost a sneer on his good-looking face. “I thought I was coming home to friends. It seems I come, instead, to a nest of spies!”

Wilma looked at him steadily, without a word, but Marcy spoke up at once.

“Lieutenant Fordham, you may lay the blame of this whole business on me. Your friends had nothing to do with it. For reasons of my own, I kidnapped you. It was one of your friends that rescued you from my hands. There hasn’t been any conspiracy against you.”

With a little gesture of appeal, Fordham turned to the girl whom he had been expecting to marry.

“I spoke hastily. I was wrong. Let us get away from here and forget this, Wilma.”

“Sir, I can forget it only when I forget you. I can only thank my friends for uncovering your duplicity,” she told him, in a low voice that stung.

Fordham bowed insolently. “Then the episode is closed. If you have no further use for me, I’ll leave this happy family party, Lieutenant O’Connor.”

“There is not a thing to detain you any longer, lieutenant. But, remember—if you move in this matter, so do we.”

Fordham turned to Jim Tucker. “As for you, I’ll be at the Willard in Tucson for two days. If you want to settle this, I’ll be happy to accommodate you.”

Young Tucker showed his teeth in a triumphant grin. “I don’t want to see you. The debt of the Tucker family is paid in full, seh. You’re a discredited scoundrel. Your plans are ruined, and you yourself a whipped cur. You can’t even hit back, without smashing yourself completely. I don’t reckon I could have asked for a better revenge. Whyfor should I want to see you?”

Fordham looked around again at the circle of unfriendly faces, ripped out a savage curse, and strode out of the room—and out of their lives. Of the

seven persons present, the only two who felt any pity for him at that moment were Bucky and his friend, Bob. Both Ellen and Wilma came later to feel sorry for him, but that was after the new happiness in their own lives had wiped out even the memory of the wrong he had done them.

Bucky relieved the awkwardness which followed the man's exit by turning cheerfully to Wilma.

"And now, Miss Wescott, I reckon there's a report due from me to you. Will you have it now, or later?"

"Now, if you please."

Bob and Lyn found chairs for the young women, and Bucky plunged into the story which he had already told Stott earlier in the day. He gave it, however, at more length, and more fully. When he had finished, Wilma commented on it.

"You have told us what *they* did, but you haven't told us how you *knew* what they did. We are still in the dark as to how you came to your conclusions," said Wilma.

"I came to the only conclusions there were left. In the first place, the fact that he was shanghaied at Frisco left a strong presumption that he had been kidnapped later. Once we had him aboard the limited from Los Angeles, and tucked away in his berth Friday night, there wasn't any chance to get off the train alive. The track had been searched, and the body was not found. Of course, that wasn't *proof* he was not dead, but it was evidence. If the intention had been to kill him, it might have been done in the first place, instead of shanghaing. Like you, Miss Wescott, I felt right sure he was still living.

"Now, I had narrowed the thing down to this: He was either dead, or he was still on the train when it reached Tucson. I went on the assumption that he was still living. Of course, there were objections to my theory. The train had been searched, and he wasn't found on it. But, according to the theory of his being still alive, he *had* to be on the train at that time. Therefore, I took it for granted that he was. If so, where?"

Marcy grinned at him. "I might 'a' known you'd go to askin' just that kind of whys, old hawss."

Bucky acknowledged this with a smile, and went on. "Of course, I talked with the train crew, and especially with those connected with that car. All the passengers seemed to show a clean bill of moral health, except those in the

stateroom of that car. I began to guess that sick man wasn't so awful sick, after all. After that, it was easy."

"But how did you connect Bob with the affair?" Lyn wanted to know.

Bucky and Marcy exchanged smiles. "I had had my doubts about Bob before, and he didn't take the trouble to allay them any. But when the sick man and his friend got off at Papago, I felt plumb sure. For I knew there was a trail from Papago to Bob's mine in the Santa Rosas, which would make a dandy place to hide the lieutenant until wanted."

"It is really wonderful, the way you worked it out!" observed Wilma.

"No, ma'am. The trail was that plain I couldn't miss it."

The mistress of the Map of Texas turned to Mr. Tucker. "There is one privilege I must ask of you. That is, to let me settle with you for that twenty-three hundred dollars." She hurried on, seeing that he was about to protest. "Not for your sake, but for mine. I owe it to—to the relation that has just terminated. I can't quite explain it to you; it's just my feeling. It would be a great favor to me."

Tucker looked helplessly at his son, and from him across to his daughter. Ellen gave him the faintest of nods. She understood the feeling which actuated Miss Wescott. It was a sort of offering to the dead love that had gone out of her life.

"Well, ma'am, just as you say. O' course, you got no obligation; but if that's how you feel, I ain't going to say no," the old man consented.

Wilma walked across to Ellen, and offered her hand frankly. "I beg your pardon. I did you an injustice, and knew it all the time though I wasn't ready to admit it, then. I'm sorry."

Ellen took her hand in both of hers. "That's all right, Miss Wescott. I don't blame you any—at least, I won't if you'll show there is no hard feelings by riding down to the ranch with us for the night. You can start for home to-morrow, or the next day."

It was so settled. The horses were brought up, and the party mounted. Bucky led the way with the Tuckers, Lyn followed, side by side, with Ellen and Bob, and Wilma brought up the rear.

After they had ridden a long way in silence, Bob mustered up his courage. "Little Boss, mebbe I did wrong by you, but it seemed right to me. I can see now it wasn't square to you."

“No—it wasn’t,” she agreed.

“The truth is, I was plumb scairt stiff for fear you’d marry him and find out about him afterward. I hated to risk it.”

“You might have trusted me, Bob.”

“So I might. But they say love is blind, honey. Will you forgive me?”

“I will, if——”

“If what, Wilma?”

“If you’ll not say anything about—that.” She got it out, with a rush.

“About what, girlie?”

“You know what.”

“You mean about—me caring for you?”

She nodded, then turned toward him a flushed face in the moonlight. “Not now, Bob. I can’t hear anything about it now. Don’t you see, I can’t—yet?”

He understood that the sting of her humiliating experience was still burning her. She wanted it to heal before she could come to her real love story; nor did she wish the latter to seem merely a consolation for what she had lost.

Bob smiled happily. “All right, Little Boss. I’ll not say a word, but—I’ll think a heap.”

For just an instant, her shy eyes met his. “I can’t keep you from thinking whatever you want to.”



THUNDERHORSE

EDISON MARSHALL



THUNDERHORSE

CHAPTER I

“OUT WHERE THE WEST BEGINS”

THIS was a strangely desolate vista, at first glance: only the grey sage ending at last on the shoulders of the rugged, rockbound hills. Beyond these hills the girl felt that the sage-lands stretched on and on, an expanse to cripple the imagination and arrest thought. Over the sage arched a pale sky of wonderful clearness, unbroken by any cities' towers bending at last down to the sage again. The sage was seemingly the beginning and the end here. She walked the length of the car and stood on the rear platform for a better view.

Now, as she looked her tired eyes felt strangely rested; and she was imbued with a mysterious sense of calm and well-being. The view from the rear platform was desolate, yet she was not depressed, but rather elated, held with a sense of beauty—such a moving, desolate beauty as, she imagined, an old seafarer might find on the deserts of grey water. It was a good land, this desert of sage. It was stern, rock-ribbed, perhaps blasted by the summer sun and cursed by winter's cold; yet she felt that it would never be desolate to her, it would rest her weary nerves and give her real contentment.

How different it was from the scene she had left! All her life, it seemed, Charity Blair had known only cities' towers, the confinement of fronting buildings and the confusion of hurrying crowds; and this was a new world. She had not dreamed, when she had given up her position as teacher, in one of the grade schools of a large city, and had accepted, at a lonely aunt's request, a district school in the far sage-plains of Oregon, of any such tremendous adventure as this. Her life had been singularly untouched by adventure—indeed it had been a very lonely, colorless life, in a great, hurrying city—but she had a queer feeling that this was the beginning of a great change. She had always longed for adventure—this drab little teacher in a great city school—and here she was breathing it in the very air.

The air was marvelously bracing. She breathed it in deeply, and she felt its vigor in the warm wheel of her blood. And now, that her field of vision had broadened, she began to make a more detailed study of the country.

While the very tone and spirit of the land was that of the sage, she began to see that there were other conspicuous features. While the floor of the valley was in itself evidently a high plateau, the hills about ranged up to a considerable height. These were great, brown piles, strangely bleak, yet with the same unmistakable quality of eerie beauty that blessed the whole land. Beyond the hills lay higher table-lands, stretching heaven knew where; and these gripped her imagination. It was a parched, semi-desert land on the higher levels, but now she could see, through the haze, the pale, blue glint of distant lakes.

There were many of these in the floor of the larger valleys. Some of them shone like jewels in the midst of the sage, but some seemed surrounded by great thickets of brown reeds, seeming at a distance only a darker grey than the sage itself. She did not know at once that these were the tule marshes beloved by the water-fowl: matted growths almost impenetrable to men. They seemed to invite her exploration.

Of man and his works there was very little sign; not a single human dwelling. Once she caught a glimpse of a brown road straggling through the sage, and at times fences ran parallel to the tracks, but not once did she see the spire of a distant city, the dust of an automobile on a highway, or even the brown stubble of a cultivated field. It was not, however, a desert: a country devoid of life. Far away at the edge of the lakes she could make out herds of cattle as well as scattered bands of horses; and she felt that more timid, furtive living creatures had their homes in the grey sage of valley and plateau.

The towns were few and far apart. Grey Lake, her destination, was no more than a village—possessing no smartness, no attractive shops, not an automobile parked on the roadway. But she would not miss these things. The crowd of jolly people that had gathered at the station seemed wholly happy without them.

One of her fellow passengers introduced her at once to every one assembled. Evidently the “school ma’am” was a person of no little importance in such frontier towns—perhaps the leader of the social life and the arbiter of fashion—for the attitude of everyone was that of the most kindly, friendly, but unmistakable deference. The women took shy observations of her pretty clothes, not only admiring them but doubtless getting some hints for their own wardrobes; and the men, one after another, straightened their ties and dusted their shoulders as they came up to be introduced. She never feared loneliness thereafter. These were not stylish people, neither rich nor poor, but abundantly fed by the grey mother that was

their earth; not highly sophisticated or ever particularly up-to-date; but they were wholesome people, attractive and winning because they were wholly without pose: such a clean, true breed as has always constituted America's greatness, far and near. She knew at once that they were naturally well bred, schooled by the hard school of the frontier; and their hearts were open and free as their own desert spaces. City raised though she was, she felt at once that these were her own kind of people with whom she had every opportunity for happiness.

She could not have told why her attention had been slowly drawn from the main group around her toward a tall man who seemed to be waiting, on the station platform, for the group to dissolve. Perhaps she noticed him first because of his unusual height, a clean six feet accentuated by the lithe outline of his lean form. She noticed vaguely that he wore some loose leather garment over his khaki: what it was and its purpose she had no idea. She had seen chaps, in plenty, on the hard-riding characters in a cowboy movie, but she missed the long hair that is popularly supposed to adorn such garments. She saw that he wore a flannel shirt, neckerchief, a khaki coat and the wide-brimmed hat, that is and will always be the summer head-dress of the plains. From his lean, loose-hung form her eyes moved to his brown face.

If there was one thing about John Sherwood's face that attracted immediate second glance it was its homeliness. John never had won nor never would win prizes at a beauty show. It was a raw-boned, weather-beaten countenance, cut across by a large humorous mouth and speckled with paled-out freckles that must have been very notable in boyhood. Yet Charity looked into that homeliness and liked it. She did not know it, but 'most everybody, through the little ten thousand square miles of territory that was John's immediate neighborhood, liked it too.

The clearness, the peculiar straightforwardness that she had noticed in the eyes of most of her fellow-passengers was particularly notable in his. Deep lines of humor spread from their corners, and she liked their even, clear grey of iris. At present he was hurriedly trying to absorb the last puff of a home-made cigarette, but he dropped it instantly as he caught her gaze. He removed his great hat, and his big mouth curled in a slow smile.

He made his way toward her, not without some shyness. He was somewhat red and flurried, as he stood before her, and she guessed the reason for those last, frenzied puffs of cigarette smoke. He had been trying to stimulate himself for the trying ordeal of presenting himself to her.

One of her friends introduced him at once—John Sherwood, foreman of the Blair Ranch. His homely face lighted from the brilliancy of his smile.

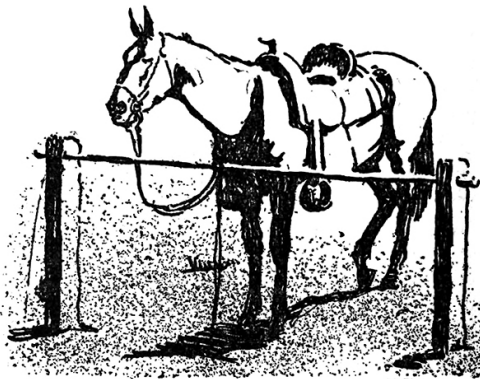
“So this is Miss Blair,” he began with an unmistakable shyness that won the girl’s friendship at once—shyness that was certainly incongruous in a man of his size and muscular development. He spoke very slowly, a man evidently none too deft with words, and with a drawl that might have belonged to the plains of Texas. “Miss’ Blair, she sent me down for to meet you. Kin I help you with your things?”

He took her bag, and she gave him the check for her trunk. “The boys will be along later, with a wagon, for the trunk. If you’re ready we’ll git goin’ right away. Quite a jaunt—to the ranch house.”

“Of course I’m ready.” Charity’s voice was gay, and just why in particular it should be she could not have told. . . . Of course there was no reason to be sorry that her aunt had sent this big foreman, with his pleasant, admiring eyes, instead of someone less companionable. . . . He had spoken of a ranch—a ranch that was some little distance away. The word suggested interesting possibilities.

She glanced about for the automobile that would carry her to the ranch, but on second thought she considered it likely that the ride would be made in some sort of carriage or wagon, as automobiles did not seem any too common in these sage-brush deserts. And it was not until John had led her across the road and halted her before a hitching rack that the truth flashed home.

There was no wagon or carriage to ride in. Tied to the rack were two large, fearful animals that John called the “ponies,” and Charity Blair, who had never bestrode a horse in her life, was evidently expected to ride one of them home to the ranch.



CHAPTER II

WINNING HER SPURS

CHARITY had counted on some slight adventure, but not anything like this. On the other hand, John had just missed being born on a horse, and of course could not immediately understand the look of unmistakable terror that came into the girl's face. In her mind horses ranked with cows and bears as dangerous and ferocious animals; and there was no make-believe or baby-posing in her apprehension now.

John saw with amazement the eager color die in her cheeks. "What's the matter, Miss Blair?" he asked gently. "Aren't you used to hosses?"

"Not very, I'm afraid." She tried to return his smile, but it was a pitiful attempt. "I don't see how I can go on horseback. I'm not dressed for it——"

John smiled happily. "Oh, that's it! She said you wouldn't be—and she sent in a ridin' skirt. I've got it here." The man indicated, with some embarrassment, a paper parcel under his arm, and when he spoke again the back of his neck was red and the words came with painful difficulty. "You can step in somewheres and put it on——"

He seemed amazed that she did not instantly brighten up. "I haven't done much riding. You spoke of a wagon——"

"A wagon is going to come in for your trunk, but you wouldn't want to ride in it," he told her earnestly. "The road's just a heap of rocks, you'd get your in'rds shook out of you, and could only go at walkin' pace at that. You say—you say you haven't ridden hosses much? I can see how that might be. Of course you could wait for the wagon, if you wanted to——"

There was a distinct note of disappointment in his voice. She wondered if it lay merely in the loss of her company home, or whether it had a deeper origin—a keen regret that she was failing to measure up to earlier expectations. For one moment a very genuine little battle was being waged in the secret places of Charity's being.

She was as truly afraid of the animal as a child is sometimes afraid to enter a dark room. And she knew, in her heart, that she could not take refuge here in the timidity that is the natural right of women. This big rancher had

thought well of her at first, but already she was giving herself away as a quitter and a coward. Worse still, perhaps, she was shattering the illusions she had held about herself. But as the desert sun poured down upon her the adventurer's blood moved in her veins again.

"Is he wild?" she asked suddenly.

"He's none too tame. He's a cayuse, but he's not vicious—not at all. He's apt to act skittish at times. But like enough you've been thrown before."

"Like enough I haven't!" Suddenly the smile came back, and with it heightened color; and the clear, hazel eyes were bright again. Charity suddenly knew that she would ride the horse if she died in the attempt.

In the home of one of the women she had met on the train she made a quick change into the riding skirt her aunt had so thoughtfully sent; and in a moment she reappeared, doing her best to smile.

John felt the back of his neck glow with pleasure at the sight of her. The idea of the long ride at her side—through the eternal wastes of sage—had gone straight home to his imagination. He knew a little clog dance with which, now and again, he celebrated extra special occasions; and he felt deeply tempted to perpetrate it now. He hurried to meet her, and then gave her her first lesson in horsemanship.

"He's plenty likely to prance around a bit when you first get on," he explained in a perfectly common-place tone—not in the least realizing that this bit of "prancing around" was terror itself to Charity. "So you want to be all ready, foot in the stirrup facin' backward, and then swing on. Sport here isn't a vicious hoss—just full o' go. I brought him along special because he's the next best hoss on the ranch. If it wasn't that old Nell here was standin' listening to me I might say in some ways he's the very best hoss on the ranch—at least he ain't so mean as some I know." He turned, doubtless with the idea of bestowing a few affectionate oaths upon Nell, remembered the presence of the lady, and thought better of it. "This way of gettin' on isn't the way that's taught in the army, or the ridin' colleges, but it's the only way in this Land that God Forgot. Put your hand in the hair—this way."

He showed her where to stand, locked her fingers in the hair of the mane, and for the first time noticed that she seemed oddly breathless and shaken. For the first time he got it through his head, usually alert but inordinately dull as far as the ins and outs of women were concerned, how really terrified she was. Of course she would be—this girl of cities; nor had

he helped to make it easier for her. And now he found himself watching her with an intensity of interest that he himself hardly understood. It was as if this had become one of the vital issues of his life: whether or not the girl's pluck would stand the test.

There was no thought, now, of suggesting she wait for the wagon. She had to learn to ride sometime if she were to do her work and fill her place in the Grey Lake country. Besides it was a personal matter with him now; a fervent hope and belief; he could not give way. There was a clear shadow of delight in his grey eyes when he saw her poise to spring on.

She leaped vigorously, and the next instant she had fallen back into John's arms. The horse, sensing her lack of mastery, had lurched to one side as she had tried to mount. She caught her balance; and by the whole might of her adventurer's soul managed to smile wanly into John's anxious face.

"Are you hurt?" he asked quickly.

"Not a bit. But if you hadn't caught me——"

"A bad beginning means a fine end," he told her in fervid prophecy. "Do you want to wait awhile before you try again?"

Whole worlds, he felt, hung on her answer. Her smile brightened until it looked almost genuine. "Do you think I'm going to walk! Please stand at his head——"

Again her foot found the stirrup, and her upward, vigorous leap landed her squarely in the saddle. There ensued a precarious moment in which the horse pranced sideways; but in a moment her foot had found the opposite stirrup and she was securely seated. The horse wheeled and pranced, but she did not lose her hold again.

Of course if the animal had not been well-broken she could not have kept her seat at all. The first vigorous buck would have hurled her over his head. As it was she found that her fears had been wholly in vain. John swung up on his horse, and rode at her side down the stony road that led toward the hills.

They rode slowly at first, partly to accustom Charity to the saddle, partly so that John could point out the interesting features of the landscape. From the first she could not doubt the reality of this man's love for the sage-brush plains in which his life was cast. Likely he could curse them eloquently, on occasion; yet she saw his ardor in every sweep of his clear eyes. It was a rugged, desolate land, rockbound and austere, yet to its brood of eagles it was home. It was a stern mother; but she had raised a litter of wolves.

The road passed soon by Grey Lake, the body of water for which the village was named; and Charity got her first glimpse of the wild life that throngs the sage-brush plains. The lake itself simply teemed with water-fowl; pelicans, like white ships, coots with bills of ivory, loons that yelled in hopeless maniacy, grey geese, and flocks of that aristocrat of waters, canvas-back ducks. Wings roared, as they passed, and John explained something of the delight of sitting behind decoys, on rainy, blustering fall days, and cracking down a score of these fine birds. But it was not until the road lifted them above the lake, and they rode between the rolling hills that she began to perceive the real spirit of the sage.

It was all very still, up here. The desert baked in the autumn sun. And its mood went into her: a sense of something infinitely venerable, wrapt in the silence of the ages, changeless as the stars. A scientist would have told her that the geological age of these plains was almost beyond reckoning in numbers; but she did not need to be enlightened on this point. She sensed it in her heart.

No wonder the desert men were silent, considering long before giving utterance to their thoughts. It was simply the teaching of the mother who had borne them.

And now John began to introduce her to her desert neighbors: such wild creatures as had homes in the sage. He showed her first the sage hens—those great, plump-breasted grouse that are best liked; brown as chestnut, in a frying pan—and then that tough old veteran, the sage-brush jack-rabbit. “Those jacks are the worst nuisance we got up here,” John told her, “and we’d be better off if every one of ’em was dead—and yet I sort of like ’em.”

This was evidently a confession of some import. “Then I don’t see why you like them,” she said, trying to draw him out.

“I don’t either. I know people in this neighborhood who’d advocate immediate hangin’ if they heard me say it, so don’t you tell nobody. It’s just that they keep on goin’, eatin’ crops and jumpin’ through the sage, for all our hardest efforts to kill, ears stickin’ up—tough old buzzards, that a greyhound can’t run down.”

He paused, and Charity sought his deeper meaning. She caught it dimly—that because these long-eared pests were standing the test of existence, keeping their tails up in spite of opposition, and standing the gaff of a hard-boiled, he-man’s land, John Sherwood loved them. He felt, in a vague way, that they were somehow his own people. He chuckled as a veteran jack

scuttled up the brown road, fell into his regular gait of soaring leaps, and soon vanished from their sight.

CHAPTER III

THE GREAT GREY STALLION

THEY rode along in silence. Asking permission first—a custom of chivalry that is not yet out-of-date on the frontier—John rolled a cigarette and drew the smoke far into his vitals. His thoughts were evidently busy, for they were almost to the top of the plateau before he spoke again.

“I’ve got some bum ideas about coyotes, too,” he ventured at last. “You haven’t seen a coyote yet, but you will plenty quick—a grey cuss that grins at you from under a sage-brush, and by the time you draw your six-gun he’s nowhere to be seen. You understand, Miss Blair, I do everything I can to get rid of coyotes.”

Charity nodded. She was to understand, from the first, that John did not let his mistaken sentiments interfere with the day’s work.

“I trap ’em and shoot ’em—or maybe I’d better say I try to trap ’em and shoot ’em,” he went on. “There’s no doubt at all that the coyote’s a coward, that he sneaks down and steals Miss’ Blair’s chickens, and does all kind of devilment. And yet—I can’t help but sort of like the cusses. They was born to be cowards, in the first place, and they’ve got too much sense to be anything else—they know what chance they’ve got with a pistol bullet. That’s what makes some of the boys so mad—old coyote’s too smart for ’em. They’re thieves, but somehow I can’t hold this agin ’em either. The main thing is—they keep right on comin’ in spite of everything we can do. A man called me a coyote once, intendin’ to be offensive. I says to him, ‘I don’t mind being a coyote, as he’s a friend of mine, but don’t let your imagination range too far.’ ”

They rode awhile in silence. “What did he say then?” the girl asked.

No answer was forthcoming for a while. “He had a powerful fine imagination,” John observed at last. “He let it run on, and I pretty near had to wash out his mouth with soap . . . Didn’t do him any real harm.”

They did not chance to see a coyote, along the rough road up the hill, but they did see what was ever so much more to their liking—nothing less than a band of those veritable children of the sage-brush lands, the incomparable pronghorn. John called them antelope, after the Western custom, but he took

pains to tell her that in reality they were not true antelope, but were rather a breed apart, holding down one of the limbs of the animal family tree all by themselves. They were slender, deerlike creatures, bearing an oddly-pronged horn; and every motion was grace beyond reach of words. As they skimmed away, more like birds than four-legged things, it was hard to see where their trim hoofs touched the ground. She watched them until the last flashing rump-patch—the recognition mark borne by 'most all wild creatures that travel in herds—had faded in the haze.

The two riders reached the top of the plateau, and now a level road made a straight path through the sage for the space of two miles. It was a good place for a second lesson in horsemanship. He asked her to set a faster pace.

She had gained considerable confidence in the last hour; so she spoke sharply and struck the animal lightly with her quirt. The result was somewhat unexpected. Sport had been schooled on the range, and with no interval of accelerating speed, he sprang at once into a swift, easy gallop. Charity managed to clasp the saddle horn: otherwise she would surely have been left in the dust behind.

In almost an instant, however, she caught the animal's motion, only to learn that loping was easier and more comfortable than to ride a horse at a walk. The wind swept into her face and disheveled her bobbed curls; and all in all it was the most stimulating experience of her life. Her laugh—as soon as her fear was past—peeled back to John: a sound so musical and merry that John's big mouth spread wide in a grin of pure sympathy.

It was really a significant moment for Charity. It was the beginning of a real love for horses and riding that was wholly necessary if she were to find happiness in the sage-brush lands. This was a horse country: the first requisite for success here was horsemanship. And John found himself watching her with deepening interest.

He suddenly came to an interesting conclusion—that Charity Blair, fresh from cities, had the makings of a real horsewoman. He couldn't have told how he knew—perhaps it was something in the way she bestrode her saddle, perhaps merely in the gaiety and spirit with which she raced along. He had a curious idea also that Sport was acting rather well; that, considering her inexperience, she was getting exceptionally good service out of him.

John believed fervently in the instincts of a "hoss." Many the times, caught out at night, he had let his animal guide him home. If Sport's good behavior was not merely a freak of chance it was surely because the animal knew, by light of his own horse sense, that this little, uncertain hand on his

rein was that of a born horsewoman. The idea gave the plainsman a keen pleasure.

The desert gods were in a particularly friendly mood to-day; and many glimpses of wild creatures, startled by the sudden appearance of the riders above the sage, helped to add delight to the long jaunt. Skies were blue; and the fall sunlight brought out the countryside in its greatest beauty: a lake glinting far away, the wastes of grey sage, the soft coloring of the barren, rocky hills. And as they started to dip down from the plateau they were granted a desert scene such as was to linger in Charity's memory for months to come.

John, riding in front again, suddenly exclaimed and drew his horse up short; then pointed down into the valley three hundred yards below. Charity looked, but at first could not read the cause of her companion's excited interest. All she could see was a band of horses, vivid against the sage, standing with lifted heads and pointed ears.

Yet an instant's glance told her that these were no ordinary horses. Instantly she recalled the little herd of pronghorn seen earlier in the journey: these animals below had something of the same freedom and grace of motion as had distinguished the wild denizens of the plains. They seemed simply aquiver with life: necks arched, nervous forefeet pawing; and the whole picture had that strange vividness, a sense of vigor and unbridled spirit, that characterizes all scenes of wild life. They seemed more like wild animals than domestic beasts of burden. Evidently they had been startled in their feeding; and were about to wheel in flight.

And now her gaze rested, with growing interest, on a great, grey stallion with flowing, snow-white mane and tail, an animal that stood near the head of the band. She had had no previous acquaintance with wild horses, but she knew instantly that this noble creature was a monarch among them. She had never seen such noble carriage on any living being.

Huge though the animal was, his lines were more nearly those of a race-horse than a draft animal. He had a long back, beautiful arching neck, a thin head and legs that were delicate for all their power: the living embodiment of strength and spirit. And now, with a thunderous beat of hoofs, he raced his band away.

"It's Thunder," John told her solemnly, "and his wild hosses. If I'd just had a rifle I'd cracked that old demon for good and all."



CHAPTER IV

THE THROB OF THE OPEN SPACES

CHARITY watched the band until they disappeared over the next rise; then turned with some wonder to her companion. She was a girl of spirit, and she resented, to the depths of her heart, John's last remark. She could not imagine a more despicable act than to strike the life from that great grey monarch of the plains. Just the sight of him had stimulated her imagination: indeed, she had never seen a living creature that had seemed to her so beautiful. She knew—with an unshakable conviction—that if freedom and spirit were worth preserving on this earth Thunder should certainly be spared. If any living creature lived to the full, certainly this was he. He was, to her, the very embodiment of all that is wild and free: the great, flashing spirit of the stretching sage. She was ordinarily a very peaceful little girl; but she felt at that moment she would fight for Thunder's life as she would fight for that of a friend.

He had personified, further, the spirit of adventure that had dwelt in her own heart. Surely, in this well-ordered world, a harnessed, conquered world, such a noble life as this could well be spared. And yet John had wished for his rifle, so that he could lay the splendid creature low!

She felt surging disappointment. John's love of nature, his love of living things that had delighted her so keenly could not be very genuine after all. She was not only disillusioned—she was profoundly distressed and hurt.

"I don't understand," she began, her voice cold in spite of herself, "why you should want to kill him."

She waited an instant for his pleasant drawl, hoping he could clear himself at once. "You see, Miss Blair, there's a price on his head——"

It was an unfortunate beginning. This only made it worse. The girl's cheeks went red, and she found herself struggling with rising anger. "Oh, is that it!" she answered him, in a cold, level voice. "You kill for money, do you? That puts the matter in a new light."

He gazed at her with widening eyes and gaping mouth. "Oh, good Lord, no!" he exclaimed. For once in his life John found himself wishing he had the gift of ready speech so that he could explain away, in an instant, the

steely light in the girl's clear eyes and the indignant flush in her cheeks. Words always came hard for him; and now, when he needed them most, he could not seize upon any at all. He stuttered and swallowed in greatest difficulty. "You don't understand, Miss Blair," he managed to say at last. "I don't want to kill him on my own account—not by a darn sight. In fact, I can't help but like him some too—just because his head is up and he's so full of go. Did you think, Miss Blair, that I go around killin' hosses just for the fun of it? I didn't s'pose you'd think that was my style."

His voice lowered moodily; and she saw that he was deeply hurt. "But you said—if you had a gun——"

"If I had a gun, I'd felt duty bound to shoot him—because it is Miss' Blair's orders—and it was Mr. Blair's orders too, before he died. You may not know it, but a man workin' for another man often has to do a few things he doesn't personally care about—because it's in the line of the day's work. Lord knows I kind of love that old sport, down in my heart. But my boss has ordered him to be shot on sight, and that's what I'm goin' to do, first chance I get. Miss' Blair is tryin' to raise hosses for a livin', and that old boy is helpin' to spoil the profits."

"Well I beg your pardon." The girl meant what she said; and the soberness, the quiet light in the girl's eyes set John's heart leaping. "I'm sorry I misjudged you."

Her frankness, the dignity of her apology was not wasted on him. Their friendly mood was instantly re-established. "The way it happens is this," John went on. "That old boy's immediate range is right around the Blair ranch. He doesn't travel all over somebody's half acre like most wild hosses—he keeps his band in this vicinity, most of the time, that is. I'll tell you the reason for that, too, in a minute. And hardly a month goes by but what he gets away with some of our mares."

"You mean—leads 'em away?"

"That's just it. Decoys 'em into joining his band—not only our mares but our neighbors' too. Sometimes he finds 'em on the open range, and leads 'em Lord knows where, and more than once he's busted down our corrals and led our cayuses away from under our noses. You know a stallion is hard to stop, once he gets goin'. And he learned to break down corrals years ago."

"And you've proved it on him?" she asked, eager to defend her hero to the last. "He hasn't many horses with him——"

“That’s true enough, but there isn’t any doubt but what he’s guilty. He leads ’em away, and we’ve got it figured out that most of ’em get mixed up with big bands of wild hosses, way back on the plateaus, and never get back again—when he gets more mares than he can catch, other stallions, big fighters on the plateaus, gets ’em away from him. The boys thought they’ve seen some of our brand in those bigger bands a few times—they couldn’t get close enough to see for sure or to round ’em up. You see hosses are always breakin’ up in little bands, each with a stallion, and since he couldn’t watch only so many, it isn’t surprisin’ that he hasn’t many with him now. I wouldn’t be surprised but that little bay he had with him now was our brand—we lost a horse that looked mighty like it.”

“But I thought you said he didn’t leave this immediate vicinity? Then how could he lead the other horses so far away you’d never see them——?”

He eyed her with considerable admiration. “You’re a good little fighter for your pet hoss, but the evidence is all against you. Hosses don’t run off by themselves, or break down corrals regular. This is his beat, and I will say the boys see him, a long way off, almost every day, but he has plenty of time to range back in the plateaus in between. No, Miss Blair, this Thunder is about as expensive a luxury as a hoss range ever tried to support. He comes in the night, and away go our mares.”

“You were going to tell me what causes him to make his range right around here.”

“That’s so, I was. You see, Miss Blair, this country—way back in the plateaus—is overrun with wild hosses that have never smelled leather. Of course they’re not, strictly speakin’, wild animals, for the reason that there weren’t any wild hosses on this continent when Columbus discovered America. They’re just the offspring of stock that got away from the settlers, years ago—but they’re wild as deer, just the same. Most of these hosses we just saw were that kind—never been branded or rounded up; stock that’s been wild for several generations. Thunder, however, was born in a stable and has worn a bridle—on the Blair ranch a number of years ago.

“Maybe you didn’t notice he had the B-Bar brand. Well, he was born the likeliest colt that old Wiggin, who owned the ranch then, ever saw. I’ve heard a lot about him since I’ve been here. He was sired by a fancy stallion down in Lakeview, and his dame was the fastest little she-devil that ever rounded up steers in Harney County. Wiggin’s daughter, Dora, made a pet of Thunder, and she used to climb all over him, and feed him sugar, and ride him all over the lot, without saddle or even a halter on him, before he was

three years old. Made a regular pet out of the big, grey brute—and the boys say he had the best disposition, and was all round the smartest hoss ever raised on the B-Bar. But he was no more than broke to a bridle when Wiggin sold the ranch to your uncle, and went east, takin' Dora with him. And a week after that Thunder jumped the fence and has run wild ever since.

“Round him up? About as much chance as roundin' up an antelope. None of our hosses can keep in sight of him, much less round him up. He can dodge a whole lot quicker than a mink. The boys gave up, after while, writin' him off the books, and that'd been all right if he hadn't started his horse-thieving business.

“That was about two years ago. Marvin, one of the boys, took after him and saw him with the first bunch. Thunder took 'em off the range. Since then the boys have been huntin' him with a rifle, but as yet they haven't been able to get near enough for a shot. Oscar the Swede would have got him, too, one night, if he'd known one end of a gun from another. The Swede laid for him in women's clothes——

“I forgot to tell you that he isn't afraid of women. Miss' Blair has had him come up to the edge of the corral, in broad daylight, and whinny at her when she comes out. The only reason I can think of—the only possible reason—is that Dora's kindness to him isn't forgotten yet. Some way, he's got it in his tough old head that women folks give a fellow sugar, and tickle him between the ears, instead of shoutin' at him. So Oscar laid for him one night, when the mares were whinnyin', and Thunder came up within thirty yards of him. Oscar says the gun went off before time, but he just plumb missed him. He was wary for a while, but some day one of the boys will get him that way yet.”

Soon the talk drifted into other channels; and Charity found that she was not only painfully tired, but sore and lame from the long ride. The afternoon was already far advanced. The light was even more diffused on the barren hills, and as they dimmed they seemed to increase in mystery. Toward the end John was encouraging the tired, pain-wracked girl with his slow smile, as they rode on in silence.



CHAPTER V

THE RANCH

BUT they saw the ranch at last, in the hollow beside a white stream, and they made the rest of the way in a brisk and triumphant gallop.

Whatever fears she had felt were quickly dispelled at the sight of the comfortable ranchhouse, shaded by a few tall poplars that were watered by the stream. It was not a mansion; but lights were already warm and bright in its windows, and it was very plainly a secure shelter against the winter's cold and wind. It was far more than she had anticipated. About the main structure lay numerous barns and corrals, a smokehouse where fragrant hams and bacons were doubtless in the process of curing, a poultry shed in which flocks of snow-white fowl were already going to roost. And her aunt, a sweet-faced, motherly woman in black who instantly won her heart, was standing at the gate to meet her.

She kissed the tired-out girl with matronly gentleness, then guided her into the big, cool white-walled room. Almost at once she felt refreshed. Here she soon met Molly, a quarter-breed Indian who helped in the kitchen, and a half dozen men who worked the ranch.

For all her experience on the westbound train she was hardly accustomed to such manifest admiration as these men gave her. Her arrival was evidently a most important and long-looked-for event—the men had brushed and scrubbed themselves until they fairly gleamed—and evidently she had surpassed their brightest hopes. This fact was not only evident in their eagerness, their actual falling over one another to do her service, but by a few muttered comments that she overheard.

“Oh, why, oh, why didn't I volunteer for that job of goin' after her,” one of the older men—a weather-beaten plains man evidently of infinite humor, who she later learned was Lying Bill—complained to his buddy. “Then I'd have a head start on all you birds——”

“You want to know why, you pore deluded old fool?” was the answer. “Because old John would have gone hisself if it was the middle of the round-up. Catch that foxy old coyote losin' out!”

Dinner was announced almost at once; and her aunt led her toward a clean, white table in an adjoining room. And at first Charity was wholly at a loss to understand some mysterious procedure that was going on behind her.

She had noticed that John had started with her, walking on the opposite side from Mrs. Blair, but he had abruptly disappeared and the older man she had overheard talking walked in his place. Soon Lying Bill also fell away, swung suddenly out of the range of her vision, and another man, who seemed oddly out of breath, took his place. In a moment this man fell back, stricken as if from behind, and John reappeared.

But if Charity was puzzled Mrs. Blair understood completely. She suddenly turned, and her half-dozen men stood solemnly at attention. Each was flushed and breathless from what had been seemingly an attempt to vanquish the other five in silent battle—and yet not push into Charity. Nor did their innocent faces deceive their mistress at all.

“If you don’t stop crowding you’ll knock Miss Blair over,” she told them. “I’m going to sit on one side of her, to see that she’s taken care of, and that’s final. You’ll have to draw lots for the other side.”

No wonder Charity’s face flushed, and no wonder her heart had a gay little lilt in her breast. These six Saint Bernards had actually pulled each other about for the honor of dining at her side. The old days in a drab boarding-house in a distant city seemed far away indeed.

They grouped themselves solemnly about her; and entering into the spirit of their play, she herself prepared the lots—matches of varying length. The shortest match won, she said. Then holding them in her little, cool fingers she let the men draw.

She felt fairly sure of the outcome before all the men had drawn. She knew how she had grouped the matches, and the third man to draw, a powerfully built, grey-eyed, quiet-spoken man named Marvin, drew what she believed to be the shortest cut. This man had commanded her interest at once upon introduction—she recognized him immediately as a resolute, headstrong, passionate type, scarcely the easy-going, kindly breed of his fellows—but she was not especially pleased to have him win. She had felt she could not be at ease with him as with the others; besides, there was a steely, magnetic light in his grey eyes that she did not like. Now his deeply-lined face showed his triumph.

The others drew, then compared cuts. And she was wholly bewildered and amazed when a half-inch of match in John’s hand showed that he had

won the draw.

Just a little glimmer of the truth went home to her when she looked into the man's face. It was triumphant, of course—quite in contrast to Marvin's angry countenance—but there was also an odd pucker about his eyes that looked suspiciously like wile. She got the idea then that the foreman was not altogether the simple and guileless plainsman she had thought him. And when she saw the broken end of the match she knew the truth.

In the confusion around her, she could not wholly overhear all that passed between John and Marvin, but she managed to catch the conclusion of what had evidently been a rather heated conversation. "You let out one squeak," John had said with certain good-humored finality—after which silence reigned—"and you'll find yourself wrong end up in the hoss-tank—right in front of her, too."

When she was seated, and her plate was heaped with fried chicken, Irish and sweet potatoes, turnips cooked in butter and crisp, pickled beets, when she was going forward splendidly with a fork in one hand and a hot muffin spread with marmalade in the other, she took occasion to reprimand the triumphant John. "You know you substituted," she said. "I didn't have that short a match!"

"Shhh!" John cautioned. Then, innocently and blandly: "Musta got it mixed up with a broken one in my pocket."

Charity slept that night in a white bed in a great, chill room—a night's rest that largely took the pain of riding from her muscles and put contentment in her soul. Then, after a breakfast of ham fried in thick slices and as tender as chicken, eggs so fresh that they seemed golden globes set in snow, griddle cakes of buckwheat, biscuits and honey, John brought her her saddle pony for a first jaunt about the ranch.

On the following Monday she took up the school work, to find at once that all her fears in regard to it had been wholly without justification. It was true that she was required to teach not one grade, but all the grades of the usual public school; but the growing boys and wind-tanned little girls, that sat at the old-fashioned desks, all came from the three or four great ranches in the immediate neighborhood, had had the best of home-training and discipline, and she found a real pleasure in working with them. But these hours were but a small part of her day. She was up at seven—which was scarcely daylight in the short, winter days—yet until the last "zamination" paper was graded at night every moment was full.

She soon got on a basis of easy companionship with most of the men. She took part in many of their complicated practical jokes on one another, and felt no ill-will when they turned these weapons on herself; she romped with them as the tom-boy she naturally was, and her ready wit enabled her to chaff away with the keenest of them. They swore by her in no time at all. Marvin, however, was something of a problem to her. He remained outwardly aloof, saying scarcely a half-dozen words to her from the day's beginning to its close, yet she felt oddly ill-at-ease in his presence. Her instincts told her that which her senses could not verify—that she dwelt in his thoughts much more than he pretended, but never as the give-and-take comrade and good companion that she was to his fellows. Sometimes, turning quickly, she caught a look of speculation in his vivid eyes that embarrassed and estranged her. She felt glad that he did not join in the rough games she played with the other men: she knew that the touch of his hands would have deeper meaning and significance. Most of the others she would have trusted in almost any situation—their natural chivalry toward her was as fine a thing as she had ever seen—but she had no wish to be delayed on the trail with Marvin. Pedro, a dark-skinned youth of uncertain breed, who dined with the squaw in the kitchen, she did not meet at all. She saw John Sherwood's hand in this. He was her guardian from the first, and he had ideas of his own concerning the social relations between girls of his own race and half-breed Mexicans.

But John did make her known to the nature that he knew and loved. Sometimes he took her abroad with him on his work about the ranch; and he taught her the primitive outdoor sports of the frontier. Armed with a twenty-gauge shotgun, the property of her aunt, she walked with this stalwart Westerner through the brushy creek bottoms after sage chickens and it was a great moment when, after many misses, she made a clean kill of a fast-flying bird. He taught her how to find her aim with both eyes open, how to gauge distance and velocity of flight; and he could not want a more eager student. Good shooting, after all, is largely a matter of a good central nervous system; and Charity's clean-living, vigorous ancestors had given her this. She had a swift, sure eye, clear as John's own; her vigorous young brain coordinated perfectly with her muscles, and these made a combination that was exceedingly deadly for the sage hens. But of course John was careful to explain—lest she overshoot herself with conceit—that sage-hen shooting was simply the primary grade of a hard school, simply a matter of preparation for a king's sport in the marshes that was to come.

This sport, she learned in time, was simply canvas-back duck shooting over a stool of decoys; and before she tried it she was a little amused at the

fervor with which John described it. He inferred that the opportunity to sit, wind-wracked and wet, at the edge of a marsh was a heaven-sent privilege that no mere tenderfoot should be permitted to enjoy; but should be kept as a last award for the tried and true. But before ever she saw a stool of decoys she had absorbed something of his enthusiasm. The sparkle in his eyes crept into hers.

There was not much opportunity to shoot water fowl this season, for the plain reason that winter was closing down too swiftly; but one stormy November day John led her toward the duck-lakes for the first time. She learned then that one does not choose good weather to hunt ducks. It was a windy, bitter day, with fine rain sweeping over the flats—the kind of day that people with well-balanced minds spend comfortably indoors—yet John seemed to think it a day of parts. He was exultant throughout the windy ride from the ranchhouse to the tule-grown edge of the desolate marsh.

Even before that ride was done Charity felt that she was tasting outdoor sport with a vengeance. She was chilled through, her face burned from the wind, and her fingers ached in her riding gloves; but she found that this was only the beginning of the day's discomfort. The thick wall of tules into which John led her was some protection from the wind; but here she encountered the most grilling physical labor she had ever imagined.

The tule growth itself was practically impassable. The tall reeds, rustling in the wind, withstood even John's great strength; so they were obliged to follow the narrow trails that cattle and horses had broken through. When they crossed the open sloughs between they sank to their knees in the tenacious mud.

Charity understood, now, why John had insisted that she wear hip boots and riding trousers instead of her riding skirt. She found that every step required a distinct and really tremendous effort: she could go forward only at a snail's pace and at the greatest cost of her strength and energy. At every fifty feet she had to pause, catch her breath, and rest.

John did not try to hurry her. He had looked forward with some misgivings to this hour, and now he felt increasing wonder that the girl was willing to go on at all. The truth was Charity had never needed her adventurer's spirit more than now.

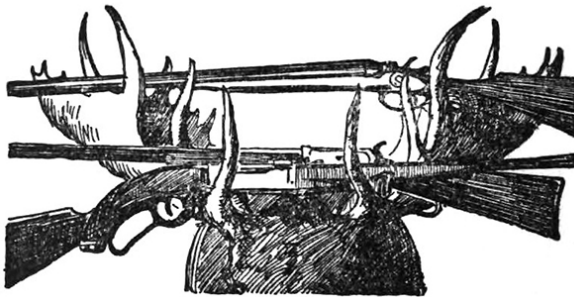
Yet the idea of giving up and turning back actually did not occur to her. Somehow, it was not in the code of the plains to give up—and to turn back. Life commanded that she be hard and tried. It was a duty imposed not on every one, but only upon a certain, strong breed to which, she knew in her

deepest soul, she had been born: an obligation that she could not trace or analyze but which was as inexorable as death. It was not the love of sport, nor even the impulse to make good in John's eyes that had brought her here.

The same command, the same inner law that sends the Viking out upon his wintry seas, that impels the sportsman to leave his comfortable home and follow the bitter game-trails of the North, had hold of her now—and somehow, somewhere there was a great, moving scheme and aim behind it all. Sometime, somewhere, whether in this world or the next, this cruel training that she was undergoing now would stand her in good stead.

They reached the blind at last, John distributed the decoys, and now she had forgotten her misery in the excitement of the sport itself. The air was full of the beating wings of water-fowl. She knew, that morning, the never-to-be-forgotten thrill of the first sight of a flock of "cannies," beating down toward her on the wind; the swift strengthening of the waving, dark line on the sullen sky; the devastating fear that the flock would not turn into the blind; the last second of breathless, unspeakable suspense; the swift flash of her gun-barrels as she tried to catch the speed and angle of their flight; and then—and then the surging disappointment of seeing the duck wing on unhurt, or the blood-mad triumph of "dead bird."

She made few hits, at first. Except for the fact that the ducks were passing in immense numbers and that John had brought a large supply of shells she would not have procured enough birds for dinner. As it was she made five kills at the expenditure of nearly a hundred shells—and John made five more with a tenth as many. This was enough for them—and at ten o'clock they were ready to turn back. Her strength had been greatly taxed but she knew it was a necessary part of her training for greater trials.



CHAPTER VI

INTRODUCED TO A RATTLER

IT had been one of the most vivid days in Charity's life, and its pleasure had lain not only in the shooting. The whole atmosphere of the marshes had gone home to her imagination: the sullen sky, the desolate expanse of grey water, the myriad whispering voices of the wind in the depths of the tule thicket, the sense of something old and strange and inscrutably mysterious.

She knew to the full that day the consolation of a warm shelter after a day in the storm. She appreciated the good, wholesome food on her aunt's table as never before. And because they had been cold and tired together, because they had stood side by side and shared their triumphs and their failures, she felt that her companionship with this tall son of the plains was ever more close, ever more fine.

She hunted the mule deer with him on the plateaus to return in triumph with two quarters of venison hung on each of their saddles; and she tracked jack-rabbits with him in the first snow. Meanwhile John did not forget the more important branches of her education—the ability to sit right on a “hoss.”

Her riding lessons were never done. Because he believed always in a thorough mastery of first principles John made her discard her saddle and practise riding bareback, explaining that in no other way could she ever learn the motion of a horse. It was an easy matter to keep her seat when the animal walked quietly about the lot; but this was scarcely the beginning of her training. He taught her how to relax every muscle of her body, taking up the jolt of a trotting horse at the base of her ribs; he showed her how to spring on lightly, one hand caught in the mane—one motion that was remarkably easy once she got the swing of it. He impressed upon her that she must learn to grip with her knees rather than her hands. What he could not teach her she learned by constant practice.

Two hours a day, not to count the ride back and forth to school, she spent on horseback—and some quality of iron in her make-up never permitted her to rest. John had not been mistaken in thinking her a born horsewoman. She not only learned easily, had good balance and control, but she showed

almost from the beginning an understanding and love of horseflesh such as made her teacher glow with pride. Her mounts gave her the best they had in them; and John explained, painstakingly, the care and consideration that a horse is entitled to in return.

She learned to tell a good horse from a vicious one by a single glance into its eyes; she knew the wide hock of a heavy puller, and the long back and sleek legs of a fast runner. She learned the tone of voice that could best quiet a nervous animal, how to spring free from the saddle and save broken bones in a bad fall, how to guide with a touch of the rein at her horse's neck. Best of all, she developed the necessary nerve.

Many the times that nerve was taxed to the utmost. She received plenty of dangerous and painful falls, but always she was willing to mount and try again. The months passed; and with them the name of tenderfoot. Her saddle became her rocking chair; and with constant practice she gained skill at bareback riding that was not too common even in this land of horsewomen. Sitting erect, knees gripping but arms free, she could keep her seat not only on a loping horse, but on a pony running at top gait over rough country. No sudden turn or leap, nothing short of actual bucking, could cost her her balance.

Of course the winter had come and gone, long before this. The whole land had become one glittering snowfield, and the wind was a raving demon over the wastes. Yet these winter days had not been without interest for her. Her school work kept her fairly busy; and John was always ready to help her into her snowshoes and accompany her on any kind of a tramp through the white drifts. On these days the fire burned ceaselessly in the big hearth of the ranchhouse; and the rough blankets were kindly on the bitter nights.

Her interest in Thunder, the wild stallion, had never abated. In her tramps with John she had often seen him, head high and white mane flowing, leading his band through the drifts; and the night's talk about the fire was full of him. He had not visited their corral for some months, but none of the ranch hands ventured the opinion that he had reformed. He had never troubled them greatly in the winter, doubtless because the domesticated animals could not be beguiled from the hay stacks in these snowy days of poor feeding—but every one seemed to believe that his depredations would recommence in spring. But it was not to be endured another season.

His death sentence had been signed and sealed: John himself felt it his duty to co-operate in the plot against the life of this great, grey monarch of

the sage.

The men had learned the animal's mortal weakness, which was women. A woman, long ago, had administered caresses and sugar, had ridden him about the pasture and pulled his flowing mane; and the memory of this kindness was to be his downfall yet. His instinct was to approach rather than flee from women, and the ranch hands would simply take advantage of this fact. Clad in woman's garb they would lay for him and slay him. This time there would be no failure: Marvin himself, a dead shot, would be one of the two riflemen selected for the work.

March gave way to April, and spring dawned once more in the Grey Lake country. The snow melted slowly; first in the valleys, then on the plateaus, and every little stream became a roaring flood of muddy snow-water. The ice broke up on the lakes, and great flocks of water fowl returned to nest in the reeds. This was a country of nameless beauty in the spring. The grass was richly green between the sage; and in this little time of opportunity, before the long drouth set in again, the lesser wildflowers blossomed in indescribable profusion. All the desert world was astir with the new awakening.

Yet spring brought little promise to Charity Blair. She found small pleasure in the slow growth of its beauty. She could not forget that spring meant the close of the school year—and that her glorious adventure was all but done.

The last night of the last school day was one of many tears to the little school ma'am, lying awake in her white bed in the chill room. There was only despair for her to-night. She was face to face at last with the seeming certainty that she had heard the night wind at these eaves for the last time—that on the morrow she would take the train again, saying good-by forever to the land of the grey sage. Neither John, the tall plainsman who had begun to hold her heart, nor Mrs. Blair, the gentle, motherly woman to whom she had given a daughter's love, had asked her to stay for another year.

It did not so much as occur to her that the reason could be other than that they did not want her. To-night she believed, in her child's heart, that she had been a failure after all. Her life was soon to resume its former drab and level course. Her destiny had been written long ago and was to remain unchanged. The superintendent of the North-End School had corresponded with her, offering her the position for the next year, and she saw no course but to accept.

“So you’re leaving to-morrow,” had been her aunt’s comment in their talk of the evening before. “I can’t tell you—how happy I’ve been to have you here—how satisfied the school board is with your work. But I suppose you’ll be happier.”

Happier! The only happiness Charity had ever known had been within these same humble walls.

This had been their farewell—never a word to suggest that she would be welcome for another year; not a sentence that she could interpret as encouragement to stay. Once the woman’s face had clouded and she had seemed about to speak further; and for an instant Charity’s heart had raced in her breast. But in an instant more the woman had turned away, the longed-for words unspoken. Whatever pity the woman had felt for her had evidently been suppressed. Once she had seen a queer, drawn look on John’s homely, good-natured face; and again her heart had thrilled with hope. But evidently this, also, was a delusion born of her prayers.

She had been a failure. True, the men seemed to like her well enough, and her aunt had always seemed to take considerable pleasure in her companionship; but evidently she had not endeared herself to such an extent that they really felt need of her. She fancied there must be some fatal shortcoming in her make-up. She had been as good a sportswoman as she knew how, good-humored in hardship, brave in trial; yet all this had come to nothing. It was a desolate fact to her that not even the least of the ranch hands had spoken with regret of her coming departure. They had all been polite enough in wishing her farewell—with a curious, strained politeness she could not analyze—but evidently none of them really cared. The North-End School and Mrs. Wilson’s boarding-house were the only prospects that remained.

Desolate in heart she got up in the dawn, ate her breakfast, good little sport that she was, tried to talk cheerily to her aunt. It was little consolation to her that she was the only cheerful person at the table; that her aunt, John, most of the men, and even Molly who served her biscuits and honey seemed oddly sober, almost depressed. What gaiety they did attempt had a false ring.

John saddled up her horse and his own, and the entire household came to the gate to bid her good-by. “You’ll think of us sometime, way out here, won’t you Charity?” her aunt asked slowly. “You’ll be back among your friends, but you won’t forget us?”

Her friends! These were her real friends: these tall, sober plainsmen who gathered to shake her hands. “I’ll not forget you, that’s certain.” And soon

she turned, waving, and rode away at John's side. And at that moment she spoke the first really bitter words that had ever fallen from her lips.

"I don't see why you should come if you have anything else to do," she told John. "I believe I can find the way myself."

She was at a loss to understand the pronounced pallor at his cheek bones as her words went home. He looked into the dust of the roadway. "I wouldn't think of letting you go alone—even though you want to," he answered at last.

It was no joy to her that this was a perfect spring day, sky blue and wonderfully clear, soft warm May winds, flowers shining in the grass, the sun genial and warm above. These two were riding forth for the last time. . . . This was their last adventure—just the long ride through the sage to the railway station.

They rode in silence clear to the top of the first hill—about a mile from the ranchhouse. And now it appeared that the desert gods had arranged some little diversion for them after all.

John, riding in front, abruptly drew up his horse. His quick gaze had discerned the least, furtive movement in the stones beside the old road; and Charity caught that subdued flash in his level eyes that had come to indicate, to her, the impending wakening of his great, sleepy muscles. This was what he loved: the little adventures of the highway. He pointed, but for a moment she could see nothing but the grey stones about the roots of the sage.

But John had not been deceived. Peering intently her eye was able to follow a blurred grey line that soon evolved itself into a queer coil. It was a living thing, truly; one of the most hated of living things in all this grey sweep of sage: a cold-blooded, cold-eyed rattlesnake, newly risen from his winter lair.

John Sherwood liked nearly every earthly thing that lived; but he had no love for this roadway loiterer. He knew him rather too well. The cold, glittering eye, the flat head, the drawing stealth of his motions were all a good index to one of the most cruel and terrible characters in all the world of living things; and besides the western rattlesnake, full grown, has now and then put a swift end to a useful human life. He appeared sluggish, incapable of fast movement; but John was not in the least taken in by these things. He knew that should his hands pass close enough that flat head would strike with the speed of a whip-lash. And the rattlesnake carries, in cunningly-contrived glands, as deadly a toxin as a chemist would wish to concoct in his

laboratory: a mysterious proteid combination that acts directly on the bloodstream.

“I’m afraid that old boy showed himself the wrong time,” he informed her. He swung easily down from his horse, being careful to drop the reins over her head so that she might be on hand when he wanted her again. The man’s next act was to cut a heavy piece of brush, hardly more than three feet long. There was no need of a longer weapon: the leap of a rattlesnake is a limited and restricted thing. Then with a single blow he dispatched the snake’s cold, wicked life.

A very quiet and uneventful proceeding. He stooped to examine the rattles, and Charity, throwing down her reins, came and stood beside him. It was a full-grown snake—a female, John thought from certain designs of the ornamental pattern of its markings. Then they both turned back to their horses.

But this desert adventure was not yet done. John had already mounted, and just as she held the reins at the horse’s neck, ready to swing on, a darting pain, sharp as a burn, suddenly lashed into the soft flesh of her leg above her boot-top.

One flash of thought, before ever she saw the movement in the dead grass at her feet, told her the truth. The old she-rattlesnake had not loitered alone in the roadway. She had been accompanied by her wicked mate, one of the largest rattlesnakes that John had ever seen, and her death had been summarily avenged.

Charity screamed as the snake struck—a shrill sound that was purely reflex and did not, fortunately, augur a complete loss of self-control. Her animal shied sharply, and feeling no restraint galloped swiftly away. At the same instant John left his saddle in one swift, cat-like bound. Because he did not take time to throw down the reins his mare also, blind terror lashing through her, dashed away with Charity’s horse.

He realized at the first instant that this omission could very easily have tragic consequences. Springing off without confining the horse might turn out to be an extremely serious mistake. It is one of the first rules of the frontier to keep all roads open behind—never to cut oneself off, in any crisis, from the base of operations. He knew further the universal rule that too much haste is often paid for later by disastrous delays. He had saved a second, but it might cost him precious moments in the end. But to-day the urgency of that shrill scream, the terror and the pain behind it, had hurled him to her side before he had time to think.

But it was not John Sherwood's general habit to make very many false motions in a crisis; and he made no more. He was somewhat pale and intent, but every nerve and muscle were in entire subjection when he reached her side. He glanced once at her face; and their eyes met in perfect understanding. There would be no need of forceful measures with Charity. Terror had hold of her, nothing less than the instinctive horror of death, yet her sturdy adventurer's soul commanded her still. Long ago John had thought he had seen good mettle in this girl of cities; and here he found his proof. She would not become hysterical, make John's work more hard by panic or loss of self-control. He was to remember long after the curious firmness at her pale lips, the amazing quietude of her gaze.



CHAPTER VII

FATE'S METHODS ARE ROUGH BUT SURE

“HE was a big cuss,” the man said swiftly. “That means we’ll have to work quick.”

The girl understood. A full-grown rattlesnake carries and administers a correspondingly larger and more deadly charge of venom. And the swift work of which John had spoken did not include what might have otherwise been a normal impulse—revenge upon the rattler. The snake crept away, and John did not lose precious seconds in pursuing it.

With one motion he lifted the girl in his arms and laid her on the grass. One pull of his strong fingers and he had torn the buckles of her garter from the cloth of the stocking; and her white leg was bared. The height of the wound in itself would have indicated the unusual size of the snake—most western rattlers are able to strike but a few inches above the ground. In the full swell of the calf, just above the boot-top, he found the red marks where the two poison-laden hypodermic needles in the snake’s jaws had gone home.

He bent and at each red wound in turn he created a powerful suction with his lips, drawing forth at once the greater part of the venom. It would have seemed a brave thing to do had not both of them known that rattlesnake venom is effective only when introduced directly into the blood stream; and that if John should swallow any of the evil liquor it would not do him the least harm. The only risk he ran was one of infection in some small cut or wound in his mouth and lips.

His next work was to make an X cut over the stings with the razor edge of his knife. Except for deepening color in her face the girl gave no sign that she felt the blade at all. The dark wine of her veins flowed forth, washing the wound of a large part of the remaining venom.

“I think we’ve got him on the hog,” the man said—the first words he had spoken since he had laid her down. “But we’re not going to take a chance. Give me that scarf.”

He indicated the silk band that she wore at the collar of her middie blouse. Her fingers were deft and sure as she took it off and put it in his

hands. "It'll be cleaner than my handkerchief," he went on, "and I know you don't carry a man's size handkerchief. We've got to have a tourniquet—at least until I can get you home."

He put the blue scarf about her leg above the wound, knotted it, and by inserting the handle of his knife, turned until the arterial flow was halted in the leg. The girl winced but did not cry out; and now he had done all he could until he could get her home.

One glance showed him the folly of trying to catch the ponies, feeding on the grass-slope beyond; nor did he care to leave her while he walked the mile to the ranchhouse for help. His arms tingled with strength.

"I guess I'm to be hoss," he told her quietly, and she wondered at the ghost of a smile that haunted his lips. She did not dream that the grinding labor of carrying her hundred and twenty pounds all the way down the hill could be anything more to him than duty, painful but unavoidable. She thanked him in her heart for his good nature and sportsmanship as he raised her to his breast.

But she need not have done that. At that instant John Sherwood would not have changed places with any man living.

They started out down the brown road. She wondered at the breadth of that brawny chest, the comfort with which she lay in his arms. His heart beat steadily and strong against her breast. And John gazed with ill-concealed delight into her flushed face.

In all the days of this tall grave Westerner there had never been an experience that pleased him quite so much as this. He was a quiet man, given to dreams—and this somehow surpassed dreams. It was the sort of thing that words simply couldn't reach—the way her bobbed curls fell away from her clear, young brow and lay against his shoulder, the warmth of her childish breath against his cheek, the nearness of her red, curving lips. His imagination had never traveled this far before: that it could really be true. Even this, merely an outgrowth of a crisis on the trail, had seemed to him to overleap his common-place destiny—nothing less than a crown and glory to his silent, lonely life. He did not feel her weight except for a soft pressure that to him was only dear. He tingled all over with sheer joy—just to be carrying her back to the ranchhouse in his arms.

He was largely unaware of the purely physical strain that was being made upon his great strength. His thoughts and imagination were too busy to comprehend the real severity of the labor. His pounding heart, however,

indexed it unmistakably, and Charity listened to it with growing dismay. She could also guess the growing strain upon his hard, gentle arms.

She gazed into his homely, weather-beaten face, now so strangely lighted and exultant. His clear eyes smiled into hers. And now she saw a way to save him.

“Wouldn’t it rest your arms—if I should hang on?” she asked. “I’m just a dead weight, now——”

His imagination leaped ahead of her words and he nodded happily. Then her arms crept about his neck, and her face rested against his lean jaw. In this manner she was able to support a large part of her own weight; but this was only the beginning of it. It brought home to John a profound but unhappy truth: that the road up the hill had been constructed much too short—that with any luck at all it should have been five miles instead of one.

Mrs. Blair saw them coming afar and hurried to meet them; and when she learned the truth she was almost as cool and efficient as John himself had been. She too was of the plains: many crises had taught her self-control. She held the doors wide while John carried her up and laid her on her own white bed.

Free application of a solution of permanganate of potash crystals completed the treatment. The tourniquet was loosed at intervals so that what little venom remained could be absorbed in small quantities; and within an hour she was wholly out of danger. Two hours later it became manifest that John’s swift work had caught the poison at its root, and that she was not even to suffer ill effects.

She drifted easily to sleep, waking shortly after noon to find her Aunt Mary still sitting by her bedside. And then, in a little talk that followed, a great misunderstanding was straightened out. It was the crowning glory of a strangely notable day.

“I can’t let you go now until you’re completely well,” the older woman had begun. “It was likely a much greater shock to you than you know. And that means we’ll have you for another few weeks, at least!”

She spoke so happily, so eagerly that Charity found herself staring with amazement. She smiled, wanly. “Yes, I guess I’m thrust on you for a few weeks more. It’s fate, I guess.”

“You won’t mind it, will you—since it makes us all so happy,” the woman went on. “Of course, it’s dull for you, none of the pleasures that you’re used to, or none of your kind of people, and we wouldn’t presume to

ask you to endure it any longer except for this accident. We've all tried to be careful about that, not to impose on your sweet, good nature. We all bless you for staying as long as you have—all of us, from John to Molly. But you'll make the best of it, won't you, considering it's necessary for your health?"

Charity suddenly sat up in bed. A sudden glimpse of a truth she should have seen days ago flashed home to her; but she dared not believe it without further proof. She must not let her hopes fly away with her again.

"Let me get this straight," she said quickly. "This is too important a matter to have any misunderstandings about—so don't be afraid to hurt my feelings if I'm on the wrong track. Was it because you thought I didn't want to stay, that I was bored and tired, that you didn't encourage me to take the job here for another year?"

The woman's eyes shone with excitement "My dear little girl, you surely didn't dream there could be any other reason? Surely you knew how we wanted you, how we were all praying that you would stay——"

"Wait just a minute." The girl stretched out her hands. "And you didn't urge me because you thought it might make it harder for me to go—that I might stay in spite of my own wishes just to please you? Is that the way it was?"

"Of course it was! Surely you couldn't have thought we didn't *want* you to stay? Why, Charity, you've become one of us—you've been like a daughter to me. If I could just believe that you would stay here for the rest of my declining years I'd be the happiest woman in the world. But it's so lonely here, and no brilliant times like you're used to, and you're so beautiful, and all——"

"Brilliant times like I'm used to!" The girl's clear eyes shone. "Aunt Mary, the first happiness I ever found I found right here in this house. How you could dream I'd want to go back to that lonely old city, a thousand times more lonely than this place, I can't imagine. Why, this is my own country!"

It was true. She had made it her own.

"You don't mean——" the woman began.

"I mean I'm going to stay here as long as you want me, and please don't stop wanting me—for a long, long time."

Then because she was Charity Blair, brave of heart enough but a child still, her face went to the pillow and her tears told what her words could not.

But she was dry-eyed and jubilant enough when John came in, some time later, to see how she was getting on. He had heard the news that she was going to stay, and the little clog dance he had threatened at the station, some months before, had actually been perpetrated.

He sat a long time alone with her, and a deep hunger came to him. “You know, there was just one thing I forgot to-day,” he said at last. “I plumb forgot, after that ride, to collect fare.”

She did not miss the point, and she smiled in her pillow. “I suppose you think you had it coming,” she observed.

“Maybe not. But folks often want things they haven’t comin’. I don’t mind sayin’ that I’d like to collect just once, yet——”

She turned her face directly toward him. “I’d be a mighty stingy girl if I hadn’t let you collect—just once.”

There have been times, in the past, when John Sherwood astonished onlookers by the swiftness of his motions. His swiftness now, in reaching the girl’s bedside, made all his previous activities seem of snail’s pace in comparison. But he was not such a fool as to carry the same gait throughout all the enterprise. He took a long time to collect the fare—and to make change.

Then, with the memory of that first kiss warm on his lips, he sat beside her and wondered at the remarkable felicity of all things. It was just fare, truly—given in generous payment for services rendered; but it exalted him none the less.

“You know I’m glad I didn’t chase that rattlesnake down, and kill him,” he observed at last in the drawl she had learned to like. “That mean old cuss was a benefactor after all—he brought Charity back to the B-Bar ranch.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE STALLION SHOWS SIGNS OF FRIENDSHIP

SPRING merged swiftly into summer, and brought long, bright full days to Charity. She helped her aunt with the housework, continued her riding lessons, explored the hills and valleys about the ranch, and took all sorts of excursions with John. Sometimes, when the latter was free from his ranch-work, they photographed the pronghorn on the plateaus, sometimes they gathered wild fruit, often they fished for trout in the headwaters of the stream. This sport, she found, was as distinguished in its way as shooting water-fowl. One does not sit still, on a green bank, and watch a bobbing cork if one wishes to catch brook trout. Rather it is a matter of stealing from pool to pool in the dusk, a flick of an artificial fly behind a fallen log, and then a lightning snap of the wrist muscles as the fish strike. She never grew tired of this sport—she was never satiated by the tender trout-flesh, fried brown in butter and served at her aunt's table. And this same spring saw the beginning of what was to be one of the most interesting phases of Charity's life.

One still afternoon, late in May, she was returning to the ranch after a long tramp over the hills; and she paused on the ridge overlooking the home valley to rest. For a time she watched the play of light and shadow on the surrounding hills; and suddenly a more vivid sight drew her attention.

Over the hill, walking quietly toward her, came the incomparable Thunder and his band. She flushed with the true pleasure of the horselover she was: Thunder's proud and noble bearing alone set him off from any animal on the range, and now, in the afternoon shadows, his towering, beautiful figure actually seemed to fill the landscape. She had seen him many times before but never at such close range. And she was glad, for once, that John was not with her; for though John loved nature even as she herself did he was also foreman of the B-Bar ranch. He was a humanitarian, but also, which counted more, he was a faithful workman. It would have been in the unavoidable line of duty to shoot down the glorious creature where he stood.

Thunder's roving eye caught sight of her, and he immediately paused. "You glorious old outlaw!" the girl told him with fervor. And he *was* an outlaw, with a reward on his head. Whatever he had once known of bit and

leather had been mostly forgotten now, remaining only a dim instinct that would likely soon pass away. But he was not forgetting how to steal horses right from under the B-Bar's nose! True, he had not raided the corral so far this season, but there had been a continued, profit-sharing loss from the range stock. No wonder the settlers hated him and stood ready to take advantage of his one weakness—an abiding trust in women, remembered dimly from long ago.

The ranch-hands' schemes of hunting him in woman's garb had come to nothing so far, partly through bad shooting, partly because Thunder had been careful of late to avoid the immediate vicinity of the corrals; but it was merely a question of time until one of the settlers should meet him in the sage and lay him low with a rifle bullet. Surely the great, grey stallion's days were numbered.

She did not dream for an instant but that Thunder would wheel in fright at the first sight of her. Thus it was with the keenest delight that she saw him lift his head, snort, then advance a step nearer.

For a moment she watched him in breathless excitement. It was a picture she could never forget: daylight dying against the bleak, rugged, many-colored hills; the grey sage stretching; the shimmering half circle of wild horses in the background, the beautiful head of each turned toward her; and in the foreground, his spring coat glossy as silk and every muscle rippling and aquiver with the sheer love of living, the noble figure of Thunder. He pawed, snorted again, trotted a few feet to one side, and once more came to a halt. The wild horses behind him drew farther away.

For the first time Charity was beholding the truth of the story she had heard from the ranch hands but which she had only half believed—that Thunder was without fear of women. Evidently his love for Dora, the girl who had made a pet of him years before, had never been wholly forgotten—in his brute mind the sight of women brought forth memories of gentleness and caresses, sugar thrust under a soft muzzle, rather than the terrifying shriek of bullets. It could not be that he was unaware of her presence. She knew perfectly that wild beasts cannot as a rule interpret still outline, but only movement; that to sit still in the wilderness is generally to remain unseen by the wilderness people; but in this case she had not been careful to remain motionless. Indeed, Thunder was within forty yards, and was looking straight down at her. Yet he made no move to run away.

There had been a time when she would not have dared sit so close. A wild stallion can be more terrible than any tiger, tearing a man to strips with

savage teeth and striking front hoofs; but now there was nothing for her to fear. Thunder's attitude was not one of enmity—rather of the keenest interest and anticipation, combined with a certain mistrust. She thought of a dog that craves a caress but fears a blow.

And now the swift progression of her thoughts led her to a most interesting discovery. In the hunting experiences of the past few months she had learned the great importance of approaching wild game from down wind so that the human smell could be blown away; and she had assumed at first that Thunder had approached so close only because he was up wind and did not catch her scent. But now a cool caress at her cheek drew her attention to the fact that, since the wind came up the valley and blew directly from her toward the animal, he had had every opportunity to investigate her with his keen nose and had approached her with full realization as to what kind of a creature she was.

She was intensely amazed at first, but presently, by trying to imagine Thunder's mental processes, she saw the reason for it all. Living in the wilderness, Thunder had learned to be fearful of all strange and unfamiliar creatures and objects: things half seen and dimly smelled. Of women, however, he was not in the least afraid—he had only pleasant memories of his relations with them—and when his keen nose had duly established the fact that Charity was a woman, not some fearful thing unknown, he had come boldly up to her. He came like a colt comes for sugar, and only a caution learned in years on the plains caused him to pause at a distance of forty yards.

The situation offered the most interesting possibilities. Why could she not, by patient effort, overcome this lingering distrust and make friends with Thunder? Why could she not teach him to eat from her hand—in short to re-establish the old relation of friendship and trust that he had once had with Dora and which the stallion evidently remembered with such pleasure? The whole secret, she realized now, was to approach him boldly down wind so that he could immediately make sure of her identity: in other words to rely upon his own senses and intelligence to distinguish her from his enemies. He must know her at once as one of the breed of whom he remembered only kindness and friendship. That way she could approach him—never as a half-glimpsed, half-identified thing such as has always, throughout man's centuries of relations with horses, filled the equine heart with terror.

She got up slowly. Then holding out her hand in an instinctive gesture of friendship—a gesture that, because it is instinctive, is part of the universal language between man and beasts—she moved easily toward him.

The animal's neck arched with indescribable beauty, and his wild eyes lost some of their fire. It was all like something he had lost in the long ago. Sometime, long since, before ever he had known the priceless freedom of the plateaus, a gentle hand had reached toward him this same way, the same smell of friendliness was in the air. The memory of a horse is a strange and limitless thing, and no man fully knows its processes; but surely the chains of memory were holding Thunder fast to-day. His mighty strength would have snapped a tough lariat like a string; but here was a bond that he could not break.

It was all clear again—the slim figure in his pasture, the reaching hand, the friendship smell that could never be forgotten. The stallion trembled, and the girl drew near.

But he could not endure to let her get too close—at least without longer acquaintance. He was too inured to the ways of the wild to submit to that reaching hand at once. When she was within fifteen yards he drew slowly away. She paused, her hand still stretching, and again the animal halted, only to move away when she tried to draw closer.

She had a “way with hosses,” John had said, and she had never greater need of it than now. She continued to move easily, to stretch her hand and to call to the horse in subdued, enticing tones; but she never made the mistake of trying to rush matters. One sudden motion, even a sharp exclamation, might have so terrified the animal that she would have never been able to approach him again. And the secret of her success did not alone lie in act and word. It was something instinctive, something that was like a gentleness that could not be conveyed by words or interpreted by any of the five senses, but which Thunder recognized in the hidden ways of beasts. There was an invisible communion between them from the first.

And now Charity wisely attempted to give up the effort for the time being. She turned slowly away. Thunder drew back with his mares. And presently, thrilled by what she had accomplished, the girl continued down the hill to the ranch.

Although it would have caused a sensation among the ranch-hands she was not in the least tempted to tell, at dinner, her experiences with Thunder. These were Thunder's enemies: she had become, since that thrilling twilight hour, Thunder's secret champion. She had no idea of giving them any ideas that they might use against him.

The next morning she climbed again to the ridge back of the ranch, and to-day her pockets were full of cube-sugar. The band of wild horses had

roamed on during the night, but by climbing to a small peak, she was able to locate them, about five miles distant, feeding at the edge of the marsh. There had been a time, not many months past, that five miles would have seemed to her a rather sizeable walk. To-day she did not give it a second thought, but swung off cheerily through the sage.

She was careful to approach the band from up wind with the idea of making her identity clear at once. Again she approached easily within a few yards of the stallion. All that morning she spent in his immediate vicinity, trying to accustom him to her presence, working to overcome his last trace of shyness. She did not, however, induce him to come to her hand to-day. Indeed, to establish close friendship with the wild stallion proved the most exacting and certainly the slowest work she had ever tried to do. Fortunately she was endowed with that first attribute of a successful naturalist, which is infinite patience; and she was never tempted into any impatient motions that might have undone all her work. Besides, every minute was keenly thrilling to her.

She did succeed, that morning, in inducing Thunder to pick up lump sugar from the ground where she had thrown it. She went back to the ranch wholly contented with her progress.

From then on—through the long summer days—she never missed an opportunity to further her acquaintance with the great beast. Often she would not see him for days at a time; and then again the band would linger many days in the same marsh, giving her every chance to visit him. Thunder was not, by instinct and ancestry, really a wild beast. He was merely a domesticated animal that had found freedom in the wilderness, and he soon grew accustomed to the girl's presence. Since she made no attempts against his life or his precious liberty, he began to trust her and at last even to submit to her pettings. The higher animals have always loved the touch of man, and the wisest naturalist cannot tell why; and the great Thunder, despot of the desert, learned to love the caresses of the girl's soft hand. Before lazy July gave way to the parched days of August, Charity had the unique experience of walking straight up to what was generally considered a wild animal of the plains, a figure so widely known through ten thousand square miles of sagebrush desert that he was a veritable legend; and see him quiver with delight as she stroked his arching neck.

He did not hesitate now to take sugar from her fingers. When he did not find it here he nuzzled in her pockets. He permitted her hand to roam over his back and sides, to caress his long mane, to scratch him under the alert ears. With the ripening days it no longer became necessary for her to make

all the advances. He would walk toward her, intent on sugar, at first sight of her on the hillside. Then, as a final triumph, she taught him to know and recognize a shrill, far-carrying whistle.

It was no little triumph to this girl of cities when, at her call, she made the great, grey beast leave his band and come to her across a gulch nearly a quarter of a mile in breadth. It was an accomplishment in which any true nature-lover would have taken the keenest delight; but would have had little meaning to those to whom the outside world is a closed book. Surely her accomplishment had no obvious commercial value, nor could she imagine it being of any material advantage to herself or any one else. Because she wished to preserve the animal's life she could not tell her friends at the ranch of her success and thus receive the applause that would certainly be hers. She had simply won the friendship of a free animal—merely one of those lesser ones with whom, in her nature-loving heart, she felt deep ties of blood.

“Now I've tamed you, Thunder, I haven't the least idea what I'm going to do with you,” she whispered in his ear. She reached up to him, and her arms encircled his glossy neck. “I wouldn't rob you of your liberty, even if I could—because I believe you'd sooner be dead. But my stars, what a riding horse you would make!”

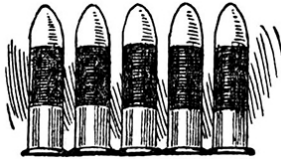
It was true: here was such an animal on which great stables were founded. Though in all probability not a registered thoroughbred, his blood was the blood of thoroughbreds, and in addition his natural powers had been enhanced by his life in the wild. Breeders would have gladly bought him, seeing in him an ideal that would be worth fortunes to perpetuate. She marked his long, sensitive, but powerful legs, the long back, the intelligent head and friendly eyes. How he could fly with her over the sage! No hard day's ride could deplete that mighty strength, or no test of trail or mountain break that incomparable spirit. She ached to climb on him and ride him bareback about the sage; but this at least, she dare not attempt. His resultant terror might easily cost her, temporarily, at least, the animal's trust and friendship that she had worked so hard to win.

“That big head was never meant for a halter,” she told him with quiet assurance. “Those powerful teeth were never meant to hold a bit. No, old boy, you were born to be free—the big boss of the Grey Lake country. . . .” She stroked his arched neck. “But it surely was worth while, if only I haven't taught you a trick that will be your downfall! Don't answer any whistle but mine, Thunder old boy—and don't go near anything you see

wearing skirts until you're sure. I want you to be boss of this range for a long time yet."

She spoke very earnestly, for indeed the preservation of Thunder's life had become a matter quite close to her heart. The idea of destroying this marvelous engine of being with a rifle's ounce of lead was hateful to her; and not even her loyalty to the ranch could make her see otherwise. To her he was not now merely a nobleman of the wilds. In the first place, she had the love of good steeds, and this love went to Thunder straight and sure. She regarded him by the Western code, which tells that a good horse is worth any number of bad men, and more deeply to be mourned. Besides, in these last months there had been awakened an odd sense of possession. She felt the primitive impulse to protect her own.

This she found an ever-increasing task. Within three days after these words were spoken she awakened to find the whole ranch in an uproar, and everywhere preparations for immediate warfare. There was complete evidence that, after a long period of comparative virtue, the grey stallion had raided the corrals again. The fence had been broken down, and some of the young mares had disappeared.



CHAPTER IX

THE SONG OF THE COYOTE

WILD riding the length and breadth of the Lake Country did not return the missing animals to the B-Bar ranch. Evidently the raid was made soon after nightfall, and the clever stallion had led the mares straight back into the plateaus, getting a head start that could not be overcome. The men dragged home, tired and beaten, at nightfall; but none of them reported seeing as much as a track of the missing mares.

John decided that night on a policy of open warfare against Thunder. He would not be content with a half-hearted, occasional watch of the corrals. He had many tricks in his bag yet, he said: perhaps a mare could be tied out as a decoy and men placed in ambush. When he was seen again in the vicinity, the entire crew could be turned out in an effort to surround him; and if this failed, he could wait till early winter, then call together all the men from the neighboring ranches and pursue the animal to his death in the snow. Seemingly Thunder was certainly and assuredly doomed.

As she listened to him Charity was a little oppressed by the preponderance of odds against her. Surely she could not hope to win this fight alone. It did not so much as occur to her that Thunder could possibly have any other champion. Therefore the later development of this same night took her wholly by surprise.

She had gone to her room soon after the return of the horsemen, and went immediately to bed. Sleep, however, did not come so easy. It was a strangely breathless, sultry night, one of the few nights of her Western experience when a crisp cold did not set in at nightfall, like a benediction to the desert people. Ordinarily she slept with blankets, but even the cool sheets oppressed her to-night. She lay awake until the last little twilight sound had died without, until the house itself was still as a tomb; then rose and slipped on her dressing-gown.

Taking her water pitcher she crept down the corridor to the stairs. She knew where cold water was to be found—in the deep, mossy-walled well behind the house. That ever-illusory mystery, that is the desert night, closed round her at once as she stepped through the door.

She filled her pitcher, listened a moment to the far-off sobbing song of a coyote, mused an instant at the incomparable beauty of the moonlight on the sage, then turned back into the house. So not to disturb her aunt, who slept downstairs, she crept along on tiptoe, and she passed like a ghost through the doorway into the hall.

At this point she paused, deeply startled. Evidently she was not the only one who had failed to find sleep in the house to-night. The front door had been opened in the moment she had lingered at the well, and now she saw, outlined distinctly against the silver blue of the night, the form of a man in the doorway in conversation with another man who stood outside. She had a cool set of nerves, this Charity of the desert, and her terror lasted but an instant. She guessed at once that these were merely two of the ranch-hands late in going to their bunks.

She pressed herself against the wall in the hope of passing unseen; and fragments of their earnest conversation came clearly to her ears. The voice of the man outside was not particularly familiar to her; but she guessed at once it was that of the half-breed, Pedro, a man with whom she had few dealings. "I'll see Joe and Whisky Jim—and Texas Harvey, too, then, first thing in the morning," the musical, mellow voice of Pedro came distinctly to her ears. These were names not frequently mentioned in the B-Bar ranchhouse, and were always greeted with some signs of displeasure by the ranch-hands. They belonged to three half-breed Indians who made their homes at the edge of the reservation, five miles distant. Charity wondered exceedingly what possible business any of the B-Bar men could have with these—Siwashes, John called them, worthless as hands, palpable chicken thieves: a certain no-good type that invariably follows the native's contact with the white man.

"Sure see 'em," the man in the doorway answered. At the first syllable Charity recognized the voice as that of Marvin—the one man among the white ranch-hands with whom she had never established real companionship, whose real personality had always eluded her, the one stranger in this simple-hearted group of friends. It did not really surprise her, that of two midnight conspirators he should be one. She had regarded him with some mistrust from the first. But she was amazed beyond speech at what she heard next. "But the first thing," Marvin went on, his words distinct in the dusk, "is to scare that stallion out of the country. *Otherwise that hard-ridin' Sherwood will get him sure!*"

She did not wait to hear more or pause to consider the significance of what she had just heard. She tried to steal past to the stairway. Nor was it

now a mere matter of modesty, of saving herself embarrassment, that she wished to creep by unseen. She secretly knew—without in the least knowing why—that the situation had suddenly become deeply complicated; and she did not wish these men to know she had heard their talk. She was breathless with excitement, yet wonderfully furtive and silent as she stole through the shadows.

But at this point her gods of chance deserted her. She tripped over the head of a bear rug at the foot of the stairs, the claws of the pelt scratched audibly on the hard, oak floor, and she lunged with a soft sound against the railing.

Desert ears, tuned to the silence that is never broken, could not miss even such a muffled sound. The girl felt the movement of air as Marvin whirled. “Who’s there?” he demanded.

It was a significant thing, pointing to a certain sureness and clarity of instinct, that she did not make the deadly mistake of trying to break for the stairway. Marvin had spoken rather softly, but she had not misunderstood. For some reason, that she could not as yet guess, Marvin was willing to protect with murder the inviolacy of the last moment of conversation with the breed: he was at that instant a desperate man, and the threat of a striking rattler was in his tone. She knew that he had drawn his pistol; and that some other object, the nature of which was no pleasure for her to guess, flashed pale light in the breed’s hand.

She answered instantly in as level a voice as she could command. “It’s just Charity—I’ve been to the well.” It was an immeasurable relief to her that her voice gave no key to her excitement—it sounded perfectly cool and matter-of-fact in the shadows. She was struck cold with terror; and she did not know why. The time was to come when she would conclude that her fear had been the silliest of imaginings—that she had been simply startled without cause—but at that moment she felt that her life was not worth a grain of dust on the floor.

“You’re up late,” she went on in a rather gay little voice. She tried to smile in the dusk—as if those eyes that she knew glittered under the heavy brows could actually pierce the gloom and see her. “You’ll be a sleepy head in the morning.”

The banal remark carried its point—the deadly poignancy of the moment was instantly relieved. The Mexican sighed softly outside the door as if tense muscles had been permitted to relax, and the girl climbed easily up the stairs. She turned into her room, locked her door with trembling fingers,

tried it softly to make sure that the bolt had shot home, and then fell trembling on her bed.

What was the meaning? Why had Marvin been so desperate, herself so stricken with blind fear? Or had a childish imagination carried her away?

As she lay, and the subdued voices of the desert night whispered in to her through the window, she became more and more convinced that she had been needlessly and foolishly terrified. Marvin had simply been startled by a sudden sound in the hall at his side—a moment had been required for him to regain his poise. Her feeling of mortal danger, her conviction that she had interrupted a clandestine conversation of great import, the murder-madness in that calm voice in the darkness, had simply been the most foolish fancies. It was Charity's way, she told herself, to make a mountain out of a molehill. She certainly had an insatiable thirst for romance! Surely she had romanticized to her heart's content—and now she must pay for it with chagrin.

Poor old Marvin! What had she not been willing to think of him? She recalled a lecture at the public library of her native city, long ago—seemingly she had always been the victim of a too-lively imagination. The sensible thing was to put the whole matter from her mind.

“But the first thing is to drive that stallion out of the country! *Otherwise that hard-riding John will get him sure!*”

The words flashed to her mind so clearly, it was as if she had heard them spoken, in the dusk, again. Here was the most baffling thing of all—the key to the whole riddle, perhaps, if she could just find it. There was no use to try to dismiss the subject until these words were made clear. And here was a matter that concerned her personally—nothing less than the preservation of Thunder, the great stallion she had learned to love.

For some reason beyond her ken, Marvin was anxious to preserve him too. Of course, then, his participation in the hunt to-day had been the merest pretense: for months back he had played the same game. Nor was he merely a passive spectator, but was actually lined on the other side, planning the difficult project of driving Thunder off the range so to keep him out of harm's way.

How did Thunder win such a powerful ally? Certainly she had never credited Marvin with a love of nature and of living things sufficient to motivate such a stand as this. She could hardly believe that he was impelled by the same affection that had made her a champion of the great, wild

stallion—a horseman's love of a noble steed. Here was another who was disloyal to the best interests of the B-Bar ranch—and what was the reason?

What did it mean? The one answer that came to her was altogether too sensational and ridiculous for belief!



CHAPTER X

MARVIN MAKES TROUBLE

WHEN CHARITY wakened at dawn the events of the night seemed like dreams. She decided at once that she had simply been carried away by her romantic imagination, that probably she had misunderstood Marvin's words and that certainly she had attached far too much importance to them. She rose and dressed with the firm intention of spending the day in the saddle and of putting Marvin and his projects out of her mind.

But the matter did not prove to be so easily disposed of. Marvin himself was waiting in the living room when she came down the stairs.

There was no possible way to avoid him. Her heart missed a beat, but she managed to wish him good morning in the most casual tone of voice. John Sherwood had observed long ago that Charity had the makings of a successful poker player; and surely she was proving it now. The lights and shadows of her mood that John had learned to watch for, no longer played in her face; and every little facial line and muscle, usually such a perfect index to her girlish, happy thoughts, were in complete subjection. Her expression was not cold, merely friendly and unsuspecting.

But her thoughts moved like the wind. This was no chance meeting: Marvin had purposely remained in from his work to meet her. Either there had been an unguessed significance in the fragment of conversation she had overheard last night, or else Marvin feared that she had overheard more than she really had. It was also plain that the man intended to intercept her before she had opportunity to talk over what she had heard with her aunt.

"Good morning yourself," Marvin returned. His vivid eyes peered searchingly into hers. "I suppose you didn't sleep any too soundly—after the start I gave you last night."

It was quite characteristic of Marvin that he should come to the point at once. He was a hard, worldly man; and she had to credit him with a certain self-confidence, a cold courage and determination that would carry him far in this world of easy-going, friendly men. He was a bold man, too. The inveterate shyness and boyishness that she found in his fellow plainsmen were quite lacking in him. She watched his face with growing uneasiness.

They were alone in the room. The other men were either at work in the corrals or riding the range. At that instant she woke to the disquieting fact that in all probability they were the only two persons in the house. She missed the sound of Molly at work in the kitchen, and this was the hour that her aunt usually spent in the dairy, taking care of the morning milk, or in working in her garden.

“Sit down, Charity—I want to talk to you,” he told her. He held a chair for her and strangely ill-at-ease, she dropped into it. He drew up another chair for himself within a few feet of hers, and for an instant watched her with vivid, magnetic eyes.

“Charity,” he went on, fondling her name as he had never done before. “I am going away from B-Bar ranch.”

She straightened slowly. “You are? That’s quite a surprise.”

“You’ll be more surprised when I’m through. Yes—I’m going away—this isn’t a life for any white man, ’way out here in this God-forsaken desert. It isn’t a land for any white woman, either. It’s all right for these boobs, born out here—and it’s all right for squaws—but for no one else.”

She watched him with an uneasiness she could not explain or justify, and tried in vain to divert the ardor of his gaze. “So you aren’t a born plainsman,” she answered, speaking easily and hoping to relieve by casual talk the deep, strange poignancy of the moment. “I supposed you had seen this country grow up.”

“I can hardly consider that a compliment, Charity. I was born in a city, same as you were—and was fool enough to come out here fifteen years ago. Yet it wasn’t such a foolish thing, in one way. In one way—just one—I consider it the luckiest move I ever made.”

She did not ask him what this one way was. She was frankly afraid of his answer. “So you don’t like it here?” she repeated, as casually as she could.

“It’s not a white man’s country, and you know it. Charity, aren’t you tired of these damnable, sage-brush hills?”

Because he had dared to assail her home-land, the open places that had her heart, she felt her uneasiness giving swiftly away to hot resentment. “I’d hardly call them that,” she answered with considerable vigor. “I love them.”

He smiled knowingly into her eyes. He was not in the least taken aback by this contradiction. Indeed, it seemed to her that the disconcerting,

magnetic light brightened in his eyes as if this show of spirit and resistance had appealed to some dark part of him she did not know.

“Don’t try to tell me that,” he answered. “I know better. You may think you love them in your heart—but if you do it’s because you’ve been away from a white man’s land for so long you’ve forgotten what it’s like. Charity, wouldn’t it be wonderful to go to a real restaurant, with white linen and silver—to see a real crowd again, instead of a gapping gang of yaps—to take in a real show, instead of such a movie as they have in Grey Lake? This country is all right for those that don’t know any better—but you do know better. I knew that the first night I saw you—and that very night I told myself I’d help you back when the time came. You’re a city girl, no more to be compared with these people than day is with night. You’re a lady, and they’re just boobs—mud-turtles out of the swamp.

“Now it happens that I, too, am not exactly what I seem.” He paused, searching her eyes as if to learn her secret reaction to these words. Her face was almost devoid of expression, however, and he went on boldly. “I’m a city man, just as you’re a city girl. I know how to live—outside. I am not just a ranch-hand by a long sight—though I’ve worked at it for the last few years I’ve had other interests—back East. I want you to keep that in mind when you give me the answer to the question I’m going to ask—that I’ve got a stake I couldn’t make in this gopher-hole in twenty years. That stake means pretty clothes like you had when you came, and furs and autos—things that make life worth living.”

Charity straightened in her chair, but her pale cheeks and quiet eyes gave no key to her thoughts. She knew what was coming, now, and she was trying to prepare for it.

“I want to take two things with me, when I go,” he went on at last. “Only two are worth taking. One of them is Thunder—the stallion you’ve heard about so much. He is a real piece of horseflesh, and is worth some big money. I want to rope him and take him with me.”

Charity felt a great quickening of interest. “Is that the reason you wanted to drive him off the range where the men couldn’t find him?” she asked quickly.

He scanned her face as a man might study a code-message—in search of a secret meaning. It was a queer battle of eyes. “Of course,” he answered slowly, at last. “I might as well be frank about it. One of the two reasons I’ve stayed here on this stupid job was to get a chance to rope Thunder. Just last night, as you went by, I was talking to Pedro about Thunder—he’s the one

person, beside yourself, that I let in on my plans. I've arranged with Pedro to scare him off the range—while John and the gang pull off this big hunt—and later I'll come back and rope him.”

It was an entirely plausible explanation for the remark she had overheard the preceding night. She decided to accept it absolutely. “Why don't you take all the boys into your confidence, and get them to help you?” she asked.

“They wouldn't any more help me than they'd fly—they'd hinder, if they could, and try to take Thunder for themselves. You'll learn after awhile to take this whole gang with a grain of salt—this friendship business in the West is mostly bunk. Please don't tell them anything about it. As I told you, Charity”—and his voice lowered—“one of the reasons why I stayed here was to get the horse. But I had another reason—a better one. The horse is one of the two things I want to have with me, when I go. And Charity dear, I want to take you with me, too.”

The girl got up, struggling with honest indignation. She did not look like a little quaker now: her eyes were dangerously bright and oddly clear under her fine, arching brows. “You'll wait a long time if you expect to take me with you,” she told him simply.

The man got up and faced her, half in insolence, half in assurance. “I'm willing to wait a long time, Charity.”

“You needn't, and you needn't mention the matter again, either. You haven't paid me any compliment by that proposal, so I hope you'll excuse my not thanking you. Any speech that elevates me, at the expense of my friends, I can't ever accept as a compliment.” Her eyes were kindling from a bright little fire of anger that burned within, and as he looked, his own mood darkened and heightened, like waves before a storm. “I want you to know that if you think you are pleasing me by running down my friends, and my friends' home, you're badly mistaken. I've talked on this subject for the last time.”

She started to move past him toward the door that led into the hall and from thence outdoors. Fully aroused now, Marvin stepped in front of her.

This was not play, as sometimes she had played with the ranch-hands. She suddenly realized that this man was dangerously in earnest. There was a peculiar, high color at his cheek-bones, his facial muscles were tense, and the deepening of certain little lines had emphasized the sensuality of his bold nostrils and mouth.

“Don't try anything you'll regret later,” she warned him swiftly.

“I never regret anything later,” he assured her, trying in vain to mask with gaiety the heat of his desire. “I said I was willing to wait a long time, Charity, and I am—so you needn’t be afraid. I’ve learned to take things easy and to bide my time. To-day I’ll be content with just one kiss.”

A deep dismay that was icy cold, like terror, seemed to seize her at the words. She was not a prude, and sometimes—in the midst of a romp—the men had stolen kisses that she had yielded with good grace; but to-day the thing went down to her inmost instincts. The hateful pressure of his lips on hers was not to be redeemed by any rough play or laughter: she felt that it would some way stain her, like an actual violation of her integrity. The fact that she was not in grave danger of further insult—her aunt and some of the men would likely hear her if she called—did not in the least save the situation for her. She knew this man with whom she had to deal, the remorselessness of his intent and the ruthlessness of his methods, and the inmost voices of her being warned her against his kiss. The lust in his eyes filled her with horror.

He reached toward her; and she tried to duck away. Instantly he intercepted her flight, and his strong arms went round her. Then she began to struggle.

Marvin’s muscles were of steel; but it was no little task to hold those little, frantic arms and that writhing body. She might have broken loose at once if they had not tripped together over the great, leathern divan, permitting him to seize her with a stronger hold. Sitting on the divan he was able to draw her across his lap, pinning her breast to his with one of his strong arms, holding her struggling body with the other. She was instantly helpless, and only the paleness of her childish face fought for her now.

But Marvin was too keenly aroused to halt now. His flushed face lowered toward hers. In an instant more she would feel his lips. . . .

Yet the descent of that dreaded face toward hers was suddenly arrested as if caught and held in a vise of iron. As she gazed his expression ceased to be sinister and formidable: it was only apoplectic and ridiculous. The eyes protruded, the throat swelled, the tide of blood heightened and then receded as surprise gave way to wracking pain. It was a long second before her tear-filled eyes made out the reason behind this mystery—nothing less than the relentless grip of a hard hand at the back of Marvin’s neck.

She could see just the tip of brown, familiar fingers—and these only for an instant. The arm behind the fingers suddenly made a queer, snapping motion: Marvin’s arms stretched wide like flapping wings and released their

hold on the girl. The same motion lifted his body from the couch and hurled him, head over heels, into the corner.

There ensued a sound of violent impact, and Charity came to her senses and sat up just at the close of an interesting little drama. Marvin was just getting to his feet after what seemed to have been an abrupt collision with the wall; and the girl cried out in warning as she saw the curious, whip-like, backward motion of his hand.

But his hand only went half way; then came back with fingers spreading. His face had an odd, yellow hue that Charity could never remember having seen before. The girl gasped; then turned to find the reason for this sudden change of heart.

She found it easily enough. Just beyond her stood John, and there was a vague hint of a dry, grim smile at the corners of his big, humorous mouth. It is not good to fight a man who smiles at a time like this! Marvin's wrist had been swift, but John's had responded like the lashing head of a serpent. His heavy revolver dangled carelessly, as if he hadn't any use at all for it, in his brown hand.



CHAPTER XI

JUST BEFORE THE CRISIS

THE summer grew to fall without great change. Charity lived the same, carefree adventurous life: hunting the sage-hen and quail on the uplands, meeting the first flights of water-fowl at the marshes at dawn, riding wide and far on her saddle horse, and, now that school had taken up, spending certain hours daily at the little schoolhouse in the sage. In between times she found opportunity to develop her acquaintance with Thunder, the stallion, take in all the country dances, help her aunt with the housework, and spend eight out of every twenty-four hours in the dreamless, refreshing sleep that is the first blessing of the mountain lands. Even at that she had time for certain fleet and very pleasant hours with John—hours in which nothing in particular was accomplished, but which never ceased to hold joy for her.

Their friendship had steadily ripened, their companionship was ever closer, more dear to each of them; but beyond this point they had not gone. Charity was not a child, to be carried away by a kiss at the door in the moonlight, a moment's magic in a garden; and she was wise enough not to encourage John beyond a certain point. She knew perfectly that this tall, smiling desert-man had won an abiding place in her heart, that they had tastes in common, and that every moment together was a delight; but she was not sure yet that she could find happiness in his arms. She was down to essentials, out here: she could glance ahead down the long, hard trail that is life, and she knew that success or failure, happiness or sorrow, triumph or despair depended upon the companion who walked at her side. She must not make up her mind too quickly. It was not enough that he was a good companion, a faithful friend, even that the occasional kiss he had given her—in certain exalted hours—thrilled her to her heart; he must also be tried in the fire. She must know not his exterior, but the very soul of the man. She must be sure of the temper of his steel.

Whether or not John loved her she did not know. She knew that he was wonderfully tender to her, faithful as his desert stars; but this might only be part of his natural chivalry. Sometimes she caught a fleeting look on his brown face that would sweep her off her feet; yet he never spoke, the few caresses that he had given her were always shy and restrained, and she assumed that he also was waiting to make sure.

“A man doesn’t want to take a hoss for keeps till he knows something about him,” he told her once. “Many the times they’ll be caught on the trail together, sometimes gettin’ home or dyin’ in a blizzard is just a matter of the hoss’s guts; so he doesn’t want to take any chances till he’s sure. The same way with a man gettin’ a wife, specially out in this hard-boiled country. They haven’t just got a few hours on the trail together, but a whole life together—and maybe another life on top of that. Believe me, Charity, they ought to make sure. Each ought to know when the other’s goin’ to keep travelin’ and when he’s goin’ to stop, when he’s goin’ to bog down and when he’s goin’ to keep his feet, when he’s licked and when he ain’t. Isn’t that so, Charity?”

Charity admitted it was so.

“I suppose you feel that before you can ever make up your mind on a point like that, you’ve got to be sure just where you stand—just what kind of a hoss you’re gettin’. You’ve got to see him tried.”

“That’s it,” Charity agreed softly. And John was surprisingly silent for an hour thereafter; as if to have her agree with him so promptly had made him thoughtful.

Naturally she had had no more dealings with Marvin. The latter resigned, promptly and without over many remarks, and had gone to work on the Lone Star ranch a few miles in the interior. Evidently he was not yet ready to leave for good this land of “boobs” and squaws.

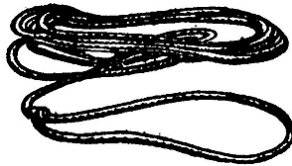
Charity had never told John of the scrap of conversation she had overheard, or of the suspicion that had, for a moment, entered her mind. Her reasons for silence were rather complicated, yet from a woman’s point of view exceedingly good ones. In the first instance her inborn sense of fairness would not let her accuse him of a charge of which she, whether she liked it or not, was also guilty—disloyalty to the best interests of the ranch for the sake of her own interests. She felt that she could not hear him blasphemed for wishing to protect Thunder’s life without confessing that she, also, championed the outlaw stallion—although truly enough for a different reason. Charity had always been troubled with a knife-point conscience; and it pricked her at even the thought of such a two-faced act as this. In regard to her momentary suspicion of his motives she felt that she had no right whatever to speak. It had been but a childish fancy, at best; and it is not in accord with the Western code of fair dealing to voice a serious charge against a man without at least some shadow of cause. She had been

indirectly responsible for his discharge; and she did not want to make him a marked man through ten thousand square miles of range.

The rains broke in October, mist-clouds sweeping over the grey faces of the marsh, winds whispering in the reeds; the whistling wings of myriad water-fowl overhead. The menace of winter was in the air again, and all living things seemed to live in dread of it. The tall poplars on the creek-bank, shimmering green before, were a wondrous golden-yellow under the magic of the frost: dark, lowering clouds filled the clear, blue spaces of the sky; water rippled and sang in creek-beds, that until now had been but paths of sun-baked boulders, beloved by the rattlesnakes; the upland birds collected in great coveys.

It was the rutting season among the wild things of the desert—the antelope on the plateaus and the mule deer in the brush thickets—and one early November night, when the rain beat before the wind, the B-Bar corral was raided again.

It was a great disappointment to Charity. Old Thunder had been on good behavior so long that she had begun to think he had reformed. Again the men rode out and far, in the stinging lash of the wind; but they herded in no runaway mares at nightfall. Evidently Thunder could still out-manuever them at every turn, making a clean getaway with four of their best fillies.



CHAPTER XII

THE UNKNOWN BECKONS

JOHN was one of the last to return from the fruitless search; and he ate his supper without a word. They knew him of old—these hard-riding men who worked with him—and they were not mistaken in thinking that their foreman's fighting blood was fully aroused at last. They saw him drain his coffee-cup, put his napkin with great care into its ring, then roll and light a cigarette. The men leaned back in their chairs, waiting for him to speak.

Curiously enough, his first words were addressed to the girl. "Charity, have you any plans for to-morrow?" he asked.

Charity had dreaded this moment, but now she managed a smile. "Not a thing," she replied. "To-morrow is Saturday, and that means my young hopefuls will stay home and study."

"I can fancy 'em stayin' home and studyin'—with the duck-flight just beginnin'. Since you won't be busy, perhaps you'd like to ride over with me to the Lone Star."

The Lone Star was the ranch adjoining, named of course for its brand. The girl smiled into her tea-cup. "Want to call on Marvin?" she asked.

John grinned back at her, but was immediately sober. "Not exactly—but he'll be in on the big deal. I'll try to arrange you a date with him, if you want."

"You needn't bother. But I'll be glad to go."

"Good." John turned to the other men. "Boys, this loss in hosses has got to stop—it's raisin' Ned with the profits. I'll confess I'd sort of hoped old Thunder had laid off that mare-stealin' game for good—but I see there's only one way to reform him, and that's with a bullet. And I will say the old boy picked a mighty poor time for this last escapade.

"To-morrow I'm going over and line up the Lone Star boys. One of them can see the boys on the Clark ranch. Then at the first snowfall, so we can follow a track, there's goin' to be a big hunt on the plateaus. We're not only goin' to put an everlastin' crimp in Thunder—keepin' after him till we get him—but we're goin' to stop this horse-disappearin' business for good and

all. If there's any other wild stallions—of course there are—we're goin' to get them too, and make a big try to round up all the hosses that's got away from us. Is that understood all round?"

The men nodded. They had expected some such plan.

"Then to-morrow you boys get things lined up here at the ranch—so we can all go. There's apt to be a snowfall any time now. If you don't mind, Charity, we'll start as soon as it's light."

As soon as it was light Charity and John rode away; and the girl was heart-sick at the realization that this was the first step in a great war that was certain, if carried through, to mark the doom of the great, grey desert-king she had learned to love.

"I guess this is our last look at autumn," John told her quietly, with something of a curious imagery she had marked in him many times before. "Old winter is almost ready to break. I can feel him in the air."

It was true: she could also feel winter in the air. All the wilderness world seemed awed and stilled under the whip of the wind, as if in fear of the dreaded season that was even now upon them.

"I'm afraid I sent you out on the wrong hoss," John told her when they reached the windy hilltop. "It's going to be no pleasure to ride to-day. It's a long way and you'd be more comfortable in front of the fire. I think you'd better turn back."

"Are you turning back, too?"

"I'd just as soon, but I can't. I've fooled along over this proposition too long already."

A slow smile, a smile that had always been like bursting sunlight to the tall plainsman at her side, a strangely sweet, childish smile that to him was beautiful as a star, crept about Charity's lips. This business of turning back was not in the code of the West. To turn back, when one is full launched upon an undertaking and except in cases of dire necessity, was one thing that she had forgotten how to do. This was a vital, basic teaching; except for this the frontier of civilization could never have spread, and the wolf would still howl unchallenged on every hill.

"I'll manage to toddle along somehow," she told him, without a trace of heroics. "It wouldn't be square not to say good-by to the autumn."

John felt warmer at once, and he caressed the neck of his mare with sudden, surprising ardor. This was the thing he had spoken of, the thing

which, once found, must never be lost until life itself is lost, the thing that must be kept and harbored and loved if the soul itself is to live. Between man and woman or man and beast it was one of the few things—in this grey, wind-swept land—that made life worth while. Besides, it was the birthright of their race—the unconquerable northern peoples from which both had sprung.

They reached the fence that was the outer rim of the B-Bar ranch, and John guided her through a rude gate. From thence they rode to the edge of a long, narrow marsh that lay almost the full length of the valley; then turned to follow the reed-grown bank. Just opposite and beyond the waving sea of reeds John pointed out a narrow crevice in the steep range, a gap such as is found so often in the hills of the eastern Oregon country: the pass, he said, that led through the hills to the Lone Star ranch. “It’s a pity we can’t go straight across, instead of follerin’ this howlin’ marsh around,” he told her. “We’d save about two hours’ ride.”

“Why not try it, any way?” was the girl’s comment. “It’s not over a half mile wide——”

John paused to consider, then shook his head. “I’m scared to try it, Charity. It’s only a half mile, but a half mile I wouldn’t want to try to get through except in a pinch. Of course a man might find cattle trails, but you know what those tule thickets are.”

“I suppose the pools are too deep to ford, too.”

“Not many of ’em. It’s pretty shallow for the most part, I’ve heard—it’s near the head of the valley. A man could get around the pools all right, but wadin’ through that gumbo would tire him out in no time—or a horse either, for that matter. I’m goin’ to try to make it sometime, when I haven’t anything better to do.”

It was a district not particularly well known to either. Charity had never had cause to visit the marsh—plenty of good duck-shooting was procurable nearer home—and as it was beyond the B-Bar fence she had never tried to cross it or encircle it. John’s work had rarely carried him here, and he had only a general idea of the country; thus the ride had a certain adventurous quality that compensated for its disagreeable features.

It was a long ride up to the head of the marsh where they could cross with safety, and a long way back. The weather had become steadily more threatening; and there was a keener, colder edge to the wind. Truly it was the kind of day that could be best spent at ease before a roaring fire, the advance

of the cold checked at the window pane, and the wind helpless at the eaves. But they were launched fully on the journey now, and they could not turn back.

The fine rain had changed to sleet by the time they had followed the marsh around to the base of the pass; and this was a sign neither rider misunderstood. "You can almost see autumn slippin' away," John told her rather solemnly. "She's skinnin' out, headin' for California and the tourists." His face clouded, and the girl knew she had found him in a rare mood, one of imagery and somber poetry that was a No-Man's land to all except his most intimate friends, and which was born of this great, bleak empty land he loved. In spite of all discomforts, even danger, that the day might have in store for her, Charity was glad that she had come.

"It's just as when a person dies—you can almost see the spirit slippin' away," he went on. "The grass, the reeds, the sage-brush all seem to yield it up, and all look sort of smothered, and crushed. One minute, and everything seems to be tryin' their hardest to live and play the game. The next, and they've given up, beaten by somethin' too big for 'em, and too big for us. How the reeds bow their heads!"

The wind moved rolling waves over the thick tule growth beside them; and seemingly in the space of an hour the great seasonal change, of which John had spoken, had come to pass. The autumn's soul had passed; and the death that is winter had come down upon the land. Suddenly it seemed to Charity that she and her companion and the horses that they rode were the only things that lived under that sullen sky. The last of the little wild creatures had taken refuge in the brush; even the water-fowl, calling down their weird, never-to-be-forgotten cries, appealed to her more as winged souls that had passed, rather than living things. There was no vigor in the reed-growths now: they were wind-blown, waving helplessly, drear and lifeless as dead leaves. The wind itself was an icy breath, and it swept down upon them fiercely, as if it coveted their mortal lives.



CHAPTER XIII

WHEN EVERY MOMENT COUNTS

THE girl felt deepening awe. Someway the silence, the threat in the air, had revealed this home-land of hers in a new and sinister mood. There would be no comfort in riding the sage-lands alone to-day. On the other hand, the sight of the tall form on the horse in front was already proving an infinite satisfaction to her. She wondered at the fullness of her trust in him; she found herself yielding to his protection as a child goes to its father's arms. There was a menace in the wind and a curse in the whole tone of the land; but these were powerless to harm her as long as John rode at her side. This was the kind of day that even the hardened plainsman prefers to spend indoors, when the fire is an ineffable consolation and the walls of a house are dear; and except for John she would not have dared go on. Although they rode some feet apart, at this moment these two mortals were more close together than they had ever been before.

The rock walls of the canyon slowly narrowed until the pass was scarcely fifty feet in width, and the wind whipped through like water in a sluice. Here the higher elevation had changed the sleet to snow, and the dry grass between the sage had already whitened. And at this point John, who now rode in front, suddenly vaulted from his saddle with a short exclamation of amazement.

Instantly Charity was beside him, as keenly interested as he was. Perfectly distinct in the thin snow were the tracks of a band of horses, and one glance at the clear imprint showed that they had passed but a few minutes before. John made a swift count to determine the approximate size of the band.

“About fifteen in all,” he reported. “Charity, they are our runaway plugs as sure as fate—four of 'em, and probably Thunder's band of wild hosses, with the old boy himself in the lead. They are likely just over the next hill—maybe in the gully just ahead. And the question is—how to round 'em up.”

Charity saw the subdued excitement in his eyes, and thanked her stars that he was armed only with his pistol, not a rifle. Otherwise Thunder's life—if indeed these unshod tracks so bold in the snow were those of the grey stallion and his band—would be worth the forty grains of powder in John's

rifle shell, and no more. In all probability the band of horses were almost in rifle range already.

“Shall we jump on—and give ’em a race?” the girl asked.

“A race won’t do—you know what kind of a chance we’ve got in a race with Thunder. Let me think a minute, Charity—there’s some intelligence to this thing if I could just make it out. Without a doubt those nags were down there in the tall tule thickets, at the edge of the marsh, all the time we were hunting them—and just took up this pass when they smelled us coming. There’s no use trying to run ’em down on hosses—our only chance is to stalk ’em and outfox ’em.”

He scanned the tracks again, swiftly, but as yet she did not understand the deepening wonderment on his homely, weather-beaten face. “Charity, did you hear the like of this—old Thunder must have led these hosses across the marsh—where most hosses don’t go unless they have to—and was smart enough to keep ’em hid in the tule thickets until we quit lookin’ for ’em. Talk about hoss sense! Of course they got our smell as we were coming back down the marsh, but the wind’s in our favor now, and I don’t think they’ve seen us. Charity, tie your hoss to the sage.”

She obeyed, promptly, and he fastened Nell. “But if we can’t run them down on horseback, I don’t see what chance we’ve got on foot,” she objected.

“They’d see us in a minute, on hossback, and pull out of the country. On the other hand, we can sneak around, keep them from seeing us, and likely surround them—they just caught a whiff of us and aren’t moving fast. Then we can drive them back through the pass into our own valley where the boys can easy round ’em up.”

She saw at once that this was their only possible course. To ride on further up the hill would soon give Thunder sight of them; and then no fast riding could possibly round up the strays. The band was certainly within a few hundred yards, and it had been only by the greatest luck—the factor of the light snowfall that had showed their fresh tracks—that the two riders had not blundered on and discovered the animals before realizing their proximity.

“They’re walking slow and takin’ it easy,” John told her as they stole on through the sage together. “The main thing is to locate those hosses before they locate us, and then still keep out of sight till we get around ’em. With a

little luck we'll outfox that old bandit yet." He grinned cheerfully as he crept between clumps of the grey, snowsifted sage.

It might have been that, had the distance been twice as far to the mouth of the little gully that opened in front, John would have sought and found another answer to his riddle—that of whence came the intelligence whereby a band of dumb beasts had remained hidden in the reeds during yesterday's search. But his school was the school of action; and now he was too keen on the chase to give the mystery any earnest thought at all. And this was the single, greatest mistake in John Sherwood's life.

The two crept cautiously to the mouth of the gully, then stood erect and peered over the sage: thus there was no period of preparation for the scene before them. Scarcely one hundred yards in front and progressing quietly down the gully walked the four missing mares, and with them a half dozen other horses that John instantly recognized as some of his range stock. But there was no great stallion to lead them. Instead they were being driven by five men on horseback—Marvin, Pedro, and the three breeds whose names Charity had heard in that half-forgotten midnight conversation of weeks before.

John had been blind before, but his senses were clear enough now. He looked just once, then reaching a strong arm he thrust the girl further down in the sage. Without an instant's pause he beckoned her to stay beside him and started to creep back the way he had come.

The truth had gone home to Charity in that one brief glimpse, so up to now there had been no need of words between them. The suspicion she had once harbored had been proven true: Marvin and his gang, not the wild stallion, had made away with the Bar-B mares; Marvin had wished to preserve Thunder's life, not through any desire to rope and sell him, but as a shield for his own crimes; and by concealing his stock in the tule thickets until the B-Bar men had given up the search he was able to drive them through the pass to a shipping point, beyond the hills. No wonder, considering the great loss of horseflesh among the ranchers in the past years, that he had piled up a stake! The girl also instantly understood John's present plan—to steal back to the horses and ride for help before the desperadoes caught sight of them.

But there was no such easy way out of this trap into which they had fallen. Pedro's sharp eyes had caught sight of Charity's red Tam o'Shanter as she ducked into the sage, and he immediately called a warning. Marvin whirled, stretched up as far as he could in the stirrups, and in a moment the

moving branches of the sage showed him the two creeping figures. He realized in an instant that his long-concealed crimes had been found out at last.

Marvin had never been one to vacillate in a moment of crisis. There was but one certainty before him now—that these two must never live to tell in the ranchhouse what they had seen—and from that first instant his every action was bent toward that end. “Soak ’em full of lead!” he called with sudden, deadly emphasis. The same instant he lifted his rifle to his shoulder and fired remorselessly at the moving brush.

The bullet sliced the ground just at John’s feet, but in all his great frame there was no tremor of muscle to show that he was aware of it. The girl looked into his face for his orders; and he gave them swiftly, coolly:

“Don’t wait for me if you get ahead—sneak fast as you can for the hosses,” he commanded. “I may have to fight ’em down to the pass.”

Crouched low as she could in the sage the girl sped toward the gap in the hills. John crept immediately behind her, his pistol drawn and ready for the first horseman who tried to intercept his flight; and his hand was steady for one who races with death. For a moment there seemed a strange communion of courage between these two: each realized, in that desperate second, that the other was wholly to be relied upon, that each would play his cards well in this hazard of peril and would hold to the old, adventurer’s code clear to the end.

He was not afraid that the twacking bullets would throw the girl into a panic that might cost both their lives. It was a long, almost hopeless chance at best; but he knew that she would play it for all it was worth, that she would move straight and sure toward any hope that remained, and that she would be steadfast to the last. This was the course laid out in ancient times for adventurers, the oath of the order; and this slender girl, so pale and yet unshaken beside him, was past doubt of that brood. She stayed at John’s side like an old campaigner.

The bullets continued to strike about them, but because they made poor targets in the brush they were able to cross half the distance back to their horses without a scratch. But there seemed little good of trying to go on. Marvin’s code did not include the sportsman’s chance of open fighting when the prey was already helpless in his hands. Without ever exposing his body to their fire, he had checkmated his enemies by one bold, simple stroke. Sport and Nell lay side by side in the snowy sage, and they would not rise to

sweep their riders through the gap to safety. Marvin had ridden in easy range and had shot them down with his rifle.

To Charity it seemed simply and wholly beyond doubt that both John and herself would be immediately done to death. It seemed one of those certainties to which only a fool would try to close his eyes. They could not possibly escape the horsemen on foot, and if they tried to make a stand in the sage, the five armed men could stalk them and slay them at their leisure. If she could have seen the least vestige of a fighting chance she would have staked it to the end—but as it was she could see no shadow of hope but that which she should find in the consolation of John's arms.

But one look into her companion's face told her that there was certain fighting still to be done. "Don't give up yet," he whispered softly. Even at this fateful instant his way and tone were gentle—a gentleness that he had always had for her, but which she had taken for granted and had never noticed in particular before. Oh, she would have loved it if she *had* noticed it, instead of merely accepting it as she had accepted so much else from this tall, gaunt man beside her. It had taken this moment of peril really to send it home to her. And now he was speaking very softly and swiftly as he crept at her side.

"Charity, listen carefully—and be sure you understand. Those devils are waitin' for us to stand up and run for it—then they'll pot us. They know we'll hit a clearin' soon and give 'em a shot. There's only one ghost of a show, and that's for me to stop in the pass. You keep on creepin' until you're out of range—four hundred yards at least—and then leg it fast as you can for the ranch. The pass is narrow—I'll give 'em a run for their money till you can get home. Otherwise they'll overtake you in the saddle and cut you down."

She glanced into his face, tried to merge into his mood; then shook her head. "I'm not going to leave you," she told him. "It'd just mean we'd be apart instead of together at the finish—and, John, I can't hold up alone. . . . *I haven't the courage, after all.* Let's stick it out together, long as we can."

He turned from his watch so that she could see the swift flash of his familiar grin. "Beat it, Charity," he said. "Don't worry about these weasels—just leg it! Honest, it's the one chance, for me as well as you. They'd cut us both down in the marsh, but it'll be just pie to sit here and plug 'em until you can send help."

"How many shells you got?"

On this question alone might depend life or death, and now that they had reached the pass, he paused to answer, “Loads o’ shells,” he told her cheerfully. “Don’t go worryin’ about me. Just leg it—tight as you can!”

Charity was an adventurer, but also she was a woman, and the bitter tears blurred her sight as she looked into his homely, grinning face. She knew he had lied about the number of shells he carried. His pistol was likely full, but she could see only a few additional shells in his belt. This man was as honest as his own hills but he had lied to her now to spare her the bitter truth.

He had grinned as he told it, and no matter whether she lived or died, whether she was to harbor it through the years or to carry it, a last image, into the oblivion that might await her in the deadly marsh, it would sustain her through them. No matter how many gates of peril she must pass through before her course was run, that cheerful widening of the homely mouth would sustain her through them all. It had not been in scorn of death, nor was it a foolish act of bravado. He had grinned at her because it was his nature, and no man could tell why; because he was John Sherwood and she was Charity Blair, and in her heart she would understand.

“I’ll go, of course,” she told him simply. “Through the marsh?”

“Yes. It’s the only chance.” His hand dipped to his pocket, and he gave her his heavy clasp knife, his eyes intent on hers. “You know that devil Marvin, and the breeds,” he said. “Don’t let ’em take you—alive!”

They were simple orders, but she understood. She nodded to tell him that on this point, at least, he need not worry: that he could fight with good cheer and know that he had protected her to the last. “Good-by—old sport,” she told him softly.

“Good-by, little Charity!”

She crept away through the sage; and he crouched with weapon ready for the first target that should be offered. It was a grim, sinister moment.



CHAPTER XIV

CHARITY FACES DANGER ALONE

THE crisis had wakened every slumbering nerve in Charity's body, and she was stealthy and alert as an animal as she crept through the pass. Her mind worked cool and sure, straight to the point, deliberate yet swift as lightning: every mental process was so keen and accurate that her muscles seemed to be acting of themselves, like parts of a wonderful machine. She crept close to the ground, infinitely careful to keep the sage-thickets between herself and her enemies: patient beyond thought, steeling herself against any false motion that might rustle the branches over her head and thus reveal her position. The breeds would be quick to fire at any movement of the brush. . . . As she drew further away and the brush growth was heavier she moved ever faster, and when at last the rock walls of the pass sheltered her she stood erect and sped like a deer, straight for the marsh.

Up to this instant the excitement of her flight and the imminence of the danger had carried her out of herself: she had been simply a human animal, fleeing from rifle fire. Animal terror she had known well—that which is born of the primitive love of life, known to all living beings and which is purely a device of nature for preserving her species—but she had been too intent on escaping to know *fear* in its true sense—fear that is of the intellect, rather than the instincts which like all personal emotions are a wheel about the hub of self. She had forgotten self, for the moment: she had been but a primitive being, fighting for her life, and the life of her comrade and her own self-realization had been submerged; but now the soul of Charity Blair began to command her again. The whole tragic situation—the desperate race that lay before her and the almost hopeless fight that John must wage alone—was suddenly illumined, revealed in pitiless detail, by that light which was her human soul. She saw the whole impending battle shaded and shadowed through the glass that was her own individual consciousness no longer a puppet of instinct but the higher creature of self-will, no longer stricken with blind terror, that functioned in the purely physical side of herself, but rather bowed down with that far-seeing fear that weighs upon the heart.

An animal cannot hope, and therefore cannot despair. When danger threatens it either flees or remains to fight, it is spared or it dies; and since it

never *knows* it can never experience the unnameable fear of *ceasing to know*; since it has no sense of self it can never know the thousand hopes and fears that afflict self. But when man was endowed with supremacy over the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, he was also given a tragic power to know and to feel. His soul makes him immortal, but because his soul is only another word for his self-knowledge, he can also see the deadly paths that he must tread from day to day, he can anticipate danger, feel the lash of circumstance. To-day Charity, fleeing into that grey, wind-blown marsh, saw all too plain the trail that lay ahead. In the same flash of vision she caught a glimpse of the whole long, tragic battle that is life, the faltering human soul crushed and driven by the cruel and oppressive powers of nature. There had been terror before, sweeping like a swift poison through the network of her nerves, but now this had given way to dismay that clutched her heart. There had been the instinctive horror of death, but now this was gone, and only a growing weight of a strange but infinite sadness took its place.

The wind swept over the sea of grey reeds, and whirled in curious eddies across the drear faces of the open waters. The sleet swept into her face, the cold gripped her lungs as she struggled for breath.

She had never really known this land before—this desert of marsh and sage under the blast of the wind—but surely she knew it now! She was face to face with it at last, prey to its cold; faltering before the onslaught of its wind; and she knew it as the last stronghold of those cruel, natural forces that ever wage pitiless war with men. It was unmasked at last as the bitter, merciless enemy that it really was—yet she gave it something of that strange image of love that a strong man gives his worthy foe.

In what was perhaps the last hour of her life she could see the soul of this grey, bleak wilderness that stretched before her; and perhaps it was merely the far vision that comes to men on their deathbeds that had enabled her, at last, to understand. She already knew, in a strange, calm region of her being, that her cause was already all but lost, and that death lay in ambush for her in those dreary depths of marsh. To her it seemed that the desert sun had risen and set for the last time: that by appeal to her inborn love of adventure, the cruel spirit of these trackless wilds had tricked and done her to death. The cold was merciless, ever increasing; the blasting wind seemed to pierce her heavy clothes. Advancing slowly, keeping dry and saving her strength, she might reach the ranchhouse before the storm smothered her existence, but this dim chance had been forbidden her at the outset. She could never save John by such tactics as these. She must risk all she had on the one chance of speed, running till she dropped on the long, pitiless trail.

The sleet was swiftly changing to snow, and the white flakes collected on her mackinaw as if they would cover and hide her as they covered the dying grass. The land had yielded its soul to winter; and surely the white power, so invincible in this storm-swept marsh, would not spare her. Always this had been the fate of adventurers. The rough lands called to them, promised them the thrill of battle, the warmth of love, the joy and stir of enlivened blood pulsing in the veins; but it was only a trap to do them to death! They came—these stout-hearted ones—they answered the wanderer's call of the wild geese flocks over the marsh, and then they were left in the snow to die. It had always been thus, since the first rude races ventured from their sheltered homes in the Euphrates Valley; and it would never change until the last forest was torn from the hill, the last marsh drained, and the last wild river harnessed for water-power—and then life would be no longer worth living, anyway. The trap had been set, and another adventurer was about to fall.

She found at once that her mortal strength simply could not break a trail through the heavier thickets of tules. It was not a question of faltering spirit here: it was simply a matter of human limitations. She was desperate, her fine, young muscles responded as she had never dared to believe they could respond, yet the tall forests of reeds would not let her through. She had to follow along their edges, and wherever the thicket was less dense, fight her way through; she sought the narrow channels of open water only to be driven back by water beyond her depth; she stumbled on through the clinging mud. She was already wet to her hips. Before she had forced herself two hundred yards into that maze of reeds and water roots, she had lost all sense of accurate direction, she was out of breath, and her precious energy was flowing from her in a frightful stream. Even the hardened plainsman dreads the marshes and walks miles to avoid them, because he alone knows the incredible labor of walking even a few feet through the clinging ooze; how each step requires a tremendous effort of will and muscle and a wrench of the entire body that exhausts almost at once the fountains of energy of the nerves; yet Charity was obliged to cross not two hundred yards, but a tragic half mile, and not at a snail's pace but in a race with death.

She fell full length in her frantic effort to make time, and was of course wet through when she got to her feet again. This, she felt, was the beginning of the end: surely wet clothes were all that was needed to defeat her. The bitter wind lashed down like a foe taking fresh heart in battle, and it seemed to chill and freeze her very vitals. She was not mistaken: her life heat was departing from her in a stream.



CHAPTER XV

THUNDER AND LIGHTNING

SHE dropped her mackinaw. Soaked with the marsh-water and no longer any protection from the cold it was only an impediment now. Then she struggled on, thrusting with all her strength through the matted weeds, floundering in the deep muck of the marsh bottom, following the edge of the thickets where she could not push through, back-trailing again and again to avoid some impassable place. Endless moments passed before she actually gained another two hundred yards—and this gain was at the cost of the very vital energy of her life.

Already she was at the brink of absolute exhaustion. Her strength was spent: only the fighting spirit kept her up at all. For her own part she would have given up long since: she was fighting now simply and wholly for the life of her comrade who guarded the pass behind her. She did not know that, were he alive at all, he could not possibly be in more desperate straits than she was herself. She had simply tried to cross the marsh at an impossible place, and she was paying for her persistence with her life. The mysterious breath cannot linger in the clay after many hours of such trial as this. She was much nearer the end of her strength, the inevitable collapse of her nervous system than she herself knew.

And now this endless battle in the mire began to partake of the nature of a dream—an interminable dream from which she could not waken. There was no reality, now, in this weird waste of reeds, thicket on thicket never ending, in the grey water that lay between, in the wind's lashing blast upon her weakened body. . . . Even her own effort seemed as if it could not possibly be true, that she must have fallen long since and only her wandering soul was thus trudging on. She was no longer aware of pain, or wracked lungs; even the cold was not so bitter now. . . .

It was almost the end. She fell at ever-increasing intervals; and it was ever more difficult to rise again. She could hear, as in a dream, the strange rising and falling song that the wind sang; but she no longer knew its source. It seemed to her rather the very song of life, the song that sped out from this sphere to be lost at last in the emptiness between the stars, an age-old melody in wailing minor chords that all men heard but not even the wisest

fully understood. . . . The same appeal she had sometimes heard in the sobbing complaint of the coyotes—heard softly over a great distance—and it was in the forlorn voices of the wild geese circling above her head. It was the song of effort wasted, of conflict against unconquerable odds, of the ignominy of defeat after brave days of battle.

She was over half through now. Scarcely two hundred yards remained. Weary miles beyond, over the snowy sage, lay the farmhouse—shelter and warmth, and help for the man she had left to guard the pass. But she was defeated, just the same. The open water had grown shallow and disappeared, and she was all but through the worst of the mire, but between her and the high ground beyond stretched an unbroken, impassable wall of reeds.

It simply would not yield before her strength and though she followed along its edge she searched in vain for a horse trail that might let her through. If it were but twenty yards, instead of two hundred, she could pass. But there was no better place to give up. . . . At least she could creep in and be sheltered.

“I can’t go on, John,” she suddenly said in a clear voice—and she spoke to a spirit that stood at her side, urging her on. . . . But he would not urge her further if he knew how tired she was! She stood in the whirling snow, a dim figure that might have been the eerie spirit of the marsh itself, and she faced the way she had come. The world was dimming about her, and the mists of delirium hovered close. “John, old sport—I love you, and I’d die for you if I could. But I can’t go on—there’s no use trying any more.”

She came to a low dune—found so often in the marshes of this land—and half-instinctively, urged on by a fire of purpose beyond herself, she climbed to its top. Perhaps she could see, from here, a horse trail through the reeds by which she could push through to the high ground beyond.

Then all at once she stretched her hands, calling as a child calls, earnestly and pleadingly. So vividly outlined that even in her half-delirium she could not possibly mistake him for a figment of imagination, stood a heroic and towering figure. It was Thunder, the grey stallion, in the lead of his band of mares.

Thunder heard at once that pleading call from beyond the reeds, and he started as if to break in terror. At once he whirled, ears pricking, and partly because the distance was too far for the eyes of animals to receive an accurate image, and partly because his acquaintance with Charity had always been more of hearing and smell and touch rather than of sight, he did not immediately recognize the figure on the dune. But his fear lasted a

moment only. Charity remembered, then, the treaty that was between them—the trick she had taught him during their long friendship.

Her shrill, sweet whistle suddenly floated across the reeds to him. It was only the faintest of faint sounds, dimmed not only by distance but by the girl's weakness, but the response was instantaneous. The marvelous mechanism of the animal's ear distinguished in an instant the tone and overtones that marked it from the other sounds he knew, the whistling of birds and the warnings of danger; and he started, and a tremor seemed to pass over his mighty body.

Thunder knew this call. It always sent a wave of ecstasy through the marvelous, delicately organized system of his nerves, and why, not even the greatest horseman could exactly tell. Thunder knew, in that sure seat of knowledge, that men call instinct, that this soft call could never lead him to disaster. It was associated in his brute mind with sugar and caresses; with hands that could soothe but which never menaced; with a slight figure that stood patiently in the sage, never frightening him with abrupt motions, always soothing with soft sounds, always gentle, but never, never to be feared. Besides, it echoed another call of another day; it stirred a chord in that unfathomable mystery that is the memory of animals. Dora had loved him, as a colt, and beast-like he had given love in return. Far down in his wild heart he knew that Charity loved him too.

He sprang with the grace of an antelope into the reeds. Thick barrier though they were, they were nothing to his mighty strength. He came in powerful bounds, a sight that lifted Charity's breaking heart to the clouds. The marshy ground seemed to quake.

He made a never-to-be-forgotten picture as he swept through the reeds—white mane flowing, neck arched, his snowy tail gleaming like a great sheaf of silver thread. Almost at once he was within a few yards of the girl, then changing his pace to a spirited trot, swept up and halted at her side.

Charity's eyes shone. To her it was the eternal mystery of the desert that this ray of hope should shine in her darkest moment of despair. It was like a scene out of an old legend: the slight upreaching form of the girl, this noble animal, whose quivering engine of life no worker in steel could ever model or imitate, about them the grey marshes desolate under the storm. The girl's pale, drawn cheeks were wet with snow, but now the tears wet them too. It was a miracle of the desert that this great help should come to her in her hour of need.

Just for an instant she stroked the great head, naked of rope or leather. Again the horse was soothed by her voice. The snow swept about them in whirling eddies as she turned him, her hand at his muzzle, until he faced the high ground beyond the reeds. Then she gripped her hands in his flowing mane, and like a bird soars—just as John had taught her and with a strength born of hope—she sprang full on his back.

The stallion's immediate response was a frantic leap of terror. Fortunately he did not buck but leaped straight ahead—otherwise the exhausted girl could not have kept her seat a moment. Skilled bareback rider that she was, this was no mean horsemanship—to retain her balance during these first, few frantic bounds. Yet she rode as on a winged horse, leaning forward slightly, knees gripping, soft hands already reaching to fondle and soothe. At the same time she caressed him with her voice.

She had expected him to be panic-stricken at first. It was part of the chance she took—the only chance she had for life, and for John's life as well. It was purely a matter of instinct with Thunder—for uncounted ages the equine breed has known the great fear of the sudden leap from ambush of the beast-of-prey. . . . Yet there were counteracting instincts, to-day. It was not the first time he had felt this weight upon his back. As a young horse the girl Dora had ridden him often—it was part of the games they had had together—and dim, fleeting memory returned to tell him that there was nothing to harm him here. Yet this memory could not have possibly prevailed were it not for the touch of her hand, the sound of her voice.

Charity Blair was a born horsewoman—that fact had been indicated long ago, and now it was proven. Except for this the wild stallion would have run until he died from frantic terror. Through his glossy, sensitive skin he felt the touch that no good steed, over the broad earth, can ever mistake. The knowledge slowly came to him, in secret ways, that this rider was no more to be feared than the beloved companion who had played with and ridden him years ago.

There was assurance in the soft, easy touch of that small hand. She was not afraid, and thus there was no contagion of terror to pass to him. There was comfort in it, a certain message that no harm was to befall him, and that she meant only well by him. She commanded him as the great have always commanded the lowly; and the knowledge of her mastery sustained him in his terror now. He need not be afraid when the master's hand was at his glossy neck. . . . Finally, there was trust and there was love in the soft touch; and though materialists deny it to the end of time, love and trust are two things that make the whole world kin, that can work miracles when courage

fails and we drop in the dust; that can establish relations of confidence and service between even two such dissimilar creatures as these, this child of men and the wild stallion of the plains.

She talked to him as her hand stroked his neck; soft, reassuring sounds whose meaning he could never mistake. There was nothing to be afraid of in her—this was simply a game such as he had played with another rider, years before. Almost at once his terror-blasted nerves were soothed, and the wild fire died in his intelligent eyes. His leaps were no longer frantic, and he soon fell into a smooth gallop, marvelously fleet, which the horsewoman instantly recognized as the most wonderful gait she had ever seen in horseflesh. She bowed low, to shelter herself from the wind, and the sage whipped under her like a grey tapestry.

But only the first crisis was past. The B-Bar fence, just a faint line through the snow, leaped up to her like a running thing and there was no help for her if the stallion failed to take it. She had no reason to believe but that he would either check his gait and throw her, or else turn aside. But the danger was over before she knew it. A fence of this height did not exist for Thunder: he rose like a bird, leaped with the easy, natural motion of a thoroughbred hunter, and the fence streaked dimly beneath. He had been headed straight for the open sage, and it was as if the animal had not seen the obstruction at all.

She had kept her balance during that long, low leap without an effort, due to her long practice as a bareback rider. But a no-less serious crisis confronted her now: that of guiding the unbridled horse toward the ranch.

Again she fell back on Thunder's early training. Western animals are not taught to obey a pull on the bit, but rather the pressure of the rein against the neck; and although the rein that had guided Thunder had rotted into dust long since, its image still lingered in his memory—that mysterious, retentive memory of the equines. Charity found that a prolonged pressure of her hand at either side of the horse's neck would cause him to swerve.

And now the only question that remained was that of whether or not she would win her battle with the cold. Her clothes were wet through and freezing, and the wind, an icy blast over the sage, chilled her to the very marrow of her bones: could she fight off the numbing frost for a few moments more? The drowsiness that is the first warning of death by freezing had had hold of her just before she had mounted; and though now more widely awake, she feared that her fountains of bodily heat were at a low ebb and would soon cease to flow. Besides, she thought she discerned an ominous

sign of which old plainsmen had warned her—a dim hint of warmth pervading her body.

But in an instant she learned its source. Except for the mists of delirium that had not yet been wholly dispelled—the strange, dreamlike quality that pervaded this whole, last incredible hour—she would have likely found it at once. The heat that poured through her was from the warm, steaming body of the animal beneath. Though running lightly as a deer, some of his bodily heat steamed through her wet clothing and nourished the dimming spark of her life. It was just animal heat, the exhalation from a sweating horse, yet it was dear beyond all naming to the cold-wracked girl. Of course, she was stiff, aching, almost insensible with cold, yet she was saved; and a strange little cry, half a laugh and half a sob, broke from her lips and was lost in the wind behind.

It was only half a laugh, but it showed that she had won. She was an adventurer tried and true, and not even this wintry desert could crush her spirit.

On she rode, darting up the hills, bounding down the valleys, flying over the snow-swept sage. The storm beat around her, but it could not halt her; and the wind lashed over her head but could not break her down.



CHAPTER XVI

THE FINAL TEST

WHEN the last clump of sage in the Grey Lake country is cleared away to make room for growing grain, when the last marsh is drained and the egg of the last mallard lies broken in the grass, there will still live the legend of Charity's return to the B-Bar ranch. Every detail will be remembered: how the inclement weather had driven the ranch-hands to the house before the noon hour; how all, except Pedro, who was supposed to be visiting a dark-skinned sweetheart on the reservation, were assembled in the big living-room; how Lying Bill was standing at the window, gazing quietly into the storm, when all at once his mouth gaped and his blue, clear, liar's eyes opened wide. The others heard him breathe deeply, at first too astonished to make any other sound.

"There's somethin' comin' to the ranch," he observed—and whether it was a cyclone or a malediction none of his hearers could tell from his tone. "I wish one of you boys would come and look," he went on rather humbly, like a man who fears his senses have gone back on him. "I sure wish you would."

This was so different from Bill's usual tone that not one, but the whole crew sprang to the window. Bill's senses had not lied to him: they also saw the mighty stallion racing over the sage, unguided except for the touch of a hand at his glossy neck, the wild figure of a girl bent low on his bare back. The rider was quite near; so there was time only for one glance. They were a lithe, loose-muscled set, used to swift action; and they sprang out of the house like quail from a covert.

They were none too soon. Charity was almost to the ranchhouse, and was face to face with the problem of dismounting from the hard-running animal. She did the only thing she could do: guided her horse straight toward the little group of men who poured from the door—knowing that the horse would swerve before he came too near and thus perhaps check his pace enough that she could swing off. It was her one chance, and she made it. The men leaped to intercept the animal—the absence of a bridle was sufficient to suggest a runaway to their bewildered minds—and terrorized by the sight of them, Thunder tried to turn aside. As he drew up and whirled

Charity dropped off. She alighted on her feet, then fell heavily on the frozen ground, but Lying Bill had her in his arms in an instant. The incident added another colorful detail to the story that Bill would later tell. The wild stallion raced away, and the storm dropped down between.

It seemed past belief that the shock of the fall, combined with the long, cruel punishment of the cold, did not at once extinguish the fading flame of her life; and indeed, the mists of dreams dropped around her. Yet instantly she began a bitter fight back to consciousness. Her work was not yet done: she had not yet sent help to her comrade, holding the distant pass. . . . Before ever Bill could carry her across the threshold of the ranchhouse, she opened her somber eyes, like a child waking after long sickness.

“John—fighting in the pass,” she told them, brokenly. “Horse thieves—and they’ll kill him if you don’t race——”

She did not have to repeat that broken message. If there was one word that could impel the B-Bar hands to quick action, it was simply “horse thieves.” It enraged like a blow in the face. It is true that Bill carried her the rest of the way into the house, laid her on a bed, and left her in Mrs. Blair’s charge, yet before the wild-riding little band had reached the ranch fence-line he was not the last man in the cavalcade and was gaining every instant.

Meanwhile John Sherwood was fighting for his life. He had taken refuge behind a large rock, and alone, with no other weapons than his revolver, was trying to hold the pass against five desperate men.

Except for the advantage of the natural fortress in which he stood, he could not have hoped for even a moment’s success. They were five to one, and their rifles would shoot to kill at a range beyond all limits of his heavy pistol. As it was, he stood like an old grey wolf at bay, and the coyotes ringed about him feared his bite.

He was fairly well sheltered from their bullets by the rock and the sage-thickets; and only by a spirited charge could they be sure of driving him out. That charge had to be made largely in the open, in the face of pistol fire—not the kind of fighting that Marvin and his gang ordinarily preferred. They were all brave men in ambush: at long-range work, when all advantages were on their side, they could be very bold and terrible; but all of them knew rather too much of this lean foreman of the B-Bar to care to engage him at in-fighting. They were good knife-men; but charging boldly across the sage, even when they were five to one, was a prospect that brought a queer wilting of the heart and an unpleasant cold in the vitals. They preferred to take a chance on a lucky shot driven in from long range.

The bandits spread out in a fan formation, hoping by that means one of them would be offered a clear-shot, meanwhile emptying their rifles into the clump of brush in which they knew he lay. There was no great harm in this. John was fairly well protected by a large boulder, and the shots, that did not flatten against its hard surface, either passed over him or made long cuts in the ground beside him. Except for a chance shot that might be whipped in at an angle and strike the less-sheltered extremities of his body, he was not likely to be injured by such tactics as these. The longer his enemies played at them the greater Charity's chance to get through to safety.

He knew the adventurer's code, this plainsman; and it was strictly true that at this moment he was fighting for Charity's life alone. He made no heroics of it, was unmoved by self-pity: it was simply an ugly deal that he had to face as he had always faced the many crises of his desert life, grimly and quietly and making no greater number of bones about it. The idea of sacrificing a comrade's life to save his own was not in John Sherwood's philosophy. It was simply one of the things that, in an adventurer's land, was not being done. He knew that she had a long, bitter way to go; and all he dared hope for was to keep his foes at bay until she could reach the ranch. It was all that he asked for, in his heart: while it was true that if he could hold out this long, he might stand them off long enough to bring help from the ranch, this was incidental, and he did not concern his mind greatly with it.

Yet he felt in his heart that even to save Charity was a losing fight. In the first place the girl might die in the marsh: he had never had occasion to cross it, and he had no way of knowing whether or not it was passable at all. Yet he had not dared to advise her to try to make the long walk around. He had seen the situation in a flash: as soon as the bandits were able to break through the pass they would ride in pursuit of Charity, with the desperate plan of cutting her down before she reached the ranchhouse to set the whole, hard-riding crew on their trail. Their very existence depended on this. Their only hope lay in a head start of several days on their pursuers: otherwise they would be ridden down and slain. Other ranches would send posses: they would be easy to track in the snow.

The farther she had to walk the more certain they were of overtaking her on their swift horses, destroying her, and by concealing evidence of the crime delay pursuit possibly for days. He could not hold them forever: thus the girl's only possible hope lay in risking everything on a speedy flight. The shorter her time on the trail the greater her chance. But even by taking the short cut through the marsh, hours would be required to walk to the safety of

the ranch. And surely, before these hours could pass, they would find some way to destroy him and sweep through in the girl's pursuit.

He could not hold these desperadoes at bay for the needed hours. While it was true that the steep, rock walls of the range on either side prevented them from encircling him on their horses, they would see other means—some of which had already occurred to John—by which they might destroy him. Indeed they were already experimenting with other tactics. His keen eyes caught one, swift dim flash of steel in the nearer sage.

Texas Harvey, the bravest of the three breeds, was attempting a stalk; and by good fortune John had seen the flicker of his rifle barrel. The latter watched intently, and in a moment the rustling brush showed the position of his enemy.

He did not wait for the breed to reveal himself. It was not his tactics to risk his own life to destroy that of his enemies, nor to duel with them with the idea of killing as many as he could before they broke through. His one aim, his only strategy was to hold them at a distance as long as possible, never to force a crisis. He immediately fired into the brush where he believed the breed to be.

The ball passed too near for the Indian's comfort; and firing aimlessly and harmlessly in return, he crawled back to his friends. The rifles barked at him again, spitefully. Then there ensued a few moments of somewhat ominous silence.

If John could have overheard the momentary conference that now took place between his foes, it would have put a swift end to the growing dawn of hope in his ever-watching eyes. Marvin had achieved a plan of some brilliancy at last: only his terror and excitement had kept him from hitting upon it long before. Its excellence was not only that it portended inevitable destruction of their enemy; but it also subjected the attackers to no great risk.

It was an exceedingly simple plan. He explained it in a sentence, then turned to give particular directions to Pedro, the breed-Mexican who was known to see with deadly straightness over a rifle barrel. In conclusion he turned to the three natives.

"It's our one chance—the only chance we've got to keep those fellows off our trail for a few days," he told them swiftly, "As soon as he's down—it'll only take one shot this way—I'll signal with my gun. When you see that, ride like the devil through the gap and overtake the girl—that end of it

is up to you.” He saw Texas Harvey’s white teeth as his lips drew back; and this was a good sign. “She’s got a long start already, but you boys will overtake her long before she gets to the ranch. It’s up to you to fix it so they won’t get on our trail for a few days at least—by then the snow will cover up the tracks and they’ll be no trouble about the getaway. But no playing with the girl if you care about your necks! You’ve got to work quick. Of course be ready to plug Sherwood if he tries to break through.”

These directions given, he and the Mexican crawled away in opposite directions, heading for the steep hills on either side of the pass.

The sporadic firing that the three breeds kept up did not mask, for long, the operations of their two confederates. John had known his weakness from the first, and now the tragic truth went home that his foes had found it too. Far away, beyond pistol range, he made out the form of Marvin, laboriously climbing the steep range above the pass. One despairing glance in the opposite direction showed Pedro, climbing to a position of vantage on the other side.

They had him between them. In a few moments more they would reach the crest of the ridge, follow it down until they were in easy rifle range—yet far beyond his power to return their fire with his pistol—and simply destroy him at their leisure. He would be in plain sight from these points of vantage. As they could fire from opposite sides there was no earthly way to conceal himself from them.



CHAPTER XVII

THE DARK HOUR ENDS

THIS was the darkest moment of John Sherwood's life. It meant nothing less than utter and unqualified defeat. He did not dare to hope, or have any right to believe that Charity had found safety: he knew that no human being could have walked across the marsh and to the haven of the ranchhouse in the time she had been gone. There was nothing to keep them now from riding her down on their fleet horses and destroying her—like the wolves they were—in the fastnesses of the sage, in the weird, grey depths of the storm. And he could not come to her, nor could he not aid.

There was no paleness of fear in his lean face: rather it turned curiously dark as a hopeless, fighting fury swept over him. Already the two sharpshooters had reached the hilltop and getting into position for firing; and John gathered himself for a desperate assault on the three breeds. The grey desert-wolf would die fighting, at least. Baring himself to rifle fire from all quarters he would spring from his covert and make one, last, desperate charge toward the horses.

But that trial was never made. The desert gods had other plans, happier, fuller plans, for John Sherwood. There came, faint and clear through the storm, a queer, shrill cry—a sound that hurled John's heart into his throat; and brought the three breeds up facing the wind, like coyotes at the bay of a hound. There was an odd look on their flat, wide faces that their leader would have despaired to see.

The call came again, more clearly. There was nothing especially ferocious about it—just a singular, shrill ki-yi that meant nothing in particular. Rather it was the assurance, the sense of victory, so certain that it was already as good as won, that wrought such dismay in the breeds' hearts. And now Marvin was no longer seeking a good point of vantage from which he might fire down at John. He was firing desperately at certain other foes who rode wildly into the pass; and his fire was being returned with considerable enthusiasm.

The B-Bar boys had come! There were certain moments of riding back and forth as they tended to a few details, that would save time and trouble later; but at last they rode up to inquire of John how he had made out, and to

see if any harm had befallen him. He had done very well, considering, he said. He was somewhat hungry, exceedingly cold, and very much cramped; but otherwise he could not complain. For a man who had battled five desperadoes for some hours he was really in first-class condition.

“Not much bloodshed,” Lying Bill observed with some disappointment.

“Bloodshed was just about to begin when you came,” John observed slowly. “Would one of you boys mind rollin’ me a cigarette? My fingers is almost froze.”

But this was all inconsequential compared with the wonders of the hour when, late at night, John was allowed to see Charity. She had slept most of the day, hot drinks had forced the cold from her tissues; and she was able to smile with her old cheer at the tall man at her bedside.

“The word’s gone out that no one is to take a shot at Thunder,” he told her at last. “It was a hot note how that old cuss got the blame for a lot of hoss-stealin’ he didn’t do. The boys can’t talk of nothin’ else except how you come ridin’ him home, with no saddle or bridle. And to think you was once afraid to get on a hoss.”

She watched him with glowing eyes; but as yet he dared not guess what was in her heart.

“I’ve been savin’ a stake, and I’m goin’ to be startin’ up a hoss ranch of my own, one of these days. I wonder if we couldn’t be partners, Charity. By working with Thunder you could decoy his whole gang of mares into a pen, and with their colts we’d have the start for the finest hoss ranch in the West. Of course Thunder must always go free—you and I know that. We’ll never put up any jobs on him. But every one of those colts will have old Thunder’s blood in ’em.”

The girl smiled dimly. “We’ve been partners quite a little. I don’t see why we couldn’t.”

The man’s bronze face went suddenly white with earnestness. “We have been partners—that’s a fact,” he said, “and more than partners, too. Do you remember, Charity, once I was talkin’ to you about choosin’ a hoss, and how you said he ought to be tried out before you trust your life on him; and how you had to know just what kind of a hoss you was gettin’ or you wouldn’t take him?”

Charity nodded; and because she was a woman she did not in the least misunderstand where John was leading with his parable of horses. She smiled, and her hand pressed closer upon his.

He leaned toward her, and she looked with growing satisfaction into his homely face. “Charity,” he asked solemnly, “am I a good hoss?”

“John,” she replied earnestly, “you’re the best hoss I ever saw.” Her voice strengthened, as she spoke with growing conviction, reckless of the consequences. “A girl doesn’t usually say this ’till she’s asked, and maybe you’re never going to ask—but I’ll say it any way. I’d go anywhere you’d want to take me. I’d never be afraid on the trail with you.”

“Even if it’s a long, lonely trail—a hard trail, at times?” John’s voice wavered uncertainly, and he tried hard to hold it steady.

“Not if it lasted a thousand years. Can I make it any plainer, John?”

There was only one way that she could make it plainer; and he found this, too, in a little while. Her little arms, pressed about him, and her lips answering his kiss told more than all the words in all the tongues of pentecost. No wonder Lying Bill and his friends waited for long, impatient hours to learn the outcome of a certain bet they had together—a bet that concerned the everlastin’ ropin’ of a hoss.

They would take the trail together, Charity and John, and because they knew each other’s mettle they could leave Fear behind them in the dreary, wind-blown marsh. Then they could mount up to the sunlit hills until they could see out over all the world. The trail might be hard, but there would be a laugh in every turn of it, just the same. And when they met old Thunder, shimmering on the plateaus, they would wish him joy in his glorious freedom, and give him the adventurer’s salute.



THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some images, for example the movie poster from the 1923 silent film *Don Quickshot*, that did not appear in the original book have been added in for reader's interest.

[The end of *Four in One Westerns* by Stephen Chalmers, W. C. Tuttle, William Macleod Raine, Edison Marshall]