

ON THE RIM OF THE ARCTIC



JAMES B. HENDRYX

RECENT MAYFAIR OF THE MOUNTED DEFENDS A SELF-CONFESSED MURDERER

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ON THE RIM OF THE ARCTIC

Sergeant Mayfair of the Mounted returns with one of the most gripping stories in his casebook—the story of a man who confessed too soon. On a long patrol north of the Arctic Circle the sergeant encounters Tex Conway, who eagerly admitted that he was guilty of a murder in Saskatchewan; Mayfair, however, was sceptical, even when Tex described the circumstances of the crime and the evidence that could be used against him.

Long months of isolation in the Far North had left Tex beaten, caring little whether he lived or died. Without a word of protest he set out for the punishment that awaited him in Saskatchewan—and then Mayfair found it necessary to leave him behind in a cabin on the Porcupine River to help out in a diphtheria epidemic.

Back in Saskatchewan the sergeant found the case of Tex Conway closed—but he reopened it with a bang! When Mayfair returned to the cabin on Porcupine River he brought good news and a dramatic story with him.

On the Rim of the Arctic is told with all the excitement, suspense, and humour that have delighted James B. Hendryx's fans for years.

By the same Author

The Way of the North
Downey of the Mounted
The Yukon Kid
Gambler's Chance
Hard Rock Man
Edge of Beyond
Blood of the North
etc.

ON THE RIM OF THE ARCTIC

by

JAMES B. HENDRYX



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All of the characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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CHAPTER ONE
JIM CONWAY CALLS A BLUFF

THE woman put the finishing touches to the arrangement of a table neatly set for three. Stepping through the doorway, she walked toward the horse corral, through the open gate of which she could see two men engaged in saddling a big rangy black, close-snubbed to the post set firmly in the centre of the corral. Pausing at the high fence, she peered between the poles. "Dinner's ready," she announced.

The elder of the two turned at the sound of her voice. "All right, Mother. Stand close to the fence and get ready to see Tommy make the ride of his life. We've been half an hour saddling this buzzard head and, believe me, he's going places with Tommy on top—part of the time, at least," he added, with a grin. Turning, he grasped the cheek-strap of the hackamore in one hand as with the other he snatched the Stetson from his head and held it as a blindfold, while the younger man placed a foot in the stirrup and gently eased himself into the saddle. The older man's glance flashed over the outfit and came to rest on the rider's face. "All set, son? Got a good hold on your rope?"

"All set," the young man replied. "Turn him loose!"

With a quick jerk on the knot that released the snubbed horse, the older man stepped back, and at the same instant the other brought his quirt down across the horse's flank. In a single bound the infuriated animal cleared the gate and struck straight across the flat in a series of running bucks; his rider, keeping a firm grip on the hackamore rope, swayed gracefully in the saddle. Then the horse stopped short, leaped high into the air with a peculiar corkscrew twist that threw the rider off balance, and came down with a jolt that threw him hard against the horn. There followed a series of end-swapping leaps, fore and aft bucks, sunfishes, and sidewise leaps. The rider, no longer swaying gracefully, clung desperately to the hackamore rope; his seat was loosened so that he slammed alternately against cantle and horn, more daylight showing between his seat and the saddle at each leap. The horse was screaming with rage, his black coat glistening with sweat. At the top of a high buck the rider lost a stirrup and, hurtling from the saddle in a parabolic curve, struck the ground on hands and knees.

"Damn near rode him!" exclaimed the older man, turning to his wife proudly. "Stayed almost a minute on the toughest horse in Texas! He'll ride him, next time! See if he don't!"

Her lips tight-pressed, the woman watched her son rise to his feet and walk toward them. Leaping wildly as he sought to rid himself of the saddle, the horse dashed toward the farther end of the big pasture. "Thank God he wasn't killed!" she breathed fervently. "That brute is the very incarnation of savage fury."

"You bet he is!" the man agreed. "He's got the pride in him and the heart and the muscles—everything a horse ought to have. I tell you, when Tommy gets him gentled he'll have the best horse on the range—on any range."

"Do you mean, Jim Conway, that you'd let Tommy get on that beast again?"

"Sure he'll get on him again. I couldn't keep him off if I wanted to! He'll keep getting on him till he rides him. I tell you—there's a horse! And Tommy's a rider, too!"

"I expected to see him killed every minute."

The man laughed. "Every minute! Do you realize that it was only fifty-one seconds from the time the horse jumped through the gate till Tommy hit the sod? I timed it."

"It seemed like an hour to me," the woman replied, and as the younger man joined them she asked solicitously, "Are you hurt, son?"

"Hurt? Of course not! What a horse! He sure knows all the tricks—and then some! But I'll ride him yet!" Stooping, he picked up a coiled lariat from the ground and started toward a horse that stood saddled in the shade of the corral fence, bridle-reins hanging to the ground.

"Wait till after dinner, son," the older man said. "Let him fight that saddle for an hour and maybe he'll be easier to ride."

"I'm not asking any odds of him."

"Of course not," the other replied gravely. "It isn't a question of asking odds. It's a question of accomplishing a purpose. Your purpose is to break that horse to ride. The easier you can accomplish it the better—for you and the horse both."

The two washed at the bench outside the kitchen door, and then, as he had done ever since Tommy could remember, Jim Conway waited behind his wife's chair as she placed the food on the table, then gravely seated her and took his own seat.

The meal over, the woman handed Conway a letter. "From Caswell," she said. "Joe Hurley left it on his way from town."

He slit the envelope and withdrew the letter as the eyes of both centred on his face. Hard lines gathered at the corners of his mouth and his eyes

narrowed as they scanned the page. He folded the letter and laid it on the envelope beside his empty plate.

“What did he say?” his wife asked.

“The same thing—only more of it. He’s giving me one last chance to sell out to him at what he calls a fair price. If I don’t, the 7-Up will start on May first and run a fence across from Piñon Butte to the river.”

Young Tom’s eyes widened. “Why, Dad, that’s open range! He can’t do it! Why, it would cut us off from the north range altogether. It would starve us out!”

“He can do it, all right. He’s got the money and the men.”

“But it’s against the law! We’ve got as much right to the open range as the 7-Up has.”

“Sure we have, son—theoretically. But as long as Bob Barnum is sheriff what are we going to do about it?”

“Sell out before we starve out,” the woman advised. Her fingers opened and closed, tears gathered in the corners of her eyes, and her lips trembled. “Oh, Jim, why won’t you sell out? Blandon did, and Ingersoll, and the Hardy brothers. They knew there was no use trying to buck Caswell. He paid them a fair price for their land and their stock too.”

“No price is a fair price if a man don’t want to sell. We were here before Caswell came. As long as the Rockwoods owned the 7-Up we never had any trouble. It’s just as old Horace Rockwood used to say: ‘There’s range enough for all.’ It was a sad day for the little outfits when Caswell took over the 7-Up.”

“Sure it was,” his wife agreed. “But we’ve got to face the fact, dear—Caswell is here, and he’s here to stay. He has boasted that he’ll get rid of the little outfits, one way or another. The others saw that it was no use to fight him, so they sold out.”

“Caswell don’t own the range,” cut in young Tom hotly. “We’ve got as good a right to it as he has!”

“He doesn’t own it,” the woman said, “but he might as well own it. When he runs that fence across from the mountains to the river, he’ll certainly control it.”

“Let him run his fence. We’ll cut his wire as fast as he can string it!”

“And then there’ll be shooting,” his mother replied. “Oh, can’t you see—when that starts I’ll never draw another easy breath.”

Jim Conway frowned. “I don’t think he’ll run that fence. In the first place, it would cost him too much to keep what few head of cattle we’ve got

off the range. And he'd know mighty well he'd have to ride it night and day to keep us from cutting his wire. Time enough to worry about shooting after he starts building his fence. Caswell's bluffing—and I'm calling his bluff." Pushing back his chair, he picked up the letter, stepped to a desk in the corner of the room, seated himself, and wrote rapidly for a few minutes. Glancing over his shoulder, his wife read:

P. J. CASWELL

7-UP RANCH, VERDE, TEXAS.

DEAR SIR:

Go to hell.

JIM CONWAY

"There," he said, glancing up. "Caswell's got his answer. It's his move."

Young Tom read the words and grinned. "That's the stuff, Dad!" he said heartily. "Let Caswell put that in his pipe and smoke it! Come on, let's go catch up that black and find out how much fight is left in him. I'll ride him or I'll know the reason why!"

"Why do you two have to be so stubborn?" the woman cried. "Always looking for a fight—fighting horses—fighting Caswell! Why can't you be sensible like the men who sold out and let Caswell have the range? I had a letter from Amy Blandon the other day. They took the money Caswell paid them for their outfit and went down near Brownsville and bought some land and they're going to raise oranges and grapefruit."

Jim Conway grinned, and winked at young Tom. "Now that's an idea, son," he said. "How would you like to go down there and get hold of a nice gentle Shetland pony and put in the time riding herd on a grove of grapefruit?"

"Don't believe my heart would stand the strain," the younger man laughed, and turned to the woman. "Cheer up, Mom, the worst is yet to come!" On the way to the corral he glanced at his father. "Mom sure takes things seriously, don't she?"

The older man nodded. "Yes. You see, son, she's from the east—from Kansas City. Eastern folks don't look at things like we do. Twenty-two years ago, when we homesteaded here, we started in a board shanty. Then you were born, and when things picked up we built the house, and put in the pecan grove, and planted the cottonwoods, and your mother fooled around with her flower-beds and loved every minute of it. We had good times, too, till the Rockwoods sold out to Caswell. Fine people—the Rockwoods—got along with everybody—always throwing parties up in the big house—always willing to help a neighbour any way they could.

“When Caswell came all that changed. And when things started to roughen up, your mother began to worry. She’s changed a lot in the last few years. Probably can’t help it—don’t come of fighting stock, I reckon. Somehow, she don’t love the *land*. She’s lived on it all these years—but she don’t love it. She can’t seem to see that if a thing’s worth having, it’s worth fighting for.”

The eyes of the younger man swept the landscape—the rolling range, and in the distance the blue mountains. “I love the land,” he said. “This is my home. I’m glad you called Caswell’s bluff, Dad. We’ll fight him to a finish—you and I.”

Alone in the house, the woman gathered up the dishes and carried them into the kitchen.

CHAPTER TWO

MURDER

IT was the first day of May, some three weeks after Jim Conway had mailed his reply to Caswell. Young Tom pulled up the big black on the summit of a high knoll close against Piñon Butte. As his gaze swept the rolling foothills a smile twisted the corners of his lips. "Dad was right," he muttered as he leaned forward to stroke the neck of the superb animal. "Caswell was bluffing about running that fence. Today is the day he was going to start building it, according to his letter, and there's no crew of posthole diggers punching holes in the prairie, and not a load of posts or a roll of wire delivered on this end of the stretch—and I'll bet Dad didn't find any on the other end, either. He ought to be showing up pretty quick," he added, as his eyes followed the grey-yellow ribbon winding among the foothills that was the trail to Verde, the little cow town midway between the Conway spread and the 7-Up home ranch.

A breath of warm air fanned the young man's face. As he shifted his position the velvet muzzle of the big black came up with a sharp rattle of bit-chains, the delicate ears pointed sharply forward, and a low nicker sounded as a forefoot pawed the sod. Tom saw it, then—the riderless horse, standing with reins hanging to the ground, close beside the trail where it emerged from between two buttes only a few rods away. "Why—it's—it's Major! Dad must be waiting for me there." But even as his lips formed the words, a premonition of evil gripped at his heart. He shook out the reins, and as the horse minced his way down the steep side of the knoll, young Tom's lips were pressed in a thin, tight line.

The horse snorted and shied sharply a few moments later as Tom pulled him up, swung from the saddle, and, lurching forward, knelt beside the still form that lay face down beside the trail. Silently he stared down at the tiny blood-rimmed hole in the back of the shirt. He tried to think, but a numbness gripped his brain. Kneeling there, staring helplessly down at the body of his dad, he felt as though the end of the world had come. "Shot," he murmured. "Shot from behind."

Something—the sound of his own voice—the realization of the dastardly deed—brought his faculties back with a rush. Grasping the inert form by shoulder and hip, he rolled it upon its back. With narrowed eyes he stared down at the shirt front, caked with blood and dust where the bullet had torn its way out, and at the blood-soaked dust in the trail. How long he knelt

there Tom never knew. Then his lips moved stiffly. "We were wrong, Dad," he muttered, staring down into the white, dust-covered face. "Caswell wasn't bluffing. He figured it was cheaper to kill a man than to build a fence—that's all."

Picking up the body, he carried it from the trail and laid it gently in the shade of the butte. He stood up and gazed about him, his eyes taking in every detail of the terrain. Then he walked to a spur of rock that jutted out from the low butte, some fifteen or twenty yards off the trail. There he found what he sought—tracks—horse-tracks, and the imprint of a high-heeled boot. A horse had stood there for some time, screened from the trail by the rock spur. A shod horse—a horse that had pawed the sod away and had stamped restlessly as he fought the flies—and, in that stamping, had left the plain imprint of a cracked shoe—a high front shoe. Squatting there, Tom stared down at that imprint until it was indelibly fixed in his mind—a crack that ran straight across the shoe from the outside edge of the toe calk.

Ascending to the summit of the rock spur, he found the place where the man had lain in wait, the coarse grass matted down between two up-jutting rocks. Half a dozen feet to one side he picked up an empty rifle-shell. It was a 0.38-calibre shell, and as Tom sniffed at it he knew that it had been recently fired. He pocketed the shell and stood erect. Drawing his Colt from its holster, he twirled the cylinder, threw it open, glanced at the six blunt-nosed bullets, and returned the gun to the holster. Then he strode to his horse, mounted, and headed down the trail toward the 7-Up ranch, some fourteen miles away.

Now and then, his eyes on the dust of the trail, he reined the horse to a walk. Several times he dismounted, but failed to find what he looked for—the track of the broken shoe. Whoever rode that horse either hadn't hit directly for the 7-Up or was crafty enough to keep off the dust-coated trail. As he mounted after the last halt, the wooden buildings of Verde loomed in the distance—half a dozen slab shacks, the store, and, across the street, the saloon. As he approached the town Tom wondered why, if the killer had been smart enough to keep off the trail, he hadn't been smart enough to obliterate the plain tracks left at the spot where he had concealed his horse behind the rock spur. He decided that in his excitement, possibly in his terror at the thing he had done, the killer's one thought had been to get away from there as quickly as possible—to put distance between himself and the corpse that lay there in the trail. "But that won't save him," Tom muttered savagely. "I'll find the man that murdered my dad if I have to examine the shoes of every damned horse on the 7-Up outfit!"

As he rode past the first shacks of the little town he slowed to a walk. No one was on the street, but standing before the hitch rail in front of the saloon were half a dozen horses; as he reined in beside them he saw that each horse carried the 7-Up brand. He recognized a big roman-nosed roan as a horse frequently ridden by Spike Turner, Caswell's range boss. Easing up to the horse, he raised its nigh front foot, and his heart thumped wildly as his gaze centred on the crack that ran across the shoe from the outside edge of the toe calk. Glancing about him, he drew the man's carbine from the saddle-boot and sniffed at the muzzle. Then he threw a cartridge from the weapon and compared it with the empty shell he had found at the scene of the crime. Returning the carbine, he stood for a moment, took a deep breath, glanced down at the butt of his six-gun, and stepped into the saloon.

The 7-Up men were lined along the bar. A whisky glass half-way to his lips, Spike Turner glanced over his shoulder at the sound of boot-heels on the floor. Swiftly he returned the glass to the bar, slopping half its contents, as he turned with narrowed eyes to face Tom Conway. Tom halted in the middle of the room.

"You murdered my dad, Spike," he said in a low, hard voice. "I found his body back there on the trail." He tossed the empty brass cartridge case to the floor at the man's feet. "There's the shell that killed him—a shell from your saddle-gun. I found where you hid your horse while you laid for him behind a rock—your big roan with a crack in his nigh foreshoe. You shot my dad through the back."

Spike Turner's hand shot downward and came up with his six-gun. There was a loud report. Turner's body jerked back against the bar, then pitched forward on to its face as his forty-five went off, the bullet ripping along the floor to crash through the baseboard of the opposite wall. The 7-Up men stood frozen in their tracks, staring down through the fog of acrid smoke at the body of their boss and at the pool of red blood slowly widening upon the floor.

The bellowing voice of the bull-necked bar-tender broke the silence: "By Jeez, kid, you'll swing fer this! It's murder—that's what it is! We kin all swear to it!"

Tom Conway eyed the man behind the bar. "There's been a murder, all right—out there on the trail. And the murderer got what was coming to him. He's lying there on the floor. I know that Caswell owns the sheriff, and if they hang me for shooting Turner, there'll be two murders instead of one."

Several hands dropped to holsters as a gangling, pimply lad in his teens piped up in hysterical falsetto: "You bet it's murder! Close in on him, boys! I'll go fer the shuriff!"

As he disappeared through the doorway the voice of old Bill Howard, one of the 7-Up top hands, broke the silence: "Take it easy. If the kid's got it straight, it's like he says—there's be'n a murder—but not in here. Spike's gun was in his hand when the kid got him. An' he was shot from in front." Reaching down, he picked up the empty cartridge case Tom had tossed to the floor and sniffed at it. "This here shell has be'n fired within a short time. The powder smell is still on it. If Spike's saddle-gun has got the powder smell too—an' the big roan's got a cracked nigh foreshoe—there ain't goin' to be no hangin'. An' if the kid's dad is layin' dead with a bullet through his back, an' the tracks of that cracked shoe shows where the roan was hid, we'll know damn well Spike got what was comin' to him. We'll ride with the kid—out there to where his dad lays. Come on—let's go."

The bar-tender scowled. "When old Caswell finds out you stuck up fer the man that shot his range boss, yer job won't be worth hell room. If a man's got any sense he knows what side his bread's buttered on. By God, when they ask me what come off here, I'm sayin' it was murder!"

Old Bill shot the man a glance of contempt. "You would! You spit-lickin' son of a bitch! You'd swear a rope around yer own mother's neck fer the price of a drink! Jim Conway was a man. He was man enough not to knuckle under to Caswell. Caswell run the other little outfits out—but not Jim Conway. Jim stayed—the only one of the whole bunch that had the guts to tell Caswell to go to hell. He fought fair—an' that's a damn sight more'n you can say fer Caswell, what with fencin' off water an' threatenin' to block off the whole north range!"

The bar-tender shrugged sullenly. "Conway was a fool, if you ask me—tryin' to buck Caswell, when everyone knows Caswell owns the shuriff. Bob Barnum's got sense. He's like me. He knows who to lay his chips on."

"That's right," old Bill sneered. "Yer two of a kind. But if Caswell an' Barnum try to hang the kid fer knockin' Spike off, they've got me to fight—an' there'll be plenty more of Caswell's own men that'll look at it like I do. There's plenty of other outfits to ride fer besides the 7-Up. How about it, boys?"

The men nodded, and a cowboy known as Shorty spoke for the others: "We look at it like you do, Bill. The kid, here, got Spike fair an' square. It wasn't no murder. An' if Barnum an' Caswell aim to do any hangin' on account of it, they're goin' to have to do a hell of a lot of shootin' first. It ain't no cinch that Spike wasn't actin' under orders when he bushwhacked Jim Conway. Come on—let's ride."

Out on the street old Bill lifted the nigh forefoot of the big roan and all eyes focused on the cracked shoe. He jerked Turner's carbine from the

saddle-boot and each sniffed at the muzzle. Then they mounted their horses and followed Tom Conway out of town.

CHAPTER THREE

CASWELL CHANGES HIS TUNE

WHEN the five riders pulled up at the 7-Up horse corral shortly after dark that night, lights were burning in the big house. At the sound of the galloping hoofs Caswell appeared on the veranda, and as the men dismounted he called to them: "You boys come up here when you've unsaddled."

With old Bill Howard in the lead, the five crossed the broad lawn, ascended the veranda steps, and stepped into the huge living-room in which were already seated a dozen 7-Up riders. Near the big stone fireplace, where a crackling fire dispelled the evening chill, stood Caswell, Bob Barnum, and the pimply cowboy who had gone to fetch the sheriff.

Caswell's eyes sought the faces of the five. He cleared his throat. "Emerson tells me you men were in the saloon and witnessed the murder of Spike Turner," he said.

Old Bill Howard's glance swept the room. "Who's Emerson?"

Caswell indicated the pimply one who stood beside the sheriff. "This lad, here."

"Oh—Stringbean, eh? We was in the saloon an' seen Tom Conway shoot Spike—but we didn't witness no murder. The murder was pulled off without no witnesses."

"What do you mean?"

"Meanin' that Spike laid fer Jim Conway behind a rock over near Piñon Butte, an' when Jim come ridin' along the trail Spike shot him. He shot him through the back. That's murder in any man's language."

Caswell scowled. "Who told you that—young Conway?"

"Yeah. He found his dad's body layin' there in the trail. An' that ain't all he found. He found where a horse had be'n hid in behind a rock spur. The horse had stood there quite a while—long enough so he pawed an' stomped down through the grass so his tracks showed good an' plain in the dirt beneath. Them tracks showed a cracked nigh foreshoe. Up on top of the spur Tom Conway found the grass matted down where someone had laid behind a rock that overlooked the trail only fifteen, twenty yards away, an' off to one side of this matted-down place he picked up an empty ca'tridge shell with the powder smell still on it. Then he rode to town an' found Spike's horse in front of the saloon. He found that the roan had a cracked nigh foreshoe. Besides that, he found that there's fresh powder smell at the

muzzle of Spike's saddle-gun—an' the empty ca'tridge is the same as the ca'tridges in Spike's gun. So he comes into the saloon, tosses the empty ca'tridge down in front of Spike, an' accuses him of murderin' his dad. Spike draws, an' Conway beats him to it an' plugs him through the heart. An' that ain't murder in no man's language."

Caswell's scowl deepened. "You say young Conway told you all this—and I suppose you swallowed it, hook, line, and sinker?"

Old Bill nodded. "That's right. We swallered it, after we'd seen the crack in the roan's shoe, an' had sniffed at Spike's carbine an' found it had be'n fired only a short time before, an' seen that the empty ca'tridge was the same as Spike's ca'tridges, an' had rode back with the kid an' checked that crack that showed in them horse's tracks with the roan's cracked shoe, an' seen the matted-down grass behind that rock, an' examined Jim Conway's body, with the bullet hole through it—a bullet that went in at the back an' come out in front."

"You seem to have gone to a lot of trouble to carry on an investigation which, after all, is the sheriff's job."

"That's right!" Barnum seconded, importantly. "I'm the one that's s'posed to do the investigatin'. An' what's more, both Stringbean, here, an' Red Nash, the bar-keep, claim Spike hadn't draw'd till after Conway shot him!"

Old Bill met the sheriff's eyes with a glance of cold contempt. "There's five of us here that kin swear that's a damn lie. Spike's gun was in his hand when the kid fired."

"Where's that there empty ca'tridge you claim Conway found? I'll be wantin' it fer evidence."

Old Bill drew the cartridge from his pocket and handed it to the sheriff. "You'll notice that there's a couple of scratches on it up there near the butt. Them scratches was made by Spike's ejector. It marks all the shells it throws out like that. The five of us here can swear to that—we've got a couple of other shells we throw'd out of Spike's gun with the same scratches on 'em. We're keepin' them shells—jest in case."

"Jest in case what?"

"In case you might lose that shell an' come up with another one—one that wouldn't fit Spike's gun. An' jest remember, Barnum, if Spike's roan should happen to git re-shod, there's five of us besides Conway that can swear to that cracked shoe."

The sheriff frowned. "You mean you don't trust me?"

"I mean I'd trust you, an' Stringbean, an' Red Nash—all three of you—about as fer as I could throw a bull by the tail."

Caswell's glance swept the room. As he read in the eyes of the dozen other cow-punchers approval of old Bill's stand, the scowl left his face and he turned to the sheriff. "In the light of the investigation these men have carried on, this case assumes an entirely new aspect. If, as seems probable from the evidence submitted, Spike did waylay and shoot Conway, he was guilty of a dastardly and unjustifiable murder, and he got exactly what was coming to him. Spike knew, as you all know, that the Conways and I have had differences. He may have taken it upon himself to remove Conway, thinking that such act would win my approval. It certainly does not. And I will state, here and now, that I am glad young Conway did not commit a murder in the shooting of Spike. So, in the best interests of all concerned, you will drop this case immediately."

Barnum nodded. "Yes, sir. Jest as you say. Looks like Stringbean an' Red lied, all right."

Caswell scowled at the pimply youth, who shifted his stance nervously. "And as for you, you can collect your pay in the morning and go. We want no damned liars around this outfit."

The youth's glance met the hostile eyes of the assembled cowboys. "I—I'll pull out tonight if you'll give me what I got comin'," he said. "An' as fer's lyin' goes, I didn't say nothin' except what Red Nash an' the shuriff told me to say—an' when you got there you —"

"That'll be enough out of you!" Caswell snapped, and turned to the cowboys. "That'll be all, boys," he said. "I called you up here so Barnum could select a posse to aid in the arrest of young Conway. But, as you have heard, no arrest will be made. So go back to the bunkhouse and forget the whole thing."

In the bunkhouse tongues buzzed as the men pulled off their clothing and slipped between the blankets. Charlie Summers grinned across at old Bill. "Cripes, Bill, when you was tellin' Bob Barnum off, an' namin' Red Nash an' Stringbean amongst them you wouldn't trust—damned if I wasn't expectin' you to include the Old Man himself!"

Buck Hall, another of the top hands, grinned and winked at old Bill, who was pulling off a boot. "By God, if you had named him in with 'em you wouldn't be'n fer off. You can't tell me Spike would of knocked Conway off if he hadn't be'n told to—prob'ly not in so many words—but believe me, if Spike had got away with that killin', I'll bet the Old Man would of slipped him five hundred er a thousan'. The damned old hypocrite—he shore

changed his tune when he found out there wasn't no chanct to frame young Conway fer murder. Hell, before you boys come in him an' Barnum was braggin' about havin' an open-an'-shut case agin Conway."

Old Bill nodded. "Yeah. Well—all he's got now is a shut case. An' I'm bettin' he'll have the guts to send flowers to Jim Conway's funeral."

CHAPTER FOUR

A FUNERAL

THE following day the body of Spike Turner was buried without benefit of clergy in the little cemetery at Verde by a half-dozen 7-Up men Caswell detailed for the job.

News of Jim Conway's murder and of the swift reprisal that followed spread rapidly among the nesters and small ranchers south of the river. This area was as yet unmolested by Caswell's expanding 7-Up empire. Neighbours arrived at the Conway ranch on horseback and in spring wagons, the women offering what aid and comfort they could to the widow, while the men helped young Tom in the digging of a grave in the shadow of the pecan grove beside the reservoir. The task completed, they squatted in the shade of the horse corral and rolled cigarettes.

Breaking an awkward silence, Joe Brodie glanced at young Tom. "Yer pa was the onliest one north of the river had the guts to stick it out agin Caswell. Lem Atly—he's cook over to the 7-Up—was tellin' me how Caswell give yer pa till the first of May to sell out to him er he'd run a fence clean acrost from Piñon Butte to the river, an' he says Caswell was whoppin' mad when he got yer pa's letter tellin' him to go to hell."

The younger man nodded as his eyes swept the little spread—house, stable, fences, ditches, reservoir, and pecan grove—and came to rest on the mound of fresh yellow-brown earth beside the open grave. "Dad never would have knuckled under to Caswell. He was here first. He and Mother homesteaded this spread, and he put everything he had into it—he put twenty-two of the best years of his life into it—and a good many of those years were mighty tough going. He loved the place—and I love it too. I was born here. This is my home—the only home I ever had. And I'll never knuckle under to Caswell either."

Gabe Jenkins ground the butt of his cigarette into the dirt with his heel. "But, Tommy," he said, without glancing up, "if Caswell runs that fence acrost, you ain't got a show."

"That's open range. Caswell's got no right to fence it."

Jack Britton nodded agreement. "That's right, boy. He ain't got no legal right. But if he thinks it's worth it, he'll run that fence jest the same. You could squawk yer head off an' it wouldn't git you nowheres. He's got the money, an' he's got the men. An' he's got Bob Barnum. Open range has be'n

fenced before this—an' it'll be fenced agin. If a man's got the money an' the men an' owns the shuriff besides, he kin do as he damn pleases in this country."

"All right," young Tom replied. "Let him run his fence. I'll cut his wire as fast as he can string it."

The old man shook his head. "You can't buck him, Tommy. The odds ain't right."

Eph Chase touched a match to a freshly rolled cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke from his lungs. "I'd bet anything I've got that Spike Turner never bushwhacked yer pa on his own account. By God, he was told to!"

Britton nodded. "You couldn't never win that bet, Eph, 'cause you couldn't never prove it. I reckon we all got it figgered out who the real murderer is." He paused and glanced toward young Tom. "An' what a man will do onct an' git away with he's apt to do agin. I ain't sayin' there's any other rider on the 7-Up outfit that would take an order of that kind. But it wouldn't be so hard fer Caswell to find a man that would, if he went to the right place."

Tom Conway shrugged and stood up. "I'm staying," he said shortly. "I've got to saddle up now an' ride down to the forks and see the preacher of that little Zion church down there. We'll hold the funeral here tomorrow afternoon, and my mother wants a preacher to officiate."

Gabe Jenkins got up and stretched. "Never mind saddlin' up, Tommy. I kin swing around by the preacher's an' git home by chore time. I'll stop in an' tell Ella Jones an' them two Warren gals to be here too. They sung right pretty last year to old Gran'ma Hanks's funeral."

The funeral of Jim Conway was well attended. Ranchers and their families came from miles around, filling the house and overflowing into the yard. Caswell, with a cavalcade of twenty 7-Up riders, was there, standing among the others with bared head as the body was lowered into the grave. He seemed unconscious of the hostile side-glances of the assembled men and women.

The rites over, the ranchers returned to their homes. Three or four men from across the river stayed to fill the grave and covered the fresh mound with strips of sod.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOLD OUT

A WEEK later young Tom, riding in from the north, paused on a knoll a mile from the house and stared at two riders who were heading toward Verde—riders who had evidently just left the Conway ranch. His eyes hardened as they centred on one of the horses, a big palomino. “Caswell,” he muttered, “but what in the devil was he doing here? And who has he got with him?”

Touching spurs to the big black, he headed for home on a high lope. When he had turned the horse into the corral he strode into the house to find his mother seated at his father’s desk in a corner of the living-room. “What did Caswell want here?” he demanded abruptly.

As the woman glanced at the stony face of her son, her eyes faltered and returned to the little rectangle of water-marked paper that lay on the desk before her. “He—he came—on business,” she replied.

“What kind of business?” The words rang hard, but even as he uttered them Tom felt a strange gone feeling at the pit of his stomach.

“He—he bought the ranch, son.”

“What ranch?”

“Why—this ranch—of course—the only ranch I had.”

“The only home I had too,” the lad said in a low, dull voice. Then fierce anger flashed in his eyes. “You sold the ranch!” he cried. “The ranch that Dad spent a lifetime to build up—and died to save! And you sold it! Sold it like a piece of calico over a counter! Sold it to the man who murdered Dad!”

“Mr. Caswell *didn’t* murder your father. You yourself shot the man who murdered him.”

“I shot the man who killed him. Caswell is the man who murdered him! Stop and think—who would benefit by Dad’s death, Caswell or Spike Turner? Why would Turner have murdered Dad, except under orders? Or at least under promise of a reward.”

“You have no right to blame Mr. Caswell for your father’s death. How do you know that Turner didn’t have a personal grudge against him? You know as well as I do that several times they’ve clashed on the range. As soon as Mr. Caswell heard of your father’s death he sat down and wrote a letter of condolence. As you very well know, that letter was addressed to both of us, and if you had read it, as you should have done, you would know how he feels about your father’s death. He expressed the deepest sorrow and

regret that the outrage had been perpetrated by one of his men, and he commended you for dealing out swift justice.”

“And you fall for that line of guff, eh?”

“I have no reason to doubt his sincerity. After all, Mr. Caswell is a gentleman.”

“He’s a low-down, range-hoggin’, double-dealing, murdering crook! I talked with some of his own men at the funeral, and they told me that Caswell and Bob Barnum, on the evidence of the bar-tender and one of the six 7-Up riders that were in the saloon when I shot Turner, had it all framed up to hang me for murder. They were just about to hit out with a posse to arrest me when old Bill Howard and the rest of the 7-Up riders who witnessed the shooting got back to the ranch after going over the ground with me to find out exactly what happened. The boys told me that Caswell was furious when these men told him there wasn’t a doubt in the world but that Turner had murdered Dad in cold blood, that they would swear to their findings, and also that Turner’s gun was in his hand when I shot him. When Caswell saw there was no chance to frame me for murder, the damned hypocrite did an about-face and fired the cowboy who was ready to swear that I shot Turner without giving him a chance.”

“They are merely expressing an opinion when they accuse Mr. Caswell of insincerity. When these men, who went back with you and investigated the murder of your father, told him of their findings, of course Mr. Caswell would do what you call an ‘about-face.’ An honourable man couldn’t do otherwise.”

“Neither could a damned crook—when he found out he couldn’t get away with it.”

The woman heaved a sigh of resignation. “The rude environment of this country and the coarse natures of those with whom he was forced to associate roughened your father in many ways—and I am deeply grieved to see that they have roughened you to the point where you would accept the word of mere cowboys against the word of a gentleman. After all, son—who are these men? Riff-raff, from the Lord knows where! What do you know of their background?”

“To hell with their background! I know they’re a bunch of good square shooters that happen to be working for a crook. But that doesn’t mean that they’ll back him up in his crookedness, not by a long shot! In fact, they’ve just proved that they won’t. But there’s no use wasting time arguing about Caswell. You’ve got your opinion—and I’ve got mine. We’ll let it go at that. You say you sold the ranch. How could you sell it so soon after Dad’s death?

I should think the estate would have to be probated—go through the courts. Don't the court have to appoint an administrator, or an executor, or something? And then—where do I come in? Didn't Dad leave a will?"

"No. Your father left no will."

"Just the same, I'll bet that sale is not legal! I'll find out, and if it isn't I'll block it, just as sure as I'm standing here! Caswell fought Dad every dirty way he could think of. You know that—and I know it—Caswell's own men know it, and so does everyone else in the country. And in the face of that, you'd quit! You'd sell out the spread Dad worked so hard to build up—sell out to the man who murdered him! But I'll never sell out! I'm no quitter! I'll fight Caswell to a finish! Dad gave his life to hold this spread—and I'll give mine to hold it too—if I have to!"

"The sale is perfectly legal. Mr. Caswell brought a lawyer with him, and he assured us both that everything was perfectly regular. You see, a few days after your father mailed his abrupt and very rude reply to Mr. Caswell, you rode over on to the north range. While you were away he got to thinking that his life might be in danger. We drove to the county seat and he deeded the ranch and all of the stock over to me, so that in the event of his sudden demise I could do as I saw fit with it, without being hindered by any long-drawn-out court procedure.

"It was his intention to deed it jointly to you and me, but I pointed out that if he did so, and we should fail to agree on the disposition of the property, we might become involved in long and bitter legal difficulties that would be both expensive and regrettable. So he deeded the property to me, upon my promise that in the event of a sale I would divide the proceeds equally with you. There was one other proviso: in the event of a sale, you were to be allowed to select any saddle-horse you desired and also a pack-horse, together with their accoutrements. I explained this to Mr. Caswell, and he agreed to the arrangement." The woman picked up the slip of paper from the desk and extended it for inspection. "This is Mr. Caswell's cheque for thirty thousand dollars," she said. "Half of it is yours."

Tom Conway accorded the cheque scarcely a glance. "So now," he said slowly, "I've got fifteen thousand dollars in cash, a saddle-horse, a pack-horse, a saddle, bridle, pack-saddle, my six-gun and rope, and a few clothes. Is that right?"

The woman nodded. "That's right, son. And when we get to the county seat you can sell your outfit and we'll go to Kansas City—back where I came from. You won't find any use for those things there. Since the property was deeded to me I have been in correspondence with my brother, your uncle Joe—you remember he spent several days with us a few years ago. He

has agreed to sell us an interest in his business and to take you into partnership with him.”

“What kind of a business?”

“A hardware store. It’s a good business. Joe has done very well with it.”

“A hardware store in Kansas City! Standing behind a counter all day selling nails and hammers, and saws, and chicken wire!”

“You will soon get used to it. And besides, you will be associated with people who are your social equals.”

Tom glanced about the room. “I don’t suppose there’s much of this stuff you’ll be taking along with you to Kansas City,” he said.

“No. Only my trunk and two bags—and they’re all packed. Right after your father’s death I planned to sell out and move away, so I’m all ready to go.”

Tom turned toward the door. “All right. Let’s get it over with. I’ll hook up the team to the spring wagon—Caswell’s team to Caswell’s spring wagon—and we’ll go to the county seat.”

A few minutes later he loaded the trunk and bags into the wagon and helped his mother to the seat. She glanced down at him. “But your horse, and the pack-horse. You are entitled to them, you know.”

Tom nodded as he climbed to the seat beside her and picked up the reins. “That’s right,” he replied, and spoke sharply to the horses.

The drive to the county seat was made in silence, despite the woman’s several attempts to engage in conversation. Arriving at the hotel, Tom registered for a couple of rooms, drove to the railway station, checked the baggage, purchased a single ticket for Kansas City, and put up the team at a livery stable.

In the morning, as they arose from the table after a late breakfast, Tom glanced at the clock. “Nine o’clock,” he said. “The bank will be open now. We better get over there. The train pulls out at ten.”

“But why should we go to the bank? I have sufficient money for the trip besides what I gave you for the tickets.”

Reaching into his pocket, Tom withdrew an envelope which he handed to his mother. “Ticket,” he said. “Not tickets. And here’s your change.” He pressed some folded bills into her hand. “And the reason we’re going to the bank is so you can cash Caswell’s cheque and give me my half. I’m not going to Kansas City.”

“Not going!” The woman stared wide-eyed into his face.

“No. I’m not going. This is my country. I mean the cow country. I’m not staying around here, though. I’m hitting north—Colorado, or maybe Wyoming, or Montana. I couldn’t stay here and ever be happy knowing that Caswell owns our ranch. I’m driving back and pick up my two horses, and ride.”

The woman’s eyes hardened. “I refuse to cash that cheque here. I told Joe we would invest the proceeds in his business, and that’s what we will do.”

“You can invest your half—but I’m not investing mine. I’ll take my share now.”

“And if I refuse to turn it over to you? Remember—you’re a minor.”

“I was a minor until day before yesterday. I reckon you forgot my twenty-first birthday—and so did I, until just now.”

The woman started. “That’s so,” she said. “May eighth.” She was silent for a moment, then her lips hardened. “Very well, son. I promised your father you should have half of the estate. A promise is a promise. Let’s go to the bank. But—oh, why won’t you go back with me?”

“I can’t do it. I couldn’t live in a city. And besides,” he added with just the trace of a grin, “I might go bad and knock off a few of those social equals you said I’d have to associate with.”

At the bank the teller handed Mrs. Conway a draft on Kansas City for fifteen thousand dollars and turned to Tom. “Do you wish to deposit your fifteen thousand?” he asked.

“Caswell’s a director in this bank, isn’t he?”

“Yes. Mr. Caswell is not only a director, he is our vice-president.”

“I’ll take my fifteen thousand in cash,” Tom said. “It’ll be safer. Thousand-dollar bills will do—fifteen of ’em.”

Pocketing the money, Tom walked with his mother to the station, where she made a final attempt to alter his decision. “Oh, why won’t you come with me? You’d be safe there—with a good business and all.”

“I’ll be safe. Don’t worry about me. I can look out for myself.”

“But with all that money on you— —”

“No one will know I’ve got it. I’ll find some place I like and settle down. I’ve got a darn sight more than Dad had to start with. I’ll make good.”

The train approached with a long-drawn whistle. “You’ll write to me, son?”

“Sure. Good-bye. I’ll write.”

The train pulled out. Stopping at the store, Tom bought a leather money-belt, got the team from the stable, and headed out on to the prairie.

CHAPTER SIX

TOM HEADS NORTH

THE sun hung low in the west when he arrived at the ranch. Unharnessing the team, he turned the horses into the pasture and stepped into the stable, where the big black nickered at the sound of his footsteps. "Waiting for your supper, eh? Well, here it is," he said as he scooped oats from the bin and poured them into the feed-box. "There's only three of us left now—you and me and the little paint—and we'll be pulling out in the morning. We don't know where we're going, but we'll see some new country. And maybe, somewhere, we'll start a little spread of our own."

The sun was just sinking behind the mountains as he walked toward the house and, pausing, fixed his eyes on the group of tall pines that stood silhouetted against the afterglow on the summit of Piñon Butte. For a long time he stood there as his gaze wandered from the pines to the newly sodded mound beside the pecan grove and back to the pines again.

At the bench beside the kitchen door he removed his hat, hung it on one of the wooden pegs driven into the wall, dipped water from the pail to the basin, and washed, drying himself on the long roller-towel. Stepping into the kitchen, he kindled a fire in the stove and set the tea-kettle on. As he waited for the water to boil he went into the living-room, which served also as a dining-room, and looked about him. A feeling of vast loneliness obsessed him as he stood there, his glance travelling slowly from one to another of the familiar objects in the room—his father's desk in the corner, the walnut table and chest of drawers that served as a sideboard, the two framed pictures on the wall, his mother's rocking-chair near the window, and the row of carefully tended plants on the sill. "They'll all die now," he muttered, "with nobody to tend 'em."

He glanced into the bedroom that had been his mother's and father's. The huge walnut bed was neatly made up, but the brush and comb, the hand mirror, and the various little receptacles that had held hairpins and what not were gone, leaving the little dressing-table looking strangely bare. A few of his father's garments hung from pegs on the opposite wall, but the chintz curtains that had screened his mother's wardrobe were drawn aside, exposing only two or three discarded garments.

In his own bedroom he took his canvas war-bag from a chest in the corner and crammed into it a couple of shirts, an assortment of socks and underwear, an extra pair of trousers, a few brilliant silk scarves, a supply of

tobacco and cigarette papers, and a box of forty-five cartridges. Pausing before the shelf above the chest, he scanned the titles of half a dozen volumes and selected one entitled *Poems*, by Edgar Allan Poe. He tossed it into the war-bag, tied the bag, set it in a corner of the room, and threw his chaps on top of it. Then he emptied the chest of its remaining contents, added the few garments that hung on the wall and the remaining books from the shelf, and tossed them on to a blanket. He returned to the kitchen, made a pot of strong coffee, sliced bacon into a pan, and heated some baked beans. The meal over, he washed the dishes, went to his room, picked up the blanket by its four corners, and carried it outside. Stepping to the wood-pile, he split a pile of fat pine kindlings, touched a match to them, and one by one he fed the contents of the blanket to the flames. "Caswell bought everything she owned, but he don't get anything of mine—by a damned sight," he muttered as he watched the flames do their work. It took some time, and much poking with a stick, for the things burned slowly, especially the clothing and the books. Finally nothing remained but ashes and charred bits of cloth. Rolling a cigarette, Tom seated himself in the doorway and smoked, his eyes on the winking stars.

He breakfasted the following morning before sun-up, washed and dried the dishes, and returned them to their shelves. Then he fed the big black, picked up a spade, and walked slowly to the newly sodded mound beside the pecan grove. Two hours later he lifted the tarpaulin-wrapped body of his father to the surface, filled in the grave, levelled it, and sodded it over with the strips that had sodded the mound.

He led the black from the stable, saddled him, and caught up the pinto pack-horse from the lower end of the pasture. He adjusted the pack-saddle and, stepping into the house, drew on his chaps and brought out his bed-roll and war-bag. With the pack, to which he had added the spade, carefully adjusted, he lifted the body of his father and roped it firmly on top of the load, then, with a last long look around, he mounted the black and headed toward the mountains, with the pack-horse following behind.

It was well after noon when he reached the summit of Piñon Butte. Dismounting, he hobbled the two horses and turned them out to graze, and in the shade of the grove of giant pines he dug a grave and lowered the body into it. "There, Dad," he said, as he looked down upon the canvas-wrapped form, "you can rest easy now. You'll sleep forever on the open range. By God, Caswell can never fence the mountains!"

He filled the grave, mounded and sodded it, and tossed the spade away. Then he caught up his horses and headed north.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“TEX” CONWAY SPEAKS HIS MIND

ALL summer long Tom drifted northward through Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. Accepting the free-and-easy hospitality of the West, he rode the grub line on into the broad grassland of Saskatchewan, where, finding the Lazy-K outfit shorthanded, he signed on for the beef round-up. It didn't take long for Bob Dye, the Lazy-K wagon boss, to find out that in young “Tex” Conway he had hired a top cowhand.

The Lazy-K ranch was located on the wide bend of a creek, some twelve miles north of the railway. The owner, old P. J. Blodgett, lived in a three-storey house, a monstrosity of dormer windows and gingerbread trimmings, at the northern edge of the town that was named for him when the railway cut through his original homestead. It was generally acknowledged that P. J., as owner of the bank and the general store that supplied the ranchers for miles around, “owned the town.” It was his open boast that he could make or break any man between Moose Jaw and Medicine Hat—any man, that is, except old Sam Mason, whose Diamond-5 empire lay to the southward, his cattle ranging from the railway to the Montana border. The Diamond-5 home ranch was on the southern outskirts of the town of Blodgett, where from the broad veranda of his one-storey rambling log house built on a sidehill old Sam could sit and gaze out over the tops of his corrals, bunkhouse, and stables to where the prairie met the sky in the hazy distance. Old Sam had the reputation of being as easy-going as old J. P. was tough—but there were men among the old-timers on the prairie who were wont to wink knowingly and to opine that “P. J., he don't want none of ol' Sam's meat.”

With bitter winds, snow squalls, and driving, pelting sleet, the final two weeks of the beef round-up were tough going for the thirty Lazy-K cowboys, who grouched and grumbled and talked of heading south. But at last the final trainload of beef was on the cars. The wagons, following the hard-riding, yelling, whooping cowboys, headed for the ranch, where P. J.'s son Al, who was teller in the bank, was waiting to pay off.

Al Blodgett was a chip off the old block, except that where P. J. was as austere in his personal habits as he was in his business dealings, Al was known as something of a “sport.” In the town of Blodgett these sporting proclivities were limited to an occasional low-limit poker game, more or less surreptitious tippling, and evenings spent in the pool hall—but there were

those who whispered that on his frequent visits to Regina, Moose Jaw, and Medicine Hat he played fast and loose with the women, sat in big-money poker games, and threw money about the bars with the best of them.

In the bunkhouse, waiting for the supper call, the Lazy-K cowboys were busy crowding their possessions into war-bags and arguing about where they were heading for the winter. Tom Conway found himself besieged with questions: “Hey, Tex, how about it down your way?” “When’s round-up start?” “What do they pay riders down there?” “Does it stay warm all winter?” “Where had a man ort to hit for?” “How much is the car-fare?” “Jeez, I wouldn’t winter in this damn country if they’d give it to me, an’ throw in Montana to boot!” These questions Tom was answering to the best of his ability when Bob Dye spoke up. “I can use four of you boys for winter ridin’. ’Tain’t hard work—just ridin’ the range kinda keepin’ an eye on things. Bad days you can lay up, an’ we pay five dollars more on the month.”

The supper gong broke in on the bedlam of uncomplimentary gibes about the weather, the job, and the country in general, as the men broke for the grub-shack.

All during supper Tom debated with himself—here was a job at good wages. True, the past two weeks had been miserably uncomfortable; but so was it miserably uncomfortable in Texas during a “norther”—more miserable and uncomfortable even than here, where a man expects and dresses for it. He had no home now in Texas—no home anywhere. Now that the beef round-up was over, all the northern outfits would be letting men go. Jobs—riding jobs, the only kind of a job he knew—would be hard to get. And here was a job for the asking. He made up his mind to stay.

Supper over, the men returned to the bunkhouse, where Al Blodgett sat at a table behind a pile of bills and silver. As his name was called each man stepped up, drew his wages, and retired to seat himself on the edge of his bunk. When Tom’s name was called he stepped to the table, where young Blodgett eyed him as he counted out the money. “You Tex Conway?” he asked abruptly.

“That’s right,” Tom replied. “They call me Tex around here.”

“The old man wants to see you tomorrow at the bank. And you better be there, too.”

Tom took his money, frowning slightly at the peremptory tone as he turned away from the table. What, he wondered, could P. J. want of him? He had never seen P. J.—never been in town, except to the shipping corral—and

what he had heard of P. J. through cowboy gossip was generally uncomplimentary, even among P. J.'s own men.

Most of the cowboys saddled up and hit for town, but Tom, with half a dozen others, remained in the bunkhouse. Presently Bob Dye showed up and looked them over. "I only need four men," he said. "I'll take Tex, here, an' you, an' you, an' you." He pointed out three other riders and addressed the three who were left. "I ain't got nothin' for you boys, so you might's well hit the trail. Can't only use four riders here in the winter." The men picked up their war-bags and headed for the corral.

After breakfast the following morning Tom and Al Blodgett saddled up and headed for town. "You'll play in with the old man if you know what's good for you," Al advised as they rode along. "The old man's tough. Hell, he can bust anyone between Medicine Hat and Moose Jaw, barring maybe Old Sam Mason."

"Why would he want to bust 'em?" Tom asked.

"Bust 'em if they get in his way. No one's ever bucked him yet an' got away with it, except Old Sam—and I guess, if you come right down to it, Old Sam's got as much as the old man has. At that, the old man's got a lot more power than Old Sam has. Old Sam runs all to cattle, but what with owning the bank and the store, the old man can put the screws on plenty of folks." As they reached town Blodgett glanced at his watch. "Eight-fifteen," he said. "I've got to go home and change clothes. The bank opens at nine. Put your horse in the livery barn and stick around."

Stepping from the livery barn, Tom encountered a pussy individual with a large constable's star pinned conspicuously on the lapel of his vest. "Hello," the man greeted with a grin. "Miss the train las' night?"

"No," Tom answered, "just got in this morning."

"Oh. Stranger, eh? I figgered you was one of the Lazy-K boys. They got paid off las' night an' was kind of jamboreein' around town till train-time. I don't bother 'em none onlest they'd git to raisin' too much hell. Figgered you was one of 'em that mebbe overslep an' missed the train."

"I'm riding for the Lazy-K. Rode in from the ranch this morning with Al Blodgett. He said his father wanted to see me."

"Al, he's a card. B'en around quite a bit. Got fired outa two, three colleges, they say, on account of pranks he'd got into. At last ol' P. J. got tired of it an' put him to work in the bank. What does P. J. want to see you about?"

"I couldn't say. Al told me his father wanted to see me. He didn't say why."

“Prob’ly ’bout somethin’ er other,” the constable opined. “Man’s all right around these parts if he plays in with P. J.—er Ol’ Sam Mason, one. Ol’ Sam, he owns the Diamond-5, an’ them two jest about runs the country around here. Sam, he’s got a boy too. Eddie, his name is. He’s younger’n Al Blodgett—kinda quiet, like. Goin’ to high school over to Moose Jaw. They claim he figgers on bein’ a doctor. That’s Ol’ Sam’s house you see up there on the sidehill, an’ that there big house on the other aidge of town’s P. J.’s. Them two big houses a-facin’ one another that way, with the town an’ the railway between ’em, allus put me in mind of a couple a roosters with heads down an’ hackles up, ready to jump at one another at the drop of a hat. They git along, all right. The Lazy-K cattle ranges mostly to the north, an’ the Diamond-5 to the south. Each one runs a round-up, an’ they brand each other’s calves an’ gather each other’s beef. But Ol’ Sam, he does most of his bankin’ over to Moose Jaw, an’ that shore gits in under P. J.’s hide. If them two ever does jump at one another, the feathers is goin’ to fly—an’ don’t you fergit it. There goes P. J. an’ Al in the bank now. Better be gittin’ over there. P. J. ain’t easy-goin’, like Ol’ Sam. He don’t like to be kep’ waitin’. I’ll be seein’ you agin. Dort’s my name—George Dort. The boys calls me Rattlesnake—kind of a nickname, like.”

The bank, the only brick building in the little town save the jail, was a one-storey structure as square and as unimposing as a shoe-box. Tom walked along the wooden sidewalk, past the little frame buildings—restaurant, pool-hall, and barber-shop—and the big two-storey warehouse of the general store. Picking his way across the muddy street, he stepped into the bank, where behind a grilled partition Al Blodgett was arranging several packets of currency in a drawer. Against the opposite wall was a small standing desk on which were several pens, an inkwell, several blotters, and a pad of deposit slips. Above the desk hung a huge calendar, the advertisement of a firm of livestock brokers in Toronto, depicting acres of wooden pens crowded with gaily coloured cattle.

Al glanced up and motioned with a jerk of the thumb toward the open door of a small back room. Pausing in the doorway, Tom encountered the appraising glance of a pair of cold slate-blue eyes set in the lean, lantern-jawed face of the tall spare man who was seated behind a flat-topped desk.

“Are you Conway?” the man asked.

“Yes, sir. Your son said you wanted to see me.”

The man indicated a straight-backed wooden chair. “Sit down.” Tom noted that the words were a command, rather than an invitation. He sat down. The man leaned forward and folded his hands on the desk before him.

“I assume, from your nickname, ‘Tex,’ that you are from Texas. Is that right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why did you leave there?” The abrupt question nettled the younger man.

“For reasons of my own,” he replied, meeting squarely the stare of the slaty eyes.

If the reply angered the man, he gave no sign of it. “My range foreman tells me that you are a good cowhand and recommends keeping you on at a five-dollar advance in wages. Is that arrangement satisfactory to you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well. You are an American citizen. Have you ever filed an intention of taking out Canadian citizenship papers?”

“No, sir.”

“You have never, then, filed an application for a homestead or any other land grant here in Canada?”

“No.”

Reaching into a drawer, the man drew out two forms which he shoved across the desk, together with a fountain pen he took from his pocket. “Just sign these,” he said.

“What are they?” Tom asked. Picking up one of the forms, he saw that it had already been filled in with his name.

“The one you have in your hand is a declaration of intention to become a Canadian citizen.”

“But I have no such intention.”

P. J. smiled thinly. “That is neither here nor there. You do not have to go through with it. Signing this intention makes you eligible for homestead rights in Saskatchewan. The other paper is an application for your entry upon the described land as a homesteader.”

“But I have no intention of homesteading here. And even if I had, I certainly wouldn’t file on a property I have never seen.”

“You are filing for the Lazy-K. Not for yourself. You will be put to no expense whatever. I will attend to the necessary fees and also to making such improvements on the property as the law requires. When the legal requirements have been complied with, you will deed the property to the Lazy-K, and I will pay you one hundred dollars.”

“Why do you want this particular property?”

“Water rights,” the man snapped. “A damned settler wants to homestead that property. He came here to borrow the money to finance his payment. I put him off for a few days. When he comes back he’ll find that the property has been pre-empted. I haven’t another man available for this application because everyone else regularly in my employ has already used his homestead rights in my behalf. This is a cattle country. We don’t want it chopped up into a lot of damned farms! I’m fighting to keep the settlers out. And I’ll keep ’em out, too! If I can’t do it one way, I’ll do it another. If I can’t keep ’em from homesteading, I can get ’em in other ways. They’re no good—got nothing behind ’em. It’s never very long till they get to where they need money to keep going on. I loan it to ’em—and then foreclose on ’em. Take this fellow Kinch, that wants to file this homestead—he’s typical of all of ’em. Drove all summer to get here from Ontario with his family and all his goods in a wagon, expecting to file a homestead out here on the prairie where the land’s all cleared and ready for seeding. He’d have stayed in Ontario if he wasn’t too damned lazy to chop himself a farm out of the woods.” The man paused, frowned, and motioned toward the papers on the desk. “Come on—sign up so I can get these papers into the land office before Kinch can go to Sam Mason for the money. He’d get it, too. Sam’s a damned fool. He can’t see that it’s only a question of a few years till these damned farmers will ruin the cattle country if we don’t keep ’em out. He’s loaned a lot of ’em the money to get started. If Kinch should hear of that—and he will before long—Sam will let him have the money—and we’ll have another damned farmer fencing in the range.”

Tom stood up. “I’m not signing those papers,” he said. “And I’m not working for the Lazy-K. You’ll have to get someone else to do your dirty work for you, P. J. You see, my dad put in the best years of his life building up a little outfit down in Texas. There was a big outfit on the range too. Man by the name of Rockwood owned it. When the going was tough, Rockwood would help Dad out. He was a fine man—I imagine about such a man as this Sam Mason you mentioned. Then Rockwood sold out to a man named Caswell. He was a son of a bitch—about such a man as you are, P. J. He fought us—and won out. His foreman shot my dad—from behind. Then I shot his foreman—from in front. Good day. I’m going out now and find Kinch and loan him the money to make his entry payment on that homestead—just in case he couldn’t locate Mr. Mason in time.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

OLD SAM MASON HIRES A HAND

P. J. BLODGETT stared in open-mouthed astonishment as the younger man strode out through the bank. Tom was entirely oblivious to the venomous glance Al Blodgett shot him through the grilled window, and but dimly aware that a large man in riding-boots and Stetson turned from the little standing desk across the room and, pen in hand, watched him disappear on to the street.

The blood mounted to P. J.'s face, his eyes narrowed, and his lips pressed tight as he swept the papers from his desk-top into the drawer. Shoving back his chair, he strode to the doorway and shouted to his son in a voice choked with rage: "Did you hear what that—that—" He broke off abruptly as the large man, holding a freshly drawn cheque in his hand, paused midway between the desk and the wicket and regarded him with a grin. "Yeah, we heard it. Fine mornin', ain't it, P. J.? I hear your wagons pulled in yesterday. Expect mine in today or tomorrow. Got to get some money to pay my boys off."

With an inarticulate mumble P. J. returned to his desk. Having cashed his cheque, the large man stepped from the bank, mounted his horse, and rode slowly down the street, reaching the livery stable just as Tom Conway led his big black out and swung into the saddle. He pulled up and eyed the black with evident approval. "Fine horse you've got there," he said. "Bar-C. Don't rec'lect seein' that brand before."

"Yes, he's a good horse. Broke him myself. Rode him up from Texas."

"Texas, eh? Quite a ride. Where you headin' now?"

"Up the crick a piece. Fellow by the name of Kinch is camped there, according to the stableman."

"Friend of yours?"

Tom smiled. "No, but I expect he'll figure I'm a friend of his. But—who are you? Didn't I see you in the bank a few minutes ago?"

The large man smiled, and Tom detected a twinkle in the shrewd grey eyes. "Yeah, I was in the bank, all right. Mason's the name—Sam Mason. P. J.'s bank ain't very big. He'd ort to shut his office door if he don't want folks to hear what's goin' on. Me an' Al shore got us an earful. I thought Al was goin' to blow up. Come on—let's be movin' along. Maybe we'd both better go up an' see this here Kinch."

As the two horses headed out of town side by side, Tom eyed the older man. "So you're Sam Mason. I'm mighty glad to know you, sir. I've heard a lot about you. Been on the Lazy-K round-up."

Mason smiled. "Guess you ain't heard much good of me if you've be'n ridin' for P. J."

"Everything I've heard has been good. As for P. J., I never saw him till this morning—and it will be all right with me if I never see him again."

Mason's smile became an audible chuckle. "Yeah, from what I heard, I sort of gathered you two wasn't hittin' it off so good. P. J. called me a damn fool fer helpin' a little feller get a start now an' then. Mebbe I am. I don't know. But I can't help rememberin' that I was a little feller oncet myself. P. J. was too. But he's fergot that."

Tom nodded. "If being decent makes a man a damn fool, I hope I'm one too. I like the way you do things—just like my dad, and like Mr. Rockwood, back there in Texas. I'd sure like to work for a man like you."

"Well, I guess there ain't nothin' to prevent it. I like you too. I liked you before ever I saw you—jest from hearin' you talk, there in P. J.'s office. Fact is, I followed you down to the livery barn to see if mebbe I couldn't hire you, seein' you'd quit the Lazy-K. I keep five, six riders over winter, an' I kind of like to hand-pick 'em. I like to have men I can count on—got four of 'em that's be'n with me fer years. To my mind, guts an' right thinkin' is more important than bein' handy with horses an' cattle. Any man that ain't afraid to stand up an' call P. J. a son of a bitch right in his own office has got guts, all right. An' any man that'll dig down in his own pocket an' loan a stranger the money to get started on is right thinkin'. An' if yer good enough on the range so Bob Dye wanted to hold you over winter, yer good enough fer me. Bob's a good cowman, an' he knows a good man when he sees him." The man raised a gloved hand and pointed to a tent pitched beside a wagon, near which grazed a pair of hobbled horses. "That must be Kinch's outfit. Better let me 'tend to financin' him. I can throw in a few pointers that'll keep him out of P. J.'s clutches."

The Diamond-5 ranch, on the outskirts of the town of Blodgett, lay half a mile south of the railway. It was reached by a road that skirted a lumberyard and wound through a grove of cottonwoods beside a small creek, along which lay the various pastures and irrigated hayfields.

Despite his sixty-odd years, Old Sam Mason still could, and often did, ride the range all day and then put in half the night in the bunkhouse playing cribbage or poker with the boys. Young Tex Conway liked the outfit from

the first. From Jack Trent, the range foreman, down to the last ranch hand he sensed a feeling of loyalty that had been entirely absent on the Lazy-K.

He spoke of this to Jack Trent one evening in late January, as he and the foreman finished the supper dishes and rolled cigarettes in a line camp some forty miles to the southward.

"Yeah," Trent agreed, "there's a hell of a sight of difference in the two outfits. Couldn't help but be. Old Sam, he's a cowman from the ground up—an' P. J.'s a banker. Sam, he mixes in with his men an' knows every one of 'em. Hell, I don't believe old P. J. gets down to the Lazy-K more'n oncet a month, an' then he drives down in a buggy. Don't believe he ever was straddle of a horse in his life. An' outside of Bob Dye, he don't know a damn man he's got hired. All P. J. gives a damn about a man is how much he can make off'n him, or if he can file him on some crick an' keep a nester out."

Tex nodded. "He tried that one on me—but I wouldn't have any part of it."

Trent grinned. "Yeah, Old Sam told me about it. It shore tickled him—you turnin' down that kind of a deal, an' as much as callin' P. J. a son of a bitch right in his own office. Him an' Al heard it out in the bank, an' Sam says Al damn near swallowed his tonsils. An', speakin' of Al Blodgett, Tex, you better sort of keep an eye on him. He hates your guts."

Tex laughed. "On account of the way I talked to his old man, I reckon. And then one night Slim Williams and I sat in a poker game with some of the town boys in the back room of the pool-hall, and Al came in and bought a stack of chips and started bulling the game. It was a good game till he got into it, the bets running from a dollar to five or ten—then he began throwing heavy money around—raising the boys out—forcing them to call for amounts that would bust 'em if they lost. I saw several of them toss away hands that would have won because they were afraid to call and go broke. I played along, giving Al some pretty stiff raises on good hands and beating him out. I saw it was kind of getting his goat, and then on a pot that had been raised several times Al raised a hundred. I saw his raise and tossed in a five-hundred-dollar-bill on top of it. Up to that time Al's biggest bets hadn't been over fifty, and you should have seen his eyes bug out when I tossed in that five hundred. Everyone else dropped out, and he studied his hand for what seemed five minutes or more, then he tossed his cards away. I raked in the pot, laughed at Al, and tossed my hand down, face up. All I had was a pair of fours, and a queen, and a jack, and a ten-spot. The other boys in the game razzed him unmercifully, and presently he cashed in and quit."

"Yeah, I heard about that pot from Rattlesnake Dort. He stood behind Al's chair an' seen him toss away three aces. But there's more to Al's hatin'

you than what you called his old man, an' more to it than you beatin' him out of that pot."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Miss Helen."

"Miss Helen! Who in the devil is Miss Helen?"

"Helen Mason—Old Sam's darter. Al, he figgers you might step in an' beat his time."

Tex laughed. "I don't reckon he's got anything to worry about there. I didn't even know that Mr. Mason had a daughter."

"No, she's be'n off to a school fer the past couple of years—some school in the East somewheres. She'd be twenty now. She ain't be'n back home sence she left. A year ago she put in her vacation visitin' around amongst some friends she'd made there at the school, an' last summer Sam, he sent her packin' off on a trip to Yurup with some other girls one of the teachers took on this here tower. I know Sam missed her like hell. Her ma died when she was six an' Eddie was four, an' Sam, he raised 'em both. Eddie's a nice kid, all right—only he won't never make a cowman. He's more fer books. Wants to be a doctor. Sets around the house readin' when he's home, instead of ridin' the range. But Miss Helen, she's different. Ever sence she's be'n big enough to crawl up into a saddle she's rode the range with Old Sam. Hell, she knows the country as good as I do, right now! You don't see her settin' around with her nose in a book, onlest it's rainin' er snowin' er somethin'. An' even then she's like as not to be out in it. The summer after she finished high school Al Blodgett begun buzzin' around her. Al, he'd be'n off to college, where, accordin' to the tell, he didn't do nothin' much but raise hell, till old P. J. got tired of it an' put him to work in the bank. Sam, he seen how things was goin', an' come fall he packs her off to this here school. Sam, he thinks a heap of Miss Helen, an' I could see it damn near broke his heart to send her away."

"I don't see why a girl like that would fall for Al Blodgett," Tex said, rolling another cigarette.

"You can't never tell who they'll fall fer. Al, he's good-lookin', an' he wears good clothes, an' he's pretty good around horses—used to hang around the old man's ranch quite a bit when he was a kid—an' he's a smooth talker. On top of that he's got plenty of money to spend—an' when old P. J. kicks out, he'll have the Lazy-K, an' the bank, an' all the rest of P. J.'s holdin's. He'll be rich. That's enough to make any girl set up an' take notice. An' Al is shore as hell makin' a strong play fer Miss Helen."

Tex grinned. "If Al's got all that money in sight, I guess he don't need to worry about any forty-dollar-a-month cowhand standing in his way."

Jack Trent was silent for a long time, his eyes fixed on the little row of draught holes that glowed brightly across the front of the stove. "By the time Miss Helen's school's out, this spring, you won't be no forty-dollar-a-month cowhand. You'll be foreman of the Diamond-5."

"What!"

"That's right. Mebbe I'm sort of speakin' out of turn, tellin' you this. But it's the truth. Sam an' me has talked it all over. Both of us figgers you're the man fer the job— —"

"But—cripes, Jack—you're good for years yet!"

The older man shook his head. "No—it's in here." He paused and pressed a hand on his stomach. "The doc says I've got mebbe a year to live—mebbe two years! I'm quittin' come spring. Sam, he offered to pension me off right now, but I told him I'd hang on till spring an' sort of break you in. You an' Sam will get along fine, Tex. By God, there's a man!"

Tex nodded slowly. "Yes, he's a man, all right—and a damn good man. My dad was a man like that. And Mr. Rockwood—back in Texas. We only had a little spread, but Mr. Rockwood owned the 7-Up, the biggest outfit in the country, and he was always ready to help out the little fellows in every way he could. Then he sold out to a man named Caswell—the same kind of a man as P. J. Blodgett. He bought out all the other little owners—forced 'em to sell to him under threat of fencing them in and ruining them—all but Dad. He wouldn't sell. He'd have fought Caswell to a finish—if he'd lived. But he didn't live. Spike Turner, Caswell's wagon boss, murdered him—shot him in the back. I shot Spike as soon as I caught up with him. Caswell owned the sheriff, and between the two of them they had it all rigged up to hang me for murder. But five of Caswell's own men who witnessed the shooting told him that they'd go on the witness stand and swear that Spike had his gun in his hand when I killed him, so Caswell called the sheriff off. I'd have stayed on and fought Caswell, but my mother sold out to him. She went back East, and I headed north. I rode the beef round-up for the Lazy-K, and Bob Dye offered me a winter job. Then P. J. sent for me and wanted me to file a homestead to keep a nester out, and I turned him down. Then Mr. Mason hired me. And not only that, he loaned the nester the money to pay his entry fee on that homestead."

"Yeah, Old Sam has gone out of his way to help a lot of little fellers, one way an' another. You'd think it would be the other way around—that P. J.

would be the one to help the nesters get started. Hell—he owns the bank, an' the store. The more folks that settles in the country, the more trade he'd get.

“Old Sam knows, an' I know, that the days of the big cow outfits in this country is numbered. This is goin' to be wheat country. Ten, fifteen, twenty years from now the hull damn range'll be ploughed up into farms. It looks like P. J.'d ort to encourage the settlers. Instead of that, he keeps 'em out if he can, an' when he can't he gives 'em more credit at the store an' the bank than they can pay back—then he forecloses on 'em. Looks like he figgers that when the farmers do come pourin' in, he'll have the hull damn country to sell 'em. He either figgers it that way, er else he's jest nach'ly so God-damn mean that he wouldn't help no one, even if he could make money doin' it. An' Al, he's a chip off'n the old block. They're about like this here Caswell you was tellin' about ownin' the hull country, shuriff an' all. The Blodgetts own Rattlesnake Dort too, but they don't own Old Sam—by a damn sight! They've got a healthy respect fer Sam—an' so's Rattlesnake, in a snivvlin' sort of a way. You've already made an enemy of old P. J. An' I'm bettin' that when Miss Helen comes home this spring you'll be makin' a damn sight worse enemy of Al. Take a fool's advice, Tex, an' keep an eye on Al. I wouldn't trust him fer's I kin spit.”

CHAPTER NINE

THE GIRL AT THE MOUTH OF THE DRAW

THE two gleaming steel rails of the unfenced railway marked, by mutual understanding, the boundary between the Diamond-5 and the Lazy-K cattle domains. As a matter of convenience, the Diamond-5 round-up covered the range south of the railway, and the Lazy-K to the north. Each carried the other's irons and branded the other's calves. After the wagons pulled in, however, the riders of each outfit rode either range, as the cattle, of course, knew no boundary.

When the Diamond-5 calf round-up rolled in May, Tex Conway was wagon boss. The men all liked him, and when the wagons pulled in, early in July, Old Sam Mason knew he had made no mistake in picking his range foreman.

Tex was no bunkhouse foreman. Every day he was out early and back late, riding the range, studying the country, getting acquainted with Indians, trappers, and the sprinkling of nesters.

Along toward noon one day he pulled up to speak to a nester who, with his wife and two children, was driving toward town in a spring wagon. The man, he knew, owned a little spread on a creek some ten miles farther on.

"Hi, Tex!" the man greeted as he pulled his team to a stand. "You wouldn't be headin' up by my place, would you?"

"Why, yes, I'm headin' that way. Why?"

"Well, fact is, what with foolin' around gittin' ready to go to town, I fergot to open the corral gate. I left four head of horses in the corral, an' with the gate shet there ain't no way fer 'em to git to water. Jest happen to think about it couple minutes ago, an' I an' the woman was augerin' about turnin' back. It's quite a piece, but, hot's it is, them horses shore ort to have water."

"Never mind turning back. I'm heading up that way, and I'll swing in to your place and turn the horses out."

"Hate puttin' you to all that trouble . . ."

"No trouble at all. Glad to do it. So long."

Some time later Tex pulled up on the rim of the bench above the nester's cabin. As he looked down on the little spread he noticed a saddled horse standing near the house, reins hanging to the ground. Even as he looked, a man stepped around the corner of a nearby haystack, an armful of hay in his arms. He entered the house, and a moment later dashed out, gathered up the

reins, mounted the horse, and headed up the creek. Putting spurs to his horse, Tex dashed down the trail that slanted the creek bed as a puff of heavy grey smoke issued from the open door of the house. Swinging from his horse, he dashed in and kicked the burning hay out into the yard, scattered it, and stamped it out. Then he opened the gate of the horse corral and, mounting, struck out after the rider who had disappeared in the sparse sprinkling of cottonwoods that lined the creek.

Unaware of pursuit, the man slanted up out of the creek-bed and paused on the rim for a backward glance at the house just as Tex burst from the grove at a high lope. Digging in his spurs, the man whirled and disappeared, and as Tex topped the rim he saw him fogging it for all his horse was worth, nearly half a mile away.

Applying quirt and spur, he struck out after the fleeing rider. He had noted that the other was a large man, and knew that with the weight his horse carried it would be easy to overtake him. Gradually the distance between the two flying horses shortened. With only a hundred yards separating them, the man glanced back, jerked a six-gun from his holster, and fired at his pursuer. "Okay," Tex muttered, "if that's the way you want to play the game—let's go!" And drawing his own gun, he fired. At the sound of the shot the man applied quirt and spur unmercifully to his tiring mount, as Tex fired again and again. At the fifth shot the horse stumbled and fell, sending the rider over his head in a rolling fall from which he regained his feet just as Tex reined up beside him. With gun in his holster, the man elevated both hands as high as he could reach, and Tex recognized him as a Lazy-K rider named Hank Chubb. And at the same moment he saw the girl. She sat her horse at the mouth of a draw not ten yards from where Chubb's horse had gone down. And despite the grim disapproval in her eyes, he thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. With one eye on Chubb, he raised his hat and addressed her:

"You better ride along, ma'm," he said. "I've got dealings with this hombre."

"Going to shoot him, I suppose," the girl replied icily.

"Why—yes, ma'm, I expect I will—if he's got the nerve to draw."

"And if he hasn't, you'll shoot him anyway?"

"No, ma'm. But I'm sure going to work him over."

"What are you doing on a Diamond-5 horse?" she demanded.

"Riding him." And as the girl flushed angrily, he added: "I see you're riding a Diamond-5 yourself. You better ride on."

"I won't ride on! I'll stay right here!"

“All right, ma’m. I reckon what you see won’t hurt you any.”

Swinging from his horse, he faced Chubb. “Draw,” he commanded, his own hands swinging empty at his sides. “Why don’t you draw?” he taunted. “You’ve got five loads left. I’ve got one.”

The man made no move, merely stood staring glassy-eyed into Tex’s face, his arms upstretched to the limit. Stepping up to him, Tex jerked his gun from its holster, emptied it, pocketed the cartridges, and tossed the gun into the high grass. He proceeded to give the man an unmerciful beating, not letting up until he was on the ground, his battered face buried in his arms.

Turning away, he stepped to the horse, which had struggled to his feet and stood on three legs, the other dangling helplessly. He disposed of the animal with a merciful shot between the eyes, then mounted his own horse.

The girl still sat her horse, her face white with anger. “You brute!” she cried. “How dare you treat a man like that!”

“He had it coming.”

“You might have killed him—shooting at him the way you did before his horse went down!”

“Yes, ma’m, I sure might. But he was hard to hit, the way we were going. I tried, and it would have served him right if I had.”

“What is your name?”

“Tex Conway. I’m range foreman for the Diamond-5.”

“You may be range foreman for the Diamond-5 now—but you won’t be five minutes after I tell my dad what I’ve just seen! He’ll fire you as soon as I finish!”

“Your dad?”

“Yes, my dad! Sam Mason—your boss!”

Tex said: “Oh.” A slow grin twisted his lips. “You must be Miss Helen. Well, I suppose I ought to be there at the firing. Come on—let’s ride.”

“But that man? We can’t leave him here afoot! That’s a Lazy-K horse, and it’s a good twenty miles to the Lazy-K ranch.”

“Yes, ma’m—about that. I see you know the country.”

“I ought to know it. I’ve ridden it ever since I’ve been big enough to ride. I’ve ridden it alone and I’ve ridden it with Dad.”

“I used to ride with my dad too, back in Texas. He’s dead now, so I ride alone.”

“But—that man—what are we going to do about him?”

"I've done about all there is to do, except bury him. And he isn't dead enough for that."

"But how will he get back to the ranch?"

Tex shrugged. "That's his problem. I won't be losing any sleep over it. If it was me, I'd walk."

"He can't walk twenty miles in riding-boots."

"He can take 'em off, then."

"But there are no creeks between here and the Lazy-K! What will he do for water?"

"He can wish for it. I sure would—walking twenty miles, hot as it is."

"You're a brute!" the girl cried angrily. "I'll bet when we get back to the ranch Dad will send a man out here with a horse for him."

Tex smiled. "I'd take that bet," he said, "except I wouldn't want to win from a lady."

The girl turned her horse toward home, and Tex fell in beside her. The ride to the Diamond-5 was made in silence.

They found Old Sam seated on the veranda sipping a whisky and soda. He listened to the girl's angry recital with a twinkle in his shrewd grey eyes. When she had finished he turned to Tex, who had stood by, a silent listener.

"What's P. J.'s cut-throats be'n up to now?" he asked.

"I ran across this hombre setting fire to a nester's cabin. It's Joe Berry's place there on Dog Crick. They're having a tough time to get along, as it is. I met Joe and his family about half-way to town, and he asked me if I'd mind turning his horses out of his corral if I was heading that way. I told him I would, and when I got there I saw this Hank Chubb carry an armful of hay into the house and set fire to it. I kicked the hay out and took after Hank. You've heard the rest of it."

The girl glanced at him reproachfully. "Why didn't you tell me that?" she demanded.

Tex smiled. "You didn't ask me."

"And all the way home you never said a word—just rode along beside me, letting me think you were a brute."

"You didn't do much talking yourself."

"I was too angry."

The smile widened. "And I was trying to figure out where I'd find another job when Mr. Mason fired me."

CHAPTER TEN

HELEN DECLINES AN INVITATION

HELEN MASON couldn't keep off a horse. Old Sam had suddenly developed an unaccountable and rather vague "misery" in his shoulder which kept him out of the saddle. Jack Trent stayed on at the Diamond-5, keeping a supervisory eye on things and attending to light duties, the principal one of which was playing cribbage at five cents a point with Old Sam during the long, hot afternoons. So it was inevitable that Helen should ride with Tex Conway. Early and late the two were in the saddle, riding the plain and the rolling hills, eating their midday lunch beside some cold spring, taking wide circles north of the railway to check the drift of the Diamond-5 cattle into Lazy-K range.

One day they ran on to Al Blodgett returning from some errand to the Lazy-K. Ignoring Tex, Al rode close to the girl and tipped his hat with a flourish. "Hello, Helen! Mighty glad to see you. Heard you were back. Been over to see you a couple of times, but Old Sam said you were out on the range somewhere. You don't look a minute older than the day you left—only prettier, if that's possible. Two years you've been away. Seems twice that long. I suppose you've heard that I'm running the bank now?"

The girl nodded, and Tex's heart beat a bit faster at the studied coolness of her reply. "Yes, I believe Dad did mention that you're in the bank."

If Blodgett noticed the coolness, he ignored it. "Yup, settled down into a solid business-man now. But it wasn't on business I called to see you. There's a dance over at the Radway schoolhouse next Saturday night, and I want you to go with me. I'll call for you about seven. We can ride over there in a couple of hours."

Helen smiled. "Can't do it, Al. Tex has already asked me, and I promised to go with him."

The man shot a venomous glance at Tex. "Oh—Conway, eh? Heard he was working for the Diamond-5. He worked for us till P. J. fired him."

The girl's smile widened. "Yes, Dad told me about it. You seem to have forgotten that he was in the bank at the time and overheard the firing."

Blodgett's face flushed a brick red. "And what's more," he blurted in a voice thick with anger, "he assaulted one of our riders the other day and killed a Lazy-K horse! If he wasn't such a rotten shot he'd have killed the man too—then he'd have been up for murder. He went off and left the rider

afoot way over near Dog Crick. The man barely made it back to the ranch. If he hadn't made it, Conway would have been up for murder anyway!"

The smile left the girl's face and her eyes narrowed. "Yes, I know all about the shooting of that horse, and the assault on the man. I was right there and saw the whole thing. It was most amusing."

Tex met Blodgett's angry glance. "You can tell P. J. that if he don't quit ordering his riders to burn nesters out he'll lose some more horses—maybe some riders too. As for the horse I shot, tell him if he'll come to me personally I'll pay him for his horse. You can tell him I'll probably pull his nose first—but I'll pay him."

Without a word, Blodgett put spurs to his horse and headed down the trail. As he disappeared in a cloud of dust, Tex slanted the girl a glance as a slow grin twisted the corners of his lips. "Didn't you ever go to Sunday school and learn what happens to little girls who tell fibs? The facts are—I don't like to dance—I never asked you to go to a dance—and I've never even heard of the Radway schoolhouse."

The girl giggled. "No. What does happen to little girls who tell fibs?"

"Why, they grow up into beautiful ladies and marry range foremen."

Helen's eyes widened. "O-o-o-h, surely nothing so terrible as that!" she cried in mock horror. "But seriously, Tex, we've got to go to that dance. We're committed. I didn't want to go with Al Blodgett—there or anywhere else. So I told him the first thing that popped into my head. And, Tex Conway, even if you don't remember asking me, or hadn't ever heard of the Radway schoolhouse, you know very well that if you did like to dance, and if you had heard of the Radway schoolhouse and knew there was going to be a dance there, you would have asked me to go with you before you'd have asked any other girl—now wouldn't you?"

It is possible that Tex's horse chose that moment to sidle close against the girl's—or barely possible that the skilful pressure of a knee forced him over. Be that as it may, the next thing Helen Mason knew, a strong arm was about her waist and she was drawn close against the Texan's breast. Her head was upon his shoulder and she was looking up into his eyes—eyes that seemed to burn with an all-consuming flame. Then his lips were upon hers; her eyes closed and for a long, long time there was no sound save the soft rattle of bit-chains as the horses nuzzled each other.

When Tex finally released her he glanced into the flushed face with its shining brown eyes. "You're right, sweetheart," he said. "I'd have asked you before I'd have asked any other girl. And I reckon from now on I'll never go any place without asking you to go with me."

“And I’ll go with you, Tex,” the girl breathed softly. “Even if it’s to the end of the earth, I’ll go.”

Tex broke a long silence as the two rode slowly homeward, side by side, across the prairie. He slanted the girl a teasing glance. “Reminds me of that first ride we took together—neither of us saying anything—it’s so different.”

“I think you were horrible,” the girl pouted, “letting me ride all that way thinking you were such a beast. Only—you didn’t know it—but before we got to the ranch I wasn’t nearly as angry as I pretended to be. You see, when you weren’t looking, I’d steal a glance at your face. It’s such a good-looking face, dear; it looked sort of hard and grim, but there wasn’t a *mean* line in it. I got to thinking that there might be some reasonable explanation for the way you abused that man—got to hoping there would be, too, before we got home. I—I really believe I was falling in love with you even then.”

Tex’s lips twisted into a grin. “You sure didn’t sound much in love with me when you were telling your dad what came off out there on the bench. I listened to every word, and I didn’t get the love slant at all. Guess I’ve got a lot to learn about women. You told Al Blodgett that what I did to that hombre was amusing. But the way you talked out there, I didn’t figure you were finding it amusing.”

“It wasn’t amusing then. I was furious. But after I heard why you acted as you did, it became highly amusing. You see, I didn’t know you then. If I’d see you do the same thing again, it would be amusing right from the start—because I’d *know* you had a good reason for doing it.”

Tex laughed. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, as they say over in England. Wonder if Al will show up at the dance? You sure made him sore—turning him down flat.”

“You didn’t soothe him any when you implied that P. J. was ordering his men to burn out the nesters. And when you told him to tell P. J. you’d pull his nose, it made him positively furious. The Blodgetts aren’t used to being talked to that way.”

“Let ’em get used to it, then,” Tex replied a bit grimly. “A little plain talk will be good for their souls—if any.”

The girl turned serious eyes on the man’s face. “You know, Tex, I’ve been thinking as we rode along—maybe it would be better if we stay away from that dance.”

“Why?”

“Well—Al Blodgett will be there. There are plenty of girls in the country that would jump at the chance to go with him. And I’ll bet he’ll see to it that there will be plenty of Lazy-K riders there too.”

“So what?”

“So either Al himself will pick a quarrel with you or he’ll have one of his men do it—and in either case you’d be outnumbered, so you wouldn’t have a chance.”

“Listen, sweetheart,” Tex said. “I’ve never yet stayed away from any place because I was afraid to go there. And I’m not starting now. We’ll go to that dance. And if Al Blodgett or any of his Lazy-K men start anything, they’d better be damn well able to finish it.” He paused and smiled into the serious eyes of the girl. “Old Jack Trent is a wise old owl. Way along last winter, one night in a line camp, he predicted what would happen when you came home in the spring. He warned me to keep an eye on Al—that Al would be afraid I’d beat his time with you. I didn’t even know there was any you till that night. And I didn’t give much heed to what Jack said because the fact is, I’d never cared for girls—never knew any that interested me—till you came home. He said that Al was making a strong play for you.”

Helen nodded. “Yes—I suppose he was. He used to be over at the ranch quite often, and we’d ride together, or just sit around and talk. I liked him well enough, but I never really cared for him. I’m not saying that I might not have been fool enough to fall for him if Dad hadn’t hustled me off to school. The first year I was away Al and I wrote to each other quite often. But my room-mate last year was a girl from Moose Jaw, and she knew all about Al Blodgett. Both her brothers knew him well, and they’d warned her never to even be seen with him. They told her that on his trips to Medicine Hat, and Regina, and Moose Jaw, he drank and gambled—and worse. They told of a girl in Regina that—that had an illegal operation, and that Al Blodgett paid the bill. And it wasn’t that they had anything against Al personally. They are both responsible business-men who told these things to their sister for her own good after they found out she’d gone to a dance with Al one night in Moose Jaw. Here on the ranch, or in Blodgett, I had no way of finding these things out. Probably wouldn’t have believed it if anyone around here had told me. And I shudder to think what might have happened if Dad hadn’t packed me off to school.”

Tex smiled. “Your dad is plenty wise too,” he said. “He had Al’s number, all right—he and old Jack both. And they savvied that telling you about Al might only serve to antagonize you—that the smartest thing to do was to get you out of the country for a while.”

“They’re two old dears, and I love ’em both,” the girl said. “And see, the sun is setting, and we better hurry or we’ll be late for supper. I’ll race you to the high rim.”

“But what will I get if I win?” Tex asked, his eyes twinkling.

“Guess what!” the girl teased, pursing up her lips. “The same as I’ll get, if I win. Come on—let’s go!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ON THE RIM OF THE BENCH

THE DIAMOND-5 wagons had been overhauled and were due to roll out on the beef round-up within a few days. The remuda horses had been gathered off the range and been turned into the big home pasture. The cowboys, assembled from far and wide, had been assigned their "strings," and awaited only the word. Supper was over and two or three poker games were in progress in the bunkhouse.

On the veranda of the low log ranch house the two oldsters played cribbage while young Eddie Mason lounged in a chair, his nose in a book. Presently the lad tossed the book aside. "I don't see why Tex and Sis stay out so late every night," he grumbled. "I'm hungry as a bear."

Old Sam grinned. "If you're so doggone hungry you'd ort to gone down to the grub-house an' et with the boys," he said.

"I'll bet Tex stays out a-purpose so he'll miss supper in the grub-house and can eat up here with Sis!"

"He's a fool if he don't," Jack Trent grunted, picking up his crib and spreading the cards on the table. "Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, an' four is eight." He shoved the cards toward Mason. "Your deal, an' I only need— —" He paused abruptly as the sound of galloping hoofs floated across the little valley. The eyes of the three centred on the two riders who pulled up sharply on the rim. The horses drew close together, and Jack Trent glanced at Old Sam. "Do you see what I see?" he asked with an audible chuckle.

"Oh, they're kissing each other! I can see 'em from here!" Eddie cried. "Gosh! An' now they'll prob'ly get married, an' Tex will be my brother-in-law! Won't that be swell! 'Cause he's the best doggone cowboy in the world!"

Old Sam winked at Trent. "Guess that settles Al Blodgett's hash—an' I'm damn glad of it. I've be'n watchin' Tex pretty close, an' I can't see where Helen could do better."

"Me neither," Trent agreed. "Tex, he's about as likely a young feller as I ever run acrost—an' I've saw lots of 'em in my time. It might be," he added, "that the way things is shapin' up, Miss Helen will git out of the notion of startin' this here school she's be'n talkin' about. It would save you quite a piece of money if she did."

Old Sam smiled. "It shore would! The way she's got it planned out, there's a schoolroom to build, an' a bunkhouse fer the kids, an' another one fer the teachers, an' a grub-shack, an' the Lord knows what not. I figger it'll cost right around twenty thousan' jest to git the thing started."

Trent shook his head dubiously. "She won't never git her money back," he opined. "Why the hell would anyone pay out good money to send their kids way out here to school when if they kep' 'em to home they could send 'em to school fer nothin'?"

"She's got it all figgered out. Seems she got the notion a year or so ago, an' she's be'n talkin' it over with folks back East, an' their idee is that if she'd git hold of a couple of accredited teachers, an' start a school fer young kids out here in the West, there's a lot of folks down in the States that would pay good money to send their kids to a school where they could learn to ride an' shoot an' camp out, on top of what they'd learn in a reg'lar school. But she ain't lookin' at it from the money angle alone. Her idee is to take these rich kids an' charge their folks plenty. Then fer every rich kid she'll take a pore kid—onder-privileged kids, she calls 'em—an' she won't charge them nothin'. She claims that mixin' 'em up that way will be good fer both kinds—sort of a democracy idee, she claims."

The two riders had slanted down into the valley and were dismounting at the corral. "Might be all right," Trent admitted dubiously. "But, like I said, mebbe she'll git out of the notion now."

Sam shook his head. "I doubt it. Once Helen makes up her mind to a thing, she sticks to it. Like Tex, there. I seen right from the first that she wanted him—an' from what we seen up there on the rim, it looks like she's got him. An' I'll miss my guess if she don't start this school too."

As the two riders crossed from the corral and ascended the steps of the veranda, Eddie greeted them gleefully: "What were you two doin' up there on the rim? And don't try to kid us—we could see from here, just as plain!"

Helen flushed and then laughed. "I was paying a bet," she said.

"And I was collecting one," Tex announced. "You see, we raced to the rim, and I beat her."

"Some bet!" Jack Trent chuckled, with a glance into the brown eyes of the girl. "You win if you lose, eh?"

"That's right," the girl agreed, "and now we might as well tell you and get it over with. Tex and I are engaged."

"Good!" Eddie approved heartily. "And now you'll get married and forget about that danged old school you've been talking about."

The girl frowned. "Eddie Mason, you're nothing but a—a brat!" she exclaimed. "I haven't said a word to Tex about the school. I wanted to surprise him. Figured on starting it right after the wagons pulled out, and have it all finished by the time the round-up was over."

Old Sam glanced at the boy. "Run out an' tell the cook to set supper on." When he disappeared, the oldster eyed the two approvingly. "This here announcement ain't exactly a surprise," he grinned, "but I don't mind tellin' you it meets my hearty approval. Skip along now, you two, an' worsh up. It's gittin' late."

"We ran across Al Blodgett over on the Lazy-K trail," the girl said as they seated themselves at the table, "and he asked me to go to the dance Saturday night over at the Radway school. But I had already promised to go with Tex—or so I told Al."

"I hate that dang Al Blodgett," Eddie cut in. "He thinks he owns the whole town."

"He pretty near does," Trent said. "Leastwise he will when old P. J. kicks out. How'd that set on his stummick—you turnin' him down?"

"Not very well. He told me Tex rode for the Lazy-K till old P. J. fired him. I reminded him that Dad happened to be in the bank and overheard the firing, and then he told me that Tex had shot a Lazy-K horse and tried to murder that horrible Hank Chubb. I told him I was right there and saw the whole thing. And then Tex chimed in and told him to tell P. J. that if he would come to him personally he'd pay for the horse he shot, but that he'd probably pull P. J.'s nose before he paid him. Al was furious. He never said another word, just spurred up his horse and hit off down the trail."

Trent grinned. "That'll shore stick in Al's gullet—gittin' talked to like that. Better keep an' eye on him, Tex. Like I told you oncet before, I wouldn't trust Al Blodgett fer's I kin spit. He'll lay to git back at you somehow—er git someone else to."

"Yah—that big Ole Johnson, that drives team and works down at P. J.'s warehouse, most likely," Eddie cut it. "He'll do anything Al tells him to—like the other night Joe Brown took a poke at Al in a card game in the back of the pool-hall, and the next night Ole Johnson picked a quarrel with Joe and beat him up something fierce. You bet, if Al puts Ole on to Tex, I'll—I'll shoot Ole! I'll show him he can't pick on my brother-in-law!"

"You're all right, Eddie," Tex said when the laughter had subsided. "But I don't reckon big Ole will start anything that I can't finish myself."

"Leastwise you don't have to worry about Al pullin' nothin' at that dance," Trent grinned. "Sim Brant was in town today an' he says the

Radway schoolhouse burnt to the ground last night.”

“Good!” Helen exclaimed. “Now we don’t have to go to the dance!”

Tex turned to the girl with a smile. “Speaking of schoolhouses, what’s this about a school you figure on starting after the wagons pull out?” he asked.

Launched on her favourite subject, Helen explained her project and also that her father had promised to put up the necessary buildings there in the cottonwoods at the first bend of the creek. “And besides everything else they’ll learn, it will be a good lesson in democracy—mixing rich boys with poor ones. It will give each a chance to get the other’s viewpoint.”

Tex grinned. “That will work all right till some poor man’s kid socks a rich man’s kid one in the eye. Then the devil will be to pay, and your school will go on the black list. All your paying clients will jerk their kids out, claiming they’re being made to associate with young rowdies and other riff-raff—and you’ll be left holding the bag. Democracy works like that—when plutocracy holds the purse.”

Helen smiled. “There won’t be any rich kids and poor kids when I get things going,” she said. “They’ll all be on the same footing. They’ll eat at the same table and wear the same clothing, and their people will not be allowed to send them any spending money. My plan is to wipe out all class distinction.”

“Quite a plan—if it works,” Tex grinned.

“I’ll make it work!” the girl exclaimed. “You men are all alike—you’re none of you very enthusiastic about it.”

Tex’s eyes were twinkling as their glances met. “My enthusiasm for the project will be in inverse ratio to the amount of time you put in on it. You see, since you came home I’m not used to riding alone. I might get lost.”

“Oh, I’m not going to teach,” the girl said, “just sort of supervise it. There’ll be lots of time for riding. I’ll see to that.”

An hour later Tex said good night. “I figure to roll the wagons Monday morning. That’ll give us tomorrow and Sunday to get everything lined up. Guess I’ll slip down to the pool-room and pick up my laundry if it’s ready. The proprietor’s wife does my washing for me.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

TEX CONWAY PAYS A FINE

As though he were walking on air, Tex strolled along the trail through the dense cottonwood thicket that fringed the creek. He paused and leaned over the side-rail of the bridge and watched the play of the moonlight on the ripples where the creek burbled over a shallow gravel bar. "It still seems too good to be true," he murmured. "Helen—I didn't know there was a woman in the world like Helen—and she loves me. And when the wagons roll in this fall, we'll be married. We'll stay with Old Sam as long as—as he needs us. Then maybe we'll start an outfit of our own—or maybe we'll keep on running the Diamond-5. Either way it will be wonderful."

He crossed the tracks and stepped into the pool-hall. "Is my laundry ready?" he asked of Jake Botz, the proprietor, who presided behind the tobacco counter.

"Naw, the old woman had a misery in her back the fore part of the week an' never got her worshin' out till Wednesday. You kin git it tomorrow night. Seems like wimmin's allus ailin', one way er 'nother."

As Tex purchased some tobacco he noted that Al Blodgett and three or four of the village loafers were playing pool at one of the tables toward the rear of the room, while half a dozen other loafers, together with Rattlesnake Dort, the constable, looked on. Blodgett glanced toward the Texan, shifted his glance to a point high on the opposite wall, and proceeded to chalk his cue. "They say it gets pretty hot down in Texas sometimes," he said. "Or maybe it just gets so hot for some particular guy that he has to ride north for his health."

Several of the loafers shot sidewise glances toward the man at the tobacco counter and grinned. Elbow on the counter, Tex Conway produced tobacco and papers and rolled a cigarette. Blodgett pocketed a couple of balls and re-chalked his cue. "Yup," he continued. "And the way things look from here, along about eight, nine months from now Old Sam Mason's liable to have a maverick on his hands he can't brand."

Boot-heels clicked sharply on the board floor. Reversing his cue, Blodgett swung with both hands at the oncoming Texan, who ducked the blow. The cue struck the wall and showered the chair loafers with loose plaster as Tex landed a blow to the jaw that sent Blodgett ricocheting from the table to the floor. He lay fumbling clumsily at his jaw with his hand.

Rattlesnake Dort stood up and laid a hand on Tex's arm. "Hold on, there—no fightin'! Al, he was only foolin', an' you attacked him."

Tex whirled on the constable. "You keep out of this!" he snapped, and glared down at Blodgett, who still fumbled dazedly at his jaw. "Get up on your feet, you damned yellow cur, and back up your insult," he said.

Blodgett made no move, and Dort again laid a hand on Tex's arm. "It's 'sault an' batt'ry—that's what you done. An' don't go resistin' arrest, er we'll send fer the Mounted, an' you'll find yerself in plenty trouble."

"I'm not resisting arrest," Tex said, turning from Blodgett in disgust. "And I'm not a man that goes around with a chip on his shoulder. But when some filthy-minded bastard like Blodgett, there, deliberately throws out a nasty insult, I'm not the man that won't pick it up, either—even if his old man does own the whole damned town."

The constable seemed greatly relieved. "I gotta 'rest you, like I said. You attackted Al—an' him only kiddin', an' not meanin' no harm." He turned to the chair-warmers. "Couple you boys run over an' git Jedge Baxter. Tell him to come over to the pool-room. We kin hold the trial right here an' git it over with."

Tex grinned. "Do you mean Slim Baxter, the manager of P. J. Blodgett's store?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's him. He's jestice of the peace."

"Fine!" Tex exclaimed. "I'll probably get a good fair trial."

A few minutes later Baxter appeared, and Dort proceeded to explain: "Al an' some of the boys was playin' pool, an' Conway come in an' ax Jake, here, is his worshin' ready, an' Jake claims it ain't on account his old woman got a misery in her back, but he kin git it tomorrow. Conway buys some tobacker an' starts rollin' a cigarette, an' Al, he sort of sez how they say it gits pretty hot down to Texas, er mebbe it jest gits too hot fer some guy so he's got to ride north fer his health. Conway, he don't pay no 'tention to it, jest kep' on rollin' his cigarette, an' then Al, sort of kiddin', like, makes some crack about Ol' Sam Mason might find out he's got a maverick on his hands he can't brand, an' Conway comes at Al an' knocks him down. Then I 'rests Conway an' sends fer you." He paused and eyed the loafers who had gathered around. "That's how it was, boys, ain't it?"

Most of them nodded assent, and Baxter turned to Blodgett, who had risen from the floor and sunk into a chair. "How about it, Al?" he asked.

"That's right," he said. "I was only kidding. Conway's always hunting for trouble. He's the man that beat Hank Chubb up that time, after shooting

his horse out from under him, and then left Hank afoot twenty miles from the ranch.”

Baxter scowled at Tex. “What have you got to say?” he asked.

“Nothing, except that Blodgett deliberately insulted me, and when I went after him he swung at me with the butt end of a cue. I ducked the blow and gave him a punch on the jaw. I’d like to have given him a good trimming—but the yellow cur quit cold.”

Baxter glanced about him. “Anyone else got anything to say?”

Jake Botz, the proprietor, cleared his throat. “All I got to say—I ain’t a-blamin’ Conway a damn bit fer knockin’ hell outa Al. Al, he had it comin’. Conway come in here mindin’ his own business, an’ Al starts in nickin’ at him. Al, he’s like that when he gits a coupla drinks in him—allus shootin’ off his mouth.”

Baxter frowned. “P. J. won’t like it much—you sidin’ agin Al that way. Remember, he owns this here buildin’ you’re in. He might raise the rent on you.”

“P. J. might own this buildin’—but he don’t own me, by a damn sight! Right’s right an’ wrong’s wrong—an’ to hell with P. J. If he raises the rent on me I’ll move out an’ put up a buildin’ of my own. Then he’ll lose even the rent he’s gittin’ now—an’ you know how much chanct there is of that.”

Baxter turned to Tex. “I’m finin’ you ten dollars an’ costs—it’ll be thirteen-sixty, all told, an’ that’s lettin’ you off easy. But I’m warnin’ you that next time you’re fetched up in front of me fer assault, er disturbin’ the peace, er anything else, I’ll give you the limit—a hundred-dollar fine an’ ninety days in jail. I ain’t goin’ to stand fer outsiders comin’ in here an’ beatin’ up our local boys.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

STREET FIGHT

AFTER lunch the next day Helen Mason paused at the horse corral beside Tex, who was seated on an over-turned box re-stringing his saddle. "Come on, take a walk," she said. "I've got to go downtown. You'll have plenty of time to finish that when we get back."

Tex laid aside the saddle and stood up. "Fine," he smiled. "I'd rather take a walk with you than string forty saddles."

"That's a kind of a doubtful compliment, isn't it?" the girl laughed. "I'd rather do most anything than string forty saddles."

"And I'd rather take a walk with you than do most anything. So now we've got rid of the saddles—let's go."

Ten yards away a rat slipped from under the feed-house and sniffed at an empty tin can. Drawing his gun, Tex shot the rat in two and returned the gun to its holster.

"That's shooting!" cried the girl. "I wish I could do that!"

"Takes practice," Tex said. "Down where I come from a man's got to be good."

As they crossed the bridge they met Eddie Mason hurrying toward them. "Hey, Tex," he cried, "you're just the one I want to see! Some of us kids were playing around those lumber-piles down by the depot, and that big Ole Johnson was unloading lumber out of a box-car. Billy Caldwell and I crawled under the car to hide, and we saw Al Blodgett slip out the back door of the bank. He looked all around, and then stooped down and pulled a bottle of whisky out from under the step and slipped it under his coat and crossed over to where Ole was loading the lumber on to a wagon. We were right under the car where we could hear everything—and Al said: 'Hey, Ole, you want to make twenty-five dollars?' And Ole said: 'Sure I do.' And Al said: 'You know Tex Conway, Old Sam Mason's wagon boss. Well, he'll be coming to the pool-room tonight to pick up his washing. I want you to give him a damn good going over—just knock hell out of him—and when you do, I'll slip you the twenty-five.' Then Al pulled the bottle out from under his coat, and they both took a drink, and Al told Ole to keep the bottle. Ole sort of laughed and said he heard that Tex knocked Al down in the pool-room last night, and that he was kind of beating Al's time with Old Sam Mason's girl. Al got mad and told Ole to mind his own business, that if he

wanted that twenty-five dollars, all he had to do was to give Tex a damn good beating and keep his mouth shut afterwards. He said if Tex got licked, the word would get around and the cowboys would all hear about it, and then Tex would be all through as a boss, and Helen would ditch him, because no girl would want to run around with a guy that couldn't hold his own in a fight, and then Tex would prob'ly quit and leave the country. He said he was going to get rid of Tex, one way or another—and he didn't give a damn how. And Ole laughed. 'I'll fix him,' he said. 'I did a good job on Joe Brown, didn't I?' And Al said: 'Yes—and I want you to do even a better one on Tex.' Then Al turned around and went back to the bank, and Ole drove away with his load of lumber, and we crawled out from under the car and I started home to tell you. By gosh, if Ole does beat you up, I'll—I'll shoot him sure's I'm standing here!"

Tex laughed. "You're all right, Eddie. Thanks for putting me wise to the deal. But you better leave any shooting that's got to be done to me. And as for Ole beating me up, I don't reckon he'll get away with it. I was figured to be pretty good with my fists, back there in Texas."

"But that horrible Ole is so much bigger than you are!" Helen exclaimed.

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall," Tex said.

"You bet I'm going downtown after supper and see the scrap!" Eddie said. "I hope you knock him for a loop!"

"Al Blodgett himself is bigger than you are," Helen said as they walked on toward town. "The dirty coward! It's a wonder he wouldn't do his own fighting."

"I reckon he figures he wouldn't have much luck at it—after last night."

"What do you mean—after last night?"

"Oh, Al had a few drinks in him and was playing pool when I stopped in for my laundry, and he made a couple of dirty cracks at me. When I started for him he took a swing at me with his cue and missed. Then I tapped him one on the jaw, and he folded up on the floor. Rattlesnake Dort was there, and he arrested me, and they sent for Slim Baxter—it seems he's justice of the peace as well as manager of P. J.'s store. After hearing the evidence, he fined me ten dollars and costs and warned me that if I got mixed up in any more scraps he'd give me a hundred-dollar fine and send me to jail for ninety days . . ." Tex paused suddenly and frowned. "Why, the dirty crook!" he exclaimed.

"Sure he's a dirty crook—and that horrible Rattlesnake Dort too! Why, old P. J. owns 'em both, body and soul! No wonder you got arrested and

fined for knocking Al down!”

“I wasn’t thinking of Baxter, or Dort. It’s Al I mean. I see through his scheme. He gets Ole to pick a scrap with me, and then I get arrested and sent up for ninety days, and I can’t go out with the wagons. I won’t be any good to your dad, so he’ll fire me—and you’ll ditch me too, because no decent girl would want to run around with a jailbird. And I’ll quit the country. You see—Al’s got it all figured out to a T—I lose out if I get licked, and I lose out if I lick big Ole. In either case he’s got rid of me, and he’ll have clear sailing with you.”

“If that’s the way he figures, he’s crazy!” the girl cried. “He’s a coward, and a crook, and a fool too—if he thinks that both Dad and I won’t stand back of you, no matter what you do! Why, I’d never be seen speaking to him again!” They had stepped on to the wooden sidewalk, and the girl glanced across the street toward the bank. “For two cents I’d go in there right now and tell him exactly what I think of him!”

Tex snickered. “You couldn’t tell him all that without speaking to him. Better wait and write him a letter.”

“Look!” the girl exclaimed. “There comes that big Ole Johnson now!”

They were passing the pool-room as they met Johnson coming down the middle of the sidewalk. Refusing to turn out, the man pushed his way between the two, shoving Tex off the walk into the muddy street. Tex’s face went white, and his voice sounded gritty and hard to Rattlesnake Dort and the half-dozen loafers who crowded to the door of the pool-room. “I’ll ’tend to your case later,” he said.

“Do it now!” Helen cried, her face flaming with anger.

Tex glanced into her eyes. “But—the round-up—your dad’s depending on me.”

“Damn the round-up!” snapped the girl. “Do it now!”

The big Swede emitted a sneering laugh. “He ain’ do nuttin’. Better he like he wait so he kin sneak home. He ’fraid for fight big Ole— —” The words ended in a grunt of mingled surprise and pain as Tex leaped forward and drove a fist into his midriff. With a bellow of rage, the huge man swung a vicious right, followed by a left that spun him half around as it missed by inches. With the man off balance, Tex bored in, right, left, right, left, each blow landing on face and jaw with machine-gun precision. The big man gave ground, backing away and flailing out with mighty punches that either missed altogether or glanced harmlessly off Tex’s shifting shoulders. Big Ole, forced across the sidewalk, stood with his back against the building as Tex drove a terrific left to the jaw. There was a crash of glass as the man’s

head snapped back against the windowpane and he slipped limply to the sidewalk amid a shower of broken glass that gashed his face in half a dozen places, bathing it in bright red blood.

Al Blodgett dashed across the street from the bank and elbowed his way through the little crowd of onlookers. He called to Rattlesnake Dort: "Arrest that man! Lock him up in the cooler and keep him there over Sunday! Slim Baxter gave him fair warning that if he started any more fights in this town he'd get what's coming to him. Lucky I happened to be looking out the window and saw the whole thing. That was an unprovoked attack, if I ever saw one!" His glance swept the faces of the half-dozen pool-room loafers. "You boys saw the whole thing, didn't you? Saw Tex swing on Ole as he was passing him here on the sidewalk?" Several nodded assent, and Al continued: "You'll all be called as witnesses at the trial Monday. Get busy now and help Ole into the back room. Wash him up and patch his face with court plaster."

Rattlesnake Dort laid a hand on Tex's arm. "Come on along peaceable now," he said. "Like I told you last night, if you go resistin' arrest we'll call in the Mounted."

"Go on along with him, Tex," Helen advised. "You won't be in there very long."

As the two headed down the street toward the little brick jail, Al Blodgett frowned. "He'll still be in when the round-up's over. He's going to learn the hard way that there's such a thing as law and order in this town. This is the second fight he's started in two days!"

The girl smiled sweetly. "Oh, you mean his knocking you down last evening. He didn't seem to think that was much of a fight."

Blodgett flushed. "Bragged about it, did he! Hit me a punch in the jaw when I wasn't looking—and then bragged about it."

Jake Botz, who had been appraising his broken window, turned on him with a grin. "Yer eyesight ain't none too good, is it, Al? What was you lookin' at last night, when you swung on Tex with yer cue? An' agin, jest now—claimin' this here rookus was an unprovoked attack. What you need is a pair of specs. I happened to be lookin' out the winder too, an' I seen Ole deliberately shove Tex off'n the sidewalk. Ain't that right, Miss Helen?"

"It certainly is."

Botz continued. "Yup—Ole got jest what was comin' to him. An' so did you, las' night. An' speakin' of winders, better tell yer pa to git this here one fixed up before night. If it should come up a rain, it might cost him quite a bit in the way of damages to my tobacker an' stuff." Turning on his heel,

Botz disappeared into the pool-room, leaving the two alone on the sidewalk. "So you see," Helen said, "we've got witnesses on our side too."

"Only two of you," Al retorted. "We've got half a dozen, besides Rattlesnake Dort and myself. We know what we saw. And I guess Slim Baxter will know who to believe."

"Maybe we'd better ask for a jury trial, then."

"I guess any jury that could qualify would see it about the way Slim would."

Helen nodded. "Yes, I suppose they would. I don't believe you could pick enough men for a jury who didn't either live in houses owned by P. J. or have notes in the bank, or were obligated in some other way. If they didn't line up the way Slim told 'em to, it might be right embarrassing to them, mightn't it?"

Blodgett squared his shoulders. "Well, just between the two of us—if you want to put it that way—yes. P. J. and I run this town. You know that. Why can't you be sensible? Ditch this Texan—he's nothing but a bum—a drifter. Say the word, and I'll marry you tomorrow. Why, if the Masons and the Blodgetts should throw in together, we could control the whole country!"

The girl flushed. "I wouldn't marry you, Al Blodgett, if I could control the world! I'd rather be dead! You see, I know you for what you are. I loathe and despise you." She paused and nodded toward Rattlesnake Dort, who was returning from the direction of the jail. "Here comes your chore boy," she said. "This farce has gone far enough. When he gets here you tell him to turn around and go back to the jail and turn Tex loose. You see, Al—Tex is everything that you're not. That's why I love him. That's why I'm going to marry him."

The man's face had flushed at the girl's words, then the blood receded, leaving it cold white. "All right—marry your jailbird, then—when he gets out. But that won't be today—by a damn sight! And if you think this is a farce, you're crazy."

"I don't think I'm so crazy. And I believe even Slim Baxter and his hand-picked jury will agree that it's a farce when they learn that you bribed Ole Johnson with a bottle of whisky and a promise of twenty-five dollars to give Tex a trimming when he came to town this evening for his laundry."

"What! What do you mean?" cried the man, his face livid with rage. "Did that big oaf—"

"Oh no," the girl smiled. "Ole didn't tell. We knew all about it—Tex and I—before we met Ole there on the sidewalk. You see, Al, some little boys, Eddie among them, saw everything you did from the time you left the bank

by the back door and got the bottle of whisky from under the step until you returned to the bank. And they heard every word that passed between you and Ole there at the lumber car. They were hiding under the car. So you see, Al, even if Ole had waited till tonight, as you told him to, you couldn't have got away with your dirty scheme. How about it—are you going to turn Tex loose? Or do you want those boys to tell their story on the witness stand?"

Blodgett hesitated only for a moment, then beckoned to the constable. "Go down and turn Tex loose," he ordered. "Miss Mason has been telling me certain things that put an entirely different aspect on this matter. It seems that Ole deliberately shoved Tex off the sidewalk into the mud. In that case, of course, Tex couldn't be blamed for starting the scrap."

Dort grinned. "Shore Ole shoved him off'n the walk. I seen the hull thing. But I didn't say nothin', 'cause I figgered you'd be wantin' me to claim it was Tex's fault."

"Shut up, and go turn Tex loose!" Blodgett snapped and, turning on his heel, strode across to the bank.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
A SHOT IN THE NIGHT

IT was late that evening when Tex said good night to Helen on the ranch-house veranda and headed for the bunkhouse. Remembering his laundry, he turned into the trail and headed for town. Lights still burned in the pool-room, where a poker game was in session in the back room.

Al Blodgett, Rattlesnake Dort, and two others were playing pool at one of the tables as Jake Botz handed Tex the parcel of laundry.

"Jest come from the Diamond-5?" he asked.

Tex nodded. "Yeah. Happened to think of my laundry and came down to get it."

"See anything of Big Ole?"

"No," Tex grinned. "I reckon he got all he wanted this afternoon."

Botz leaned closer. "Better keep yer eyes open," he warned. "He was in here a while back, an' he's pretty well likkered up. He borried a pair of knucks off'n one of the boys, an' he throw'd his brag that he'd chop you into mincemeat with 'em. Didn't Eddie Mason tell you about them knucks, an' what Ole bragged he'd do? He was in here when Ole was shootin' off his mouth, an' I figgered he'd slip you the word. Ole'll likely be layin' fer you when you go home. He figgered you'd be down after yer worshin'."

"I haven't seen Eddie since supper," Tex said. "But if Ole ever swings on me with knucks on his fist, it'll be just too damn bad for him. I'll shoot him sure as hell!"

The words carried to the pool table, where one of the players grinned at Dort as Tex stepped out on to the street. "Yer liable to have a murder on yer hands, Rattlesnake, if that guy meets up with big Ole."

Al Blodgett hurriedly placed his cue into the rack and slipped out of the back door. Dort eyed the speaker. "Then I'll call in the Mounted. Damn if I'm goin' to git mixed up in no murder! Hell, if a man's shot one fella he shore as hell wouldn't stop at shootin' another—like if I'd try to arrest him!"

With the bundle under his arm, Tex crossed the tracks and started through the lumber-yard just as a freight train thundered through town. In the faint starlight Tex held wide of the lumber-piles, keeping an eye out for the lurking form of the big Swede. Suddenly he halted as a shot sounded above the roar of the train. Then he leaped forward, rounding the corner of a lumber-pile just in time to see a running figure halt suddenly, stare into his

face for an instant, then dash madly up the trail away from town. “Eddie!” he called. “Eddie—wait!” But the fleeing figure disappeared in the cottonwoods in the direction of the Diamond-5. Turning the corner of a pile of lumber, Tex halted abruptly and gazed down in horror at the figure that lay sprawled in the dirt—the figure of big Ole. Even before he stooped to examine him Tex knew that the man was dead. Blood oozed from the breast of his shirt, the red stream staining a broken fragment of board. As he straightened up Tex noted the metal knuckles strapped to the man’s fists.

“Good God,” he breathed, “Eddie shot him! He threatened to do it—the fool kid! This will kill Helen—Old Sam too! They think the world and all of Eddie. Helen’s been a mother to him.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Tex dashed the parcel of laundry to the ground, jerked the revolver from its holster, and tossed it between two lumber-piles. “Good thing I didn’t reload after shooting that rat this afternoon,” he breathed. “That one empty shell will tell the story.” Turning, he struck off through the cottonwoods, tossing his hat to the ground as though it had been knocked off by a low-hanging limb. Avoiding the open, he slipped to the horse corral, saddled a horse, mounted, and rode up the trail to the bench. On the rim—at exactly the spot he and Helen had pulled up and he had claimed the kiss that was his reward for winning the race the day they had become engaged—he reined in and glanced down at the Diamond-5 spread, dimly visible in the light of the winking stars.

“Good-bye, Helen,” he said in a voice that broke with a queer choking sound. “It isn’t the way we figured it—but, by God, they’ll never hang Eddie for shooting big Ole! Even if he tells ’em he did it, they won’t believe him—not with me on the run, they won’t! They’ll think he’s lying to save me.”

Then he turned and headed south—for the Montana line.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ALONE

TEX CONWAY lowered his binoculars, returned them to their leather case, and leaned back against the rock from the lee of which he had been scanning the wind-swept plain. The six tiny specks just visible to the naked eye were caribou—and caribou he must have. If only old man Hoke were here! Damn Hoke! He had promised to return from Fort Yukon by the end of January, and here it was the first of March—that is, providing he had not forgotten to tally each successive day from the first of December, when old man Hoke had left with the fur for Rampart House. Hoke had complained of a “misery in his guts” and had avowed the intention of going on from Rampart to Fort Yukon to consult a doctor. Tex wondered whether he had forgotten to mark down some of the days, especially the winter days, which are not days at all, but merely brief grey intervals in the long Arctic night.

He glanced at the low-hanging sun that illumined the glittering white expanse of plain with a cold glare that accentuated the long shadows of the black and red rock fragments. Anyway, the date did not matter—he must eat.

Mentally he took inventory of the larder of the little cabin, half dugout, half poles, that nestled against the face of a cliff on the bank of the river. Less than half a pound of tea, the shoulders and neck of an Arctic fox, and a few handfuls of flour in the bottom of the sack. That was all—except the bag of rancid seal oil that old man Hoke had obtained from an Eskimo in exchange for caribou skins. Tex shuddered at the thought of the oil. Old man Hoke had given him the bag when he left. “It hain’t good,” he explained, “an’ I don’t never eat none onlest I’ve got to—but it beats starvin’ all to hell.” This latter statement Tex had seriously doubted after one tentative sniff at the bag. But he took it nevertheless, and now he grinned sourly as he mentally listed it as food. Again his eyes sought the six dark specks far out on the plain, and he shrugged. “Two hours of daylight left at the most. No chance for a shot at them today. Tomorrow, if they feed this way, and the wind is right, maybe. But until then it’s fox and tea for mine. And if they feed the other way, it may be seal oil.”

Rising to his feet, he picked up his rifle and started for the river. He had traversed three or four miles when his attention was attracted by a blur of motion some distance ahead. Halting abruptly, he brought up his glasses and after careful scrutiny made out a snowy owl perched on an uptilted rock fragment. Cautiously he crept forward. Of all winter delicacies the snowy

owl is most to be prized, for in the far North the winter months are the months of leanness, and the snowy owl is always fat. Tex had learned, from the grudgingly imparted information of old man Hoke, and from his own experience, that a diet of lean meat alone is almost as bad as no meat at all. For one may gorge to repletion upon lean meat—gorge until his belly literally cannot hold another ounce—and get up from his meal hungry as a wolf. The last caribou he had shot, a month before, had been devoid of fat, and the foxes were all stringy and thin. He had not seen a ptarmigan in two months, and lately he had had bad luck with the fishing.

So, very carefully, he stalked the snowy owl. At a hundred yards he rested his rifle over a rock and drew his bead fine. As his finger was about to press the trigger his nerve failed. What if he should miss! He lowered the rifle, slipped his hand into his mitten, and studied the approach to a rock half-way between himself and the owl. At fifty yards, even with the wind blowing, he could be reasonably sure of his mark. He decided that he could gain the rock and, dropping to his hands and knees, worked himself into a shallow ravine and proceeded to crawl swiftly forward. He gained the rock and peered cautiously over the top. There, before him, was the fragment upon which the owl had been perched—but the owl was gone! For a half hour he scrutinized with his glass every rock within its range of vision, but no trace of the bird did he see. With an exclamation of disgust, he continued toward the river.

Swinging out of his course, he visited old man Hoke's cabin, which was situated on the shore of a small lake some four miles north of the river. With beating heart he found himself straining his eyes for sight of smoke rising from the thicket of scrub timber that sheltered the cabin of the old trapper. But no smoke rose from the thicket, and as he approached the place he cursed himself for a fool for allowing the discovery to disappoint him. He had been disappointed so many times before, but always, even in the face of repeated disappointment, he expected to find that the old man had returned. "He's got to come sometime," he muttered, "unless something has happened."

At the cabin he pushed open the door and stood staring into the interior while his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. One by one the objects took form—the bunk, the bunches of traps suspended from the ceiling, the table and the single chair, the stove, and the depleted grub-box. Old man Hoke was a close buyer. Long years of experience had taught him, almost to the ounce, how much grub would last him between his semi-annual trips to the fur post. He desired no visitors, nor did he make provision for any. Old man Hoke was sufficient unto himself.

Tex advanced and, raising the lid of the box, peered within. Salt, baking-powder, and a few pounds of flour mixed half-and-half with coarse corn meal were all the interior afforded. He took the flour and closed the lid with a bang. "I can pay him back when he brings in my supplies," he muttered, and, carefully closing the door, made his way in the gathering darkness to his own abode, the patched-up cabin of some long-forgotten prospector or trapper.

Kindling his fire, he filled a pot with ice and, when it had melted, added a shoulder of fox. The flour from old man Hoke's he hoarded with his own against a day when there should be no meat.

His supply of candles had long since been exhausted, and in the darkness of the little windowless cabin Tex threw himself on to his bunk and stared at the red glow that showed at the draught of his stove. For a long time he lay there—staring—thinking. What was the good of it all? Five months in this damned wilderness—living like a wolf in the lean lone land of cold! Eight months since that night he had saddled his horse at the Diamond-5 corral and ridden south across the Montana line—and why? All because of a shot in the dark that had left a man sprawled dead in the mud of a lumber-yard beside a railway track! And because the girl he had learned to love, as he had not known it was in the heart of man to love, must never learn the truth about that shot in the dark. Take it all in all, he had done the right thing—the only thing a man could do. It was a tough break, but he would play the game. And yet at times like this his longing for Helen Mason became almost intolerable. More than once, during the past five months, when this longing engulfed him, he had looked down the muzzle of his rifle with his toe bared for the trigger. But always something deterred him. It was not fear of death—better the oblivion of utter annihilation than the torture of hopeless longing. Somehow, it wasn't quite playing the game. Perhaps, in time, he would arrive at old man Hoke's viewpoint—become sufficient unto himself amid the thunders and the silences of the wilderness. But with the passing of the days his hatred of the unpeopled waste grew apace with the urge to mingle once more with his kind and with his almost unconquerable desire for Helen Mason—for the sight of her face, for the sound of her voice, for the touch of her hand. He even thought of returning to Blodgett and giving himself up. Imprisonment—even the rope—would be preferable to ending his days in this gaunt land of ice and rocks and little trees. He had fled the country to avoid arrest. And to give himself up to the authorities now would be to admit defeat. He could never admit defeat!

He removed the pot from the stove, lifted the fox shoulder from the water, and buried his teeth in the hot meat. It was lean and stringy and of

disagreeable flavour, but it was food, and Tex was hungry. He smiled a bit grimly as he tore the meat from the flat shoulder-blade—a cave man, that's what he was, gnawing his bone in the darkness of his den. Involuntarily his fingers sought his matted beard—a cave man, hair and all! The grin broadened. Tomorrow he would kick out some caribou shoulder-blades from under the snow and with his knife carve thereon the pictorial history of his life. There would be plenty of shoulder-blades. He had killed several caribou during the winter. One bone to an epoch. The cave men carved their records on reindeer bones. The caribou is a reindeer—and wherein did he differ from a cave man? It would give him something to do besides hunt caribou and look for gold. Let's see, where would he start? Vaguely his brain groped to fasten upon some highlight of his early years in Texas. But there did not seem to be any highlights until that fateful day he found his father's bullet-pierced body lying there in the trail—at least, none that could aspire to the dignity of being recorded upon caribou bone. His single year at the university couldn't be called a highlight. His pictorial epic should start with the body of a man lying in the dust of a trail. Then a man pitching forward from the bar to the floor of a bar-room. Then a man on a black horse with a pinto pack-horse following—a lonely grave beside a grove of pines—and Helen Mason. Then a railway track—some lumber-piles—a dead man in the mud—a bundle of laundry—a six-gun with one empty shell—a Stetson lying in the nearby cottonwoods. Then a swift ride south—a man on the rods of a freight-car—Seattle—a steamer bound north—a clumsy scow on the Yukon. A lynx-eyed policeman—a river boat—then a canoe—and a bearded man tearing boiled fox-meat from a flat bone with his teeth. That would complete the series—the story of his life—one epoch to a shoulder-bone.

Tex went to bed.

In the morning it was snowing. No use hunting caribou today. He could see scarcely twenty yards from his door, and tracks would be obliterated almost as soon as made. He was glad he couldn't hunt. He wanted to get at his carving. It was something to do! Why hadn't he thought of it before, when in sheer desperation for something to occupy his attention he had committed to memory the numbers and the lettering on the bank notes in his money-belt and every word of the fragment of old newspapers that old man Hoke had brought back from Rampart House on his last trip in. Depicting the important epochs of his own life-history on bone would be much more interesting than committing to memory the columns of a year-old newspaper.

Drawing on his parka, he stepped out into the storm, and within half an hour succeeded in kicking out from under the snow five flat bones. Laughing

like a boy, he re-entered the cabin and dried the bones beside the fire. Propping the door open for a space to admit light, he seated himself on the floor and with the point of his hunting-knife proceeded to make scratches on the flat surface of a bone. At the end of an hour he surveyed the lightly scratched lines with approval. So much for the sketch. Now for cutting the deeper lines of the permanent picture. He eyed the point of his knife dubiously. If it should be broken off or dulled, he would be seriously hampered in the skinning of caribou and the other animals he must kill for meat. The surface of the bone was hard. He dared not risk his knife. Sticking into a pole of the wall was the file he used to sharpen his axe. He reached for the file and thrust the end of it into the fire through the draught-hole of the stove. When it was red, using a rock for an anvil, he hammered its end to a sharp bevelled point with his axe. Then, using a billet of wood as a mallet, he proceeded to deepen the finely scratched lines. The work fascinated him, and it was only when darkness overtook him that he laid it aside. That night he boiled the rest of his fox and thought with resentment that on the morrow he must hunt.

Luck favoured him that day. He had swung around by Hoke's cabin, hoping against hope that the old trapper had returned. But the cabin was empty. As he was leaving it he spied two young bull caribou crossing an arm of a small lake. Slipping swiftly around through the scrub, he concealed himself and shot them both before they left the ice. The remainder of the day was spent in skinning them and hauling the meat and hides on the hand-sled to his cabin.

During the daylight hours of the two succeeding days he worked industriously at his chiselling. Toward noon of the third day he paused abruptly and scowled. He, Tex Conway, late wagon boss of the Diamond-5, squatting on the floor of a windowless hovel well within the Arctic Circle, pounding grooves in a piece of bone! "To hell with it!" he cried in sudden fury. "What's the good of it all? I'm a fool! I've got to go somewhere—see someone!" But where? Where could a man go who was wanted for murder? He strove to remember what old man Hoke had told him of the lower Yukon. That was American territory—Alaska. He need have no fear of the Mounted in Alaska.

Once again his fingers sought the beard that covered his face. Surely no one who had ever known him would recognize, in the bearded, skin-clothed figure, the range-riding Tex Conway. Why not take a chance? Slip over on to the Yukon, mingle with the new-comers of the gold rush, work with them throughout the summer, and go outside in the fall. Once back in the States, he would be reasonably safe. The crime, in all probability, had been long

forgotten, except, perhaps, in Blodgett and its immediate vicinity. The victim had been only a teamster.

Tex rose abruptly to his feet. "I'll be damned if I'll spend the rest of my days living like a wolf for any drunken teamster!" he cried aloud, and, pacing up and down in the dark little room, tried in vain to remember whether old man Hoke had named any gold strikes on the lower Yukon. Probably not, for Hoke was sparing of his words. He had said, though, that Rampart House was fifteen or twenty days away, winter travel. And the Yukon was far beyond Rampart. But fifteen or twenty days for Hoke, mushing with dogs, might easily stretch itself into twice as many days for him, pulling his outfit on a hand sled. "I'll take a chance," he muttered between clenched teeth. "By God, I'll go! Even if I don't make it, or if they pick me up, it won't be any worse than this!" He kicked the caribou bones into a corner and spent the remaining hours of daylight in overhauling his outfit.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CONFESSION

AT daylight the following morning Tex closed the door of his cabin behind him and struck out, pulling the hand sled upon which were lashed his few remaining ounces of tea, all that remained of his flour, and some sixty or seventy pounds of caribou meat from which the bones had been carefully removed to save weight. To this was added his axe, an Eskimo-tanned caribou skin, and two rabbit robes. The rancid seal oil he left in the cabin.

He headed northward to Hoke's cabin, on the chance that the old trapper had returned with the supplies. Finding it empty, he swung back to the river and struck westward toward Alaska.

Going was good over the wind-packed snow, and night found him some fifteen miles down-river. He camped in a clump of stunted willows beside a tiny creek, drank a pot of tea, and ate boiled meat and bannocks made from the last of his flour.

The two succeeding days were a repetition of the first, and on the morning of the fourth day he awoke in the midst of a howling blizzard. For three days the storm continued with unabated fury, and Tex, holed up in his rabbit robes beneath a snowdrift in the lee of a huge rock, gnawed frozen meat and wished he could build a fire.

There followed several days of fair weather, during which he made heavy going, dragging his sled through the new snow that gripped and dragged at the runners.

By the evening of the tenth day out he figured that he had made about a hundred miles. Climbing the crest of a ridge, he paused in the rapidly gathering darkness to survey the trail ahead. As he was about to begin his descent, his shoulders straightened abruptly as he strained his eyes toward a clump of timber at a bend of the river a half mile away. There it was again, the tiny flicker of a fire, appearing and disappearing from out the blackness of the dense growth. "Old man Hoke!" he cried aloud. "It's time he was showing up!" and was startled by the sound of his own voice, which seemed to boom through the silence of the night. "I'll take what I need of my supplies for the trail and let him keep the rest. It'll be easier from here on. I'll have his back trail to follow until the next storm blots it out."

Descending the ridge, he pushed on, and half an hour later he left his sled on the river, ascended the bank at the clump of spruce, and amid a

commotion of growling dogs stepped abruptly into the circle of firelight. But the dogs were not old man Hoke's dogs, nor was the face that smiled up at him from beside the fire the face of old man Hoke.

A word of command sent the dogs about their business, and the lone camper greeted his visitor as he replenished the fire from a small pile of wood near at hand. "Had supper?" he asked, and, even as he spoke, reached for the teapot.

"No. I was about to camp when I caught the glint of your fire from the top of the ridge. I thought it was old man Hoke."

"Where's your outfit?"

"Right here at the foot of the bank — —"

"But, man, you're not travellin' without dogs!"

Tex nodded. "Only a hand sled. How far do you call it to the Yukon?"

"A hundred miles or so. A hell of a ways to pull a hand sled."

Tex grinned. "I've pulled it that far already, and it gets lighter every time I eat. I figured on picking up supplies at Rampart House."

"How much grub you got?"

"I must have nearly fifty pounds of caribou meat left, and maybe a handful of tea. And that reminds me that I'm ready to eat right now." He turned toward the bank to get his sled, but the other motioned him to be seated.

"Never mind that. I just got through boilin' up some meat, an' this tea'll be ready in a minute, and here's some rice an' prunes to warm up."

Tex had felt an instant liking for this stranger with the keen, kindly eyes and the neatly trimmed moustache heavily shot with grey. Here was a man of his kind. Not one who, like old man Hoke, was taciturn to the point of surliness, and who was as niggardly with his words as he was with his possessions. Here was a man to whom he could talk, and who would talk in return. He felt an overwhelming desire to talk to this traveller of the wastes — this trapper, or trader, or prospector who so handsomely was playing host. Words pent up by long months of restraint trembled upon his lips as he seated himself beside the little fire. "Conway is my name—Tom Conway. I've been prospecting a hundred miles or so up the river . . ." He paused abruptly. Was it something he saw in the eyes of his listener, or was it just the sudden realization that a man who is a fugitive from the law should not go about the country introducing himself by name? The fact that he had put many miles between himself and the little town of Blodgett had given him a certain sense of security, especially among lone outlanders like old man

Hoke and this stranger, neither one of whom in all probability had even heard of Blodgett, Saskatchewan.

Among the hobos he had encountered on the train as he beat his way westward to Seattle, among the passengers on the boat that took him to Skagway, on the long trip through the lakes and down the Yukon, and later in Dawson, he had kept pretty much to himself. At Chilkoot Summit he had checked in with the border police as James Smith and let it go at that. During his brief sojourn in Dawson he had maintained the alias.

But he had unhesitatingly told old man Hoke his name, and it had meant nothing to him, and it undoubtedly meant nothing to the man who sat beside him here at the fire. Tex had had no schooling in the business of being an outlaw, but he wished he had been a trifle less frank in his introduction. He proceeded after a slight pause: "Old man Hoke lives on a lake way back there, and I patched up an old cabin on the river just south of him."

"Grub's ready. You must be hungry. While you eat I'll get your sled up here. Can't trust these dogs with fifty pounds of fresh meat where they could get at it."

Tex ate his meal and cleaned the dishes while the other hauled his sled up the bank and gathered some more firewood. Then both filled their pipes. As the man tossed the burning twig back into the fire, he blew a plume of blue smoke from his lungs and eyed his visitor quizzically. "So your name's Conway?" he said in a tone in which kindness blended with curiosity. "It couldn't be Tex Conway, could it?"

The younger man's eyes leaped to the other's face. "You've heard — —"

"Yes," interrupted the other, "I've heard of you. You're wanted down in Saskatchewan in connection with a murder, the details of which I don't remember—only the name, and, roughly, the description. I'm Sergeant Mayfair, of the Mounted Police. It is my duty to place you under arrest and to warn you that anything you say may be used against you."

For the space of moments Tex sat staring into the fire. Well, it was all over. The thing from which he had been fleeing for eight long months had overtaken him at last. He had endured those eight months of hell—of snow, and cold, and darkness—all for nothing. He might better have surrendered to Rattlesnake Dort in the first place and had it over with. But no. It would have been harder—much harder—then. Now the arrest came almost as a relief. Any ordeal he must face would be better than living up here on the rim of the Arctic with no one to talk to and nothing to do but think, think. In all probability they would hang him. The Blodgetts would see to that. He remembered the metal knuckles strapped to big Ole's dead hands. Those

weapons might influence the jury to leniency—unless Rattlesnake Dort or some other minion of the Blodgetts' had removed them. Life imprisonment, perhaps. But life imprisonment would be better than this. He would at least be among his kind.

To his surprise, Tex realized that with his arrest had come a strange sense of relief. He was not yet through. He still had his part to play, and he would play that part gamely to the end. He smiled into the face of the officer as he broke the silence.

"I—I did it, all right. I killed him. You're welcome to use anything I say any way you want to. I'm going to tell the judge everything I'm telling you, anyway. I'll not put up any defence. I'll plead guilty and take what's coming to me. But I'm going to talk! Lord, man, you're the only person I've laid eyes on in months that I could talk to! Old man Hoke don't count. It's like talking to a rock. He listens without any sign that he hears what you're saying, and he won't talk—a word now and then, when it's absolutely necessary, or a grunt, and that's all. Wouldn't let me pitch camp within two miles of his. Said he didn't want to be crowded. Threatened to move on because he didn't want to live in the middle of 'no dam' settlemint.' I'll burst if I don't talk! I shot big Ole. He was a roustabout and teamster. He stepped out from behind a lumber pile, and I shot him dead."

Sergeant Mayfair puffed at his pipe. "Any witnesses?" he asked.

"No. It was at night—quite dark. I had to pass through this lumber-yard beside the railway track on my way to the ranch. I'd picked up my laundry at the pool-room and was carrying it home. I was range foreman for Old Sam Mason's Diamond-5 outfit. I shot him. Then I dropped my package of laundry and ran. I lost my hat too. A limb knocked it off when I plunged into a grove of cottonwoods!"

"An' the gun—did you drop the gun too?"

Tex was aware of the scrutiny of the shrewd grey eyes. "Yes—sure, I threw away the gun. I tossed it between two lumber-piles and then ran into the cottonwood grove."

Sergeant Mayfair—Old Man Mayfair, as he was affectionately known to superiors and subordinates alike—was regarded by all who knew him as one of the wisest officers in the service. A sergeant at twenty-five, he remained still a sergeant though time had touched his hair with silver and each year added honour to his unsullied record. Stubbornly and consistently he had refused promotion. His superiors accepted his refusal at its face value. "The higher up you go, the sooner you get chained to a desk. I'm no office policeman. I'm an outland man—an' the farther out the better."

The old officer refilled his pipe. "You say you're not goin' to put up any defence. You didn't kill him just for fun?"

"Oh no. We'd had a fight on the street that afternoon, and I knocked him through a window. Then he got liquored up and borrowed a pair of brass knuckles from a local lad and threatened in the pool-room to chop me to mincemeat. When I called there for my laundry the proprietor told me how he had boasted, and I told him that if big Ole jumped me with the knucks I'd shoot him dead. And that's just what I did. They'll have a clear case against me. They can easily establish a motive. It's all right. I did it, and I'll take what's coming to me without whimpering. They'll either hang me or they won't. If they don't hang me, they'll either send me up for life or they won't. If they send me up for life, I'll either get pardoned sometime or I won't."

Sergeant Mayfair smiled. "Sort of fatalistic philosophy, ain't it?"

Tex shrugged. "Maybe. But that's what it boils down to."

For several moments Mayfair smoked in silence. Finally he asked: "What kind of a gun did you shoot him with—what calibre?"

"A forty-four Colt—frontier model. The same gun I shot a man with in Texas—the man who murdered my dad. He had his gun out when I shot. I wasn't even arrested for that." He hesitated, then continued: "They doubtless found the gun. They can use it as evidence along with my laundry, and my hat. All three items can be identified as belonging to me."

Abruptly Mayfair changed the subject. "I've got to take you with me. But I'm on a long patrol that will take me to Fort McPherson on the Mackenzie. Then across to Dawson. There's diphtheria in the country. Old man Hoke died of it at Fort Yukon, over on the American side. They operated on him for appendicitis, then he got diphtheria. There have been other deaths—mostly Injuns. I've got antitoxin units with me, an' I'm doctorin' those that have it an' leavin' a little of the stuff here an' there where they might need it later. There's no use leavin' it with the Injuns. They wouldn't follow directions. An' we probably won't run on to many white men till we get to the Mackenzie. With what grub we've both got, an' what we can kill as we go along, we'll have enough. We'll be headin' on upriver in the mornin'."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE WORD OF A GENTLEMAN

CAMP was broken at daylight. Tex's sled was abandoned and his outfit added to the load which was pulled by the eight big dogs. They headed back up the Porcupine for the purpose of visiting the Indians and any white trappers that might be living along the river or its tributaries.

The two made good time, considering the shortness of the days, and sometimes, when the snow conditions permitted, they travelled long into the dark. For the most part, though, they camped where darkness overtook them rather than risk the loss of the outfit through the thin ice of a snow-covered rapid or by having it smashed against some hidden rock. And after the evening meal there was generally an hour or two of odds and ends to be attended to—the cooking of dog food, the overhauling of the outfit, the mending of clothing or harness.

“You got a good ways north for anyone that don't know the country,” observed Sergeant Mayfair one evening, as the two sat smoking beside their fire on the bank of the river. “Where were you headin' for?”

Tex smiled. “I wasn't heading for any place. I just kept on the move, with my back toward Saskatchewan. I had been range foreman for Sam Mason, as I told you. The Diamond-5 home ranch is right on the edge of the town of Blodgett. That night, after—after killing the teamster, I hit for the corral, threw my saddle on a horse, and hit south for the Montana line. At Chinook I caught a freight and beat my way to Seattle. There I heard of the gold strike in the Klondike and caught a boat for Skagway. I got an outfit at Dyea and came in over the Chilkoot. Another chap and I bought a boat on Lake Lindemon and came on through to Dawson. Then one day, in the Tivoli Saloon, I saw a policeman eyeing me pretty carefully, so I slipped out, bought a canoe and some grub, and hit down-river. At Fort Yukon I overheard some men talking about a strike an old fellow named Porcupine Jack had made somewhere up the Porcupine, so I took on some supplies and hit up this river. I got more supplies at Rampart House and shoved on. When the river froze I holed up in an abandoned cabin. I wintered there, but with no one else in the country except a few Indians and old man Hoke, the loneliness got me—and I decided to hit back for the Yukon. Anything—even arrest and conviction—would be better than that damned loneliness. Then I ran on to you, and—well, here I am. And I'm damned glad of it! I'm tired of it all. I'm through.”

“How old are you, Tex?”

The unexpected use of the nickname drew the younger man’s eyes to the officer’s face. “Twenty-three,” he answered.

“You must have changed quite a bit since you shot that man who murdered your dad.”

“Changed? What do you mean? You never — ”

“No,” interrupted Mayfair. “I never laid eyes on you till you walked into my camp a few nights ago. But just the same, I know you’ve changed. A man your age who had guts enough to shoot it out with a murderer certainly wasn’t no quitter — yet you’re quittin’ now — quittin’ cold.”

The tone of the man’s voice brought a quick flush to the younger man’s cheeks. He stifled an angry retort and settled back on to his robe with a shrug. “Yes,” he said in a dry, toneless voice, “I’ve probably changed quite a bit. Between you and me, let’s just forget it. We’ll charge it up to the loneliness and let it go at that. It’s going to be cold as hell tonight. How about giving that antitoxin a little extra wrapping? I don’t know whether freezing will hurt it or not, but it’s just as well not to take any chances.”

The officer assented. “Instructions are not to let it freeze, but to use it just the same if it does. I’ve kept it from freezing so far, an’ an extra wrappin’ won’t hurt any.”

Sergeant Mayfair frankly liked his prisoner, and for a long time after they had crawled into their beds he lay awake, thinking.

Several days later, many miles beyond the shack where Tex had wintered, they came upon the cabin of a white trapper. Smoke rose from the chimney, and in response to Mayfair’s knock the door was opened by a bright-eyed little boy of some six or seven years.

“Come in quick!” he said. “There ain’t much wood left, and my daddy and mama will get cold. They’re sick.” The two stepped across the sill, the youngster closed the door, and as their eyes became accustomed to the gloom of the interior they made out the forms of a man and a woman lying beneath the covers of a double bunk built against an end wall.

Mayfair stepped swiftly across the room and a moment later turned to Tex. “We’ve run on to it,” he explained tersely. “An’ if I’m any judge, it’s mighty bad.”

For answer, Tex grasped the officer’s arm just above the elbow, propelled him toward the door, opened it, and, pushing him out into the snow, closed the door behind them. So swift and well-timed was the movement that Mayfair had no chance to resist. But even as he was being pushed through the doorway the thought flashed into his brain—quitter—

yellow—won't face the music! Angrily he whirled upon the younger man, who stood with his back against the closed door. The words that had leaped to his tongue were never uttered, for the eyes that met his were not the eyes of a quitter, and the voice that sounded in his ears was a voice of authority—the voice of one in the habit of issuing orders and of having those commands obeyed. "This is my job, Mayfair. You stay out of this cabin!"

"What—what do you mean?" cried the officer, his eyes wide with astonishment. Never, in all the long years of his service, had a prisoner taken matters into his own hands and, in tones of authority, issued orders as though he expected to be obeyed.

"I mean just what I said—that this is my job, not yours. Step lively now—break out that antitoxin and tell me what to do with it. Then you set up the tent and take the little shaver with you. I'll stay with the patients and do everything that can be done—"

"But why? It's what I'm here for—to handle just such cases as this."

"Good God, man, you might get it! Diphtheria is highly contagious!"

"I'm no more apt to get it than you are—not nearly so apt. They gave me some shots of toxin-antitoxin three or four months ago."

"Fine—if it works. But no prophylactic is infallible. In all probability, you are ninety-per-cent immune. Even so, there remains that fatal ten per cent."

"But you're almost sure to get it!"

Tex laughed shortly and met the officer's gaze squarely. "What if I do?" he asked. "What difference would it make? What have I got ahead of me? Life imprisonment—a rope, maybe. As I told you the other night, I'm through. But you're not through—by a damn sight! Think, man—this is not the end of your job. It may be only the beginning. There may be other cases—probably are—scattered here and there in this damned wilderness. With your experience and your knowledge of the country, you can get to them. I couldn't. If you should kick out, and the man and woman too, the chances are that, with the little kid on my hands, I'd never make the Mackenzie—might not even make it back to the Yukon. Don't be stubborn, Mayfair. There may be lives depending on your going through with this patrol."

For a single instant the eyes of the two men met, and Sergeant Mayfair reached out impulsively and grasped the hand of his prisoner in a mighty grip. "Have it that way, then," he growled, and, turning, loosed the lashings of the sled.

Thrusting the package containing the antitoxin into the younger man's hand, he gave minute instructions as to its use and proceeded to set up his

tent and make a camp for himself and the little boy, who appeared presently, dressed for the outdoors, and proceeded to add his little best to the work at hand.

The man in the bunk died within the hour. After carrying the body outside, Tex turned his attention to saving the life of the woman.

He had applied heroic treatment—fifty thousand units directly into the vein of her arm and forty thousand more into the muscles of her back. Despite the fact that a partial paralysis had set in, Tex noted a change for the better under the influence of the powerful antitoxin. By midnight the false membrane had showed no further spread, and that already formed was becoming detached and thrown off by the patient. The feeble pulse beat a bit stronger, and the patient fell into a troubled sleep.

In a chair beside the bed, Tex dozed fitfully. In the morning the woman was able to swallow a few spoonfuls of caribou broth. Later in the day she beckoned him close and, with the greatest difficulty, asked after the little boy—Billy, she called him. Upon assurance that he was all right, she closed her eyes with a vast sense of relief. “He had it—diphtheria—five or six weeks ago—got well—then we got it—four days—and Billy—” Her voice trailed off into silence, and Tex begged her not to try to talk and again assured her that the little boy was all right.

For two days he watched over his patient, never leaving her except during brief periods of sleep, while outside Sergeant Mayfair fetched the wood and water and busied himself in burning a grave into the frozen ground.

The young woman interested Tex. She seemed somehow vastly superior to her surroundings. Obeying his injunction, she spoke sparingly, but those few words were well chosen and correctly spoken. Not once did she mention her husband. She evidently knew that he was dead, and apparently her thoughts were centred entirely upon the little boy. Several times Tex saw a smile flicker on the wan lips as the sound of the small voice floated in from the outside. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, in the midst of what was apparently rapid improvement, she died.

“Her heart let go, I guess,” Tex explained to Mayfair, and set about the fumigation of the cabin. Later he joined the officer in the widening of the grave.

Thorough search failed to discover any hint as to the identity of the dead couple, whom design, rather than chance, had evidently placed in this far corner of the world. There were no letters, and only three books. An anthology of poetry, a copy of *Lorna Doone*, and a volume entitled *The*

Family Physician. From each of these the upper half of the flyleaf had been carefully removed.

“I’m glad we didn’t find out who they were,” announced Tex at the conclusion of the search.

“Why?” Mayfair asked.

“Just because they didn’t want us to know. That’s reason enough for me.”

And Sergeant Mayfair nodded thoughtfully as he recorded the facts in his diary. Finally he returned the book to his pocket and filled his pipe. “We’re in a nice jam now,” he said, with a jerk of a thumb in the direction of the boy who lay asleep in his own bunk. “We can’t drag that little shaver over the trail we’ve got ahead of us. And we can’t leave him here.”

Tex looked the officer squarely in the eye. “Will you accept my word—the word of a cowboy?”

Mayfair paused, a smile flickering at the corners of his lips. “About some things—yes. What are you goin’ to say?”

“Why not leave me here with the youngster while you carry on with your patrol? There may be people needing you, beyond. I’ll give you my word that I’ll be here when you come for me. I’ll consider myself on parole.”

“Your word is good,” answered the officer gravely. “You call it the word of a cowboy. I’m takin’ the word of a gentleman. I don’t know what Ottawa would say about turnin’ loose a man wanted for murder—but Ottawa’s a long ways off.”

“You’re not turning me loose,” reminded Tex with dignity. “My word is at least as good as the iron bars of your jail.”

“So I judge. There’s grub enough here, an’ game’ll be plenty in a few weeks. I’ll leave you some of the antitoxin. You know the symptoms—watch yourself and catch it in time.”

Tex grinned. “They say a man who is his own doctor has a fool for a patient.”

“A true enough sayin’ back in the Provinces. But if it was true out here, we’d all be fools north of sixty. I’ll pull out in the mornin’. An’ sometime I’ll come back.”

On the first night out, in his camp some twenty miles east of the plague cabin, Sergeant Mayfair sat staring for a long time into the blaze of his little fire. It was a pose characteristic of the old officer, and it was characteristic, too, that he should consider his problems aloud. “There’s more to it than just

the killin' of a teamster. A man like him don't lay for a man an' shoot him down in the dark because he's been threatened. An' if the fellow had attacked him, an' he'd killed him in self-defence, he wouldn't have run away. He's lyin'—but what for? Lyin' like a gentleman, as they say, to protect someone else, prob'ly. But who? An' why? That's what I've got to find out. He told me the *facts*, maybe—but he didn't tell me the *story*—not by a damn sight! An' the way he told it, it's a set of fact that any jury would convict him on. He could fool a jury into believin' he's guilty. But he can't fool me. I've heard too many of 'em own up to their crimes. No one ever confessed a murder like that—he done it backwards. The fact that the man had threatened him was an afterthought. An' he mentioned it as establishin' a motive—not as an excuse. An' leavin' his laundry there, an' his hat—he took pains I should know that. An' his gun too. He's no fool an' only a fool would have left his laundry an' his hat an' his gun right on the spot to be picked up an' identified by the first person to come along. He was plantin' evidence against himself. It's an interestin' case—a case that needs lookin' into. Poor devil, he ain't used to bein' alone. It was beginnin' to get him. He don't care a damn about the trail ahead, an' that's bad—fer a young man. There's a woman in it somewhere—that's sure. What is it the Frenchmen say? *Cherchez la femme*—it's damn good advice. I will."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PARDNERS

AS SERGEANT MAYFAIR disappeared into the sparse spruce timber on the morning of his departure, Tex and the little boy waved good-bye and turned to the cabin. As he closed the door the man addressed the little chap with a smile. "Well, Billy, what's on the programme for today?"

"What's a programme? We ain't got any of them."

Tex assented. "That's so, we haven't. But we're going to have. Come to think of it, that's what's been the matter with me for the past eight months—I haven't had any programme."

The boy was all attention, his eyes on the man's face. "Oh, good! We'll go hunting an' maybe we can shoot one. My daddy lets me shoot the twenty-two. And once I killed a rabbit. That'll be fun! But where we going to find it? My daddy shot bears and caribous an' wolves an' foxes. But he never shot any programmes."

Tex smiled. "A programme," he explained, "is something you carry out — —"

"Like slops?"

The smile beneath Tex's beard widened. "No, not something you carry out and throw away—like slops. It's something you decide on and then follow out."

"Oh, like a caribou trail?" cut in the boy. "I know how to do that. My daddy and I've killed lots of caribou."

"Well, not exactly like a caribou trail. It's like this. You and I have certain things to do each day. There are dishes to wash, and the floor to sweep, and the wood to get, and the meals to cook — —"

"And the traps to look at!"

"Why, yes, the traps. Only I don't know just how we're goin' to manage the traps." Tex was thinking of old man Hoke's long trap line that took a week to go over. "You see, I don't know where the traps are, and even if I did, you're too little to follow a trap line. And I couldn't leave you here alone for a week at a time."

"But you don't have to stay for a week," explained the little fellow eagerly. "My daddy used to be gone a long time to look at the traps, and my mama didn't want to stay here with nobody but just me, and so my daddy

changed his traps so he can get home every night. But he ain't looked at 'em for a long time because he got sick."

"All right, we'll add the traps to the programme—that is, if the trail hasn't been snowed under. Oh, you and I'll have quite a programme. It'll keep us pretty busy."

"And I can help, can't I? I can wipe the dishes, and I could put 'em away, but the shelf's too high. And I can carry in the wood. But I can't chop it because I'm too little and I might chop my foot. And I can help with the traps. My daddy used to take me lots of times. I get tired after a while and he lets me ride on the sled. I ain't very heavy. Daddy has to pull the sled now. We ain't got any more dogs. Murphy went crazy, and Tom got his foot in a wolf-trap, and Nellie ran away with the wolves. Daddy sees her tracks sometimes and the tracks of the big white wolf."

"White wolf, eh?"

"Yes, he's most all white. Daddy saw him and Nellie too, one night, over on the ridge. Nellie had been gone a long time, and he called her and she pretty near came, but she kept running back to the big white wolf, and he wouldn't come, and at last he ran away, and after a while Nellie ran after him and she wouldn't come back. Daddy wants her back awful bad 'cause he said if she'd have some puppies they'd be the best puppies there is."

"Well, we'll just add Nellie and the big white wolf to our programme."

"Oh, and if we get the puppies, can I have one—for all my own?"

Tex smiled down into the eager face. "Why, they'll all be yours. This whole outfit is yours—the cabin, and the fur in the cache, and the traps—everything."

The boy pondered the words. Presently he asked: "Well, what have you got?"

Tex laughed. "Oh, I haven't got anything. I'm just here to kind of look after things till Sergeant Mayfair gets back."

"When's he comin' back?"

"I don't know."

"You goin' away then?"

"Yes, I'll have to go with him."

"Don't you want to go?"

The man hesitated over the reply. "Why—I suppose so. It doesn't make any difference whether I want to or not. I've got to."

"I don't want you to go away. I like you. And I don't want all the puppies, and all the fur, and all the cabin. We'll be pardners, and you can

have half and I can have half, and if my daddy and my mama come back they can have half, and we'll all have half. Do you think they'll come back?"

"No, kid, they won't come back," answered Tex. "You see, they—they kicked out—they're dead."

"Where do they go when they're dead?"

"I don't know, son. They go—and I guess that's about all anyone knows."

"I wish they'd taken me." The small voice quavered, and Tex noted that the eyes blinked rapidly. "I like my daddy and my mama. They're good. You're good too. I like you. I ain't goin' to cry. My daddy says I'm a little tillicum, and tillicums don't cry."

"A what?"

"A tillicum. That means a good man—like a sourdough. You're a tillicum too, and we'll be pardners."

"All right, tillicum," said the man, "put her there. You've got guts!" He took the small hand in his own and shook it. "Look here," he added, "when you shake hands with a man, grab hold of his hand like you meant it. There—that's better."

"What do you shake hands for?"

"Why, that sort of binds the bargain. We're partners now."

"What's guts?"

"Same thing as nerve," grinned Tex. "If a man's got guts he's a good man—a tillicum."

"You've got guts too," announced the youngster in a tone of conviction.

"I hope so," answered the man dryly. "God knows I'll need 'em."

"Catching the white wolf and Nellie?"

"Yes—maybe."

"What's your name?" asked the boy suddenly.

"Tex. You can call me Tex."

"My name's Billy Jones, and I'm seven. It didn't use' to be Billy Jones. My daddy told me to forget my other name, but I didn't. It use' to be—"

"Hold on!" The man's words cut sharply, and the boy looked up in surprise. "Don't you ever tell that other name. Remember your daddy told you to forget it. That means he didn't want you ever to tell it to anybody. He had his reasons that you and I don't know anything about. But we do know that he wanted you not to tell it. Do you know what a promise is?"

“Yes, it’s when you say you’ll do something and then you’ve got to.”

“That’s it. And remember that a good man—a tillicum—a man that’s got guts—always keeps a promise. Now I want you to promise me you’ll never tell anybody what your name used to be.”

“All right. I won’t ever tell.”

“That’s the way to talk. And remember, your name is Billy Jones—and that’s the only name you ever had.”

“Yes, it’s Billy Jones. And your name is Tex. And we’re pardners.”

“That’s right.”

In the midst of the dish-washing the boy paused to ask: “What do you wear whiskers all over your face for?”

Tex smiled. “Don’t you like ’em?”

“I can’t see your face very good. My daddy use’ to shave his whiskers off. He’s got a shaver, an’ it’s sharp as hell, he says, and I can’t monkey with it. And he slathers his face all up with a brush and some soap, and then he shaves. He keeps it in there.” The boy indicated the top drawer of a home made dresser. “Ain’t you got any shaver?”

“I used to have, but I threw it away.”

“Was it broke?”

“No. It wasn’t broken. I didn’t think I’d need it any more. But it don’t make any difference now. After we finish these dishes I think I’ll shave. Your daddy wouldn’t care if I used his razor, I know.”

“No, he wouldn’t care. Only me—I’m too little and I might cut myself, but you won’t cut yourself, will you?”

“I guess not. But first I’ve got to find a pair of scissors. This beard’s too long to tackle with a razor.”

The boy produced a pair of scissors from a bark basket that contained some unfinished sewing and watched with interest while Tex sheared off his beard and shaved the stubble from his face. “How do you like me now?” he asked, when the operation was completed.

“Oh, I like it better! Come on, let’s do some more programme. We’ll cut some wood. You chop it with the axe, and I’ll carry it in the house. That’s the way Daddy and I use’ to do. Only he called it chores.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE EDUCATION OF BILLY JONES

THE daylight hours of the next ten days were spent in tracing out the trap lines of the dead trapper. These trap lines had been ingeniously laid in intersecting semi-circles which very thoroughly covered the territory within a radius of ten miles of the cabin, yet allowed the trapper's return each night. For the most part the trails were still visible, but in places they had been obliterated for long stretches by drifting snow. In more than one instance, however, Billy was able to follow the trail from memory to a point where it could again be picked up.

Under Tex's words of commendation the boy's eyes would sparkle happily, the tired little shoulders would stiffen with pride, and never, until the man picked him up and took off his tiny snowshoes and placed him on the sled, would the boy abandon the trail. At such times he would fall asleep almost immediately, snuggling warmly in the fur robes on the jolting sled, until he awoke in his bunk with the odour of cooking in his nostrils.

Twice the two ran across the trail of the bitch Nellie and the big white wolf, and once, as Tex was returning to the cabin with the boy asleep on the sled, just at dusk, he caught sight of them on the rim of a rock ridge that paralleled a small river.

Each day found the two busy cutting wood, snaring rabbits, or running the trap lines, and more than once as he returned in the evening the man smiled to himself at thought of his own neglected prospecting and wondered at his newly awakened interest in the very things that had made his existence such an intolerable bore. "It's on account of the kid," he explained to himself. "I promised Mayfair I'd look after him, and I haven't got any right to sit around and let his traps get snowed under. He hasn't got a soul in the world, and the little shaver's going to need every cent he can get hold of—only seven years old, and he's got to buck the big game all alone. He'll win, too. I wish I could . . ." His thoughts trailed off into a misty future that had to do with stout iron bars and grey walls.

One night a wolverine climbed one of the posts and broke into the meat cache. Tex shot the brute, and the next two days were spent in remodelling the cache, extending the floor to project beyond the posts, which they peeled and greased with the fat from the wolverine. Later they traded the skin to a band of Eskimo for ten times its trading-post value, as it happened to be one

of the “fashionable” straw-coloured pelts much sought after by the coast dwellers for trimming for their clothing.

Each day the sun swung a trifle higher, the hours of daylight lengthened, and furious blizzards alternated with stretches of mild weather that softened snow and slowed up the work on the trap lines. One moonlight night, when the cold had stiffened the snow, the two spent several hours coasting with the hand sled on the smooth slope of a hill near the cabin. It was Billy’s first experience in the business of having fun. The idea of a grown man sliding downhill for the sport of the thing was evidently a novel one for the boy, and his pleasure added keen enjoyment to the sport for the man. Thereafter, whenever possible, the two would spend an hour flying swiftly down the long slope and laboriously hauling the sled to the top for another go.

Toward the first of May patches of bare ground began to show on south hillsides, and one day Tex shot a barren ground grizzly which had just emerged, fat and hungry, from his long hibernation.

On several occasions they ran across the tracks of the bitch, always accompanied by those of the big white wolf. “They’re hanging around here,” Tex said, “and pretty soon, now, they ought to den up. If we can find their den on one of these rock ridges we can probably dig it out and get Nellie and her puppies—and if we’re lucky, we may get a shot at the big white wolf himself.”

“Oh, and we’ll save his hide for a robe, and we’ll keep all the puppies, ’cause my daddy said they’d be the best dogs in the world. How many puppies will there be?”

“I don’t know. Four or five—maybe more.”

“What does a den look like?”

“I don’t know that, either. I guess it’s just a hole in the ground, or maybe a sort of cave among the rocks. We’ll move around along these ridges, and maybe we’ll find it. I want to see what those puppies will be like.”

As more bare ground appeared, Tex found himself wondering what had become of Sergeant Mayfair. For with the passing of the days he had come more and more to realize that life was not the drab span of existence he had come to regard it. He had begun to take keen interest in the world about him—a grim and a harsh world, to be sure, and a world of austere limitation. He realized that the thing he had undertaken as a matter of duty had become the thing he would now do as a matter of choice. *Billy needed him*. In a sense he had appreciated the fact when he volunteered to look out for the boy during the officer’s absence, but the need that occurred to him then was the mere temporary need of attending to the boy’s physical wants. Gradually,

however, association with the little fellow had engendered a realization that here was a bit of humanity that stood alone at the very threshold of life—a man in the making—a good man—possibly a big man. The indomitable pluck that had held back the tears at the death of his parents because “tillicums don’t cry” should go a long way, if properly directed, in the building of a real man.

Tex found himself wishing that he could have the directing of the formative years of the youngster’s life. If only he could—he and Helen Mason—

At thought of the girl his lips pressed tight, and for a long time he sat in the silence of the little cabin, thinking. But his thoughts brought him nothing of comfort, and again his future loomed before him, a thing of grey walls and iron bars. At least he could put the boy through school. Thank God he had money. Fourteen of the fifteen thousand-dollar bills were still in his money-belt. Enough to insure the lad an education and give him a start in life. He swore softly to himself: “But what an education! He’ll be simply one of a class. They’ll probably turn him out an average citizen—no better, no worse than his class fellows—one of the herd, that’s all, and it’s a *damned shame!*” At the sharp exclamation the little fellow stirred in his sleep, and Tex blew out the candle and went to bed.

Most of the traps were taken up, and the time thus saved was divided between searching the ridges and hillsides for the den of Nellie and the white wolf and the beginning of the formal education of Billy Jones.

Tex did not know just where to start in this matter of education. He found that the boy knew his letters, could pick them out of the words in the books with unfailing accuracy, and could print them out with a pencil. Also he could combine them into a few short words. This much his mother had taught him, and she had taught him to count up to one hundred. He noted that the boy could apply numbers to objects—three or five caribou—and he could carefully count traps and furs. Of money he knew nothing.

In the boy’s mind necessary supplies were bought with furs. The supplies had a definite value because they had a definite use. And the furs had a definite value: people made clothing out of them. The boy could readily see that if one person had many furs but no flour and sugar, and another had much flour and sugar but no furs, that the logical thing to do was to trade, so that each should have sufficient of either commodity. But money had no value. Tex showed him the few loose coins he carried in his pocket and the paper money he carried in the leather belt he wore beneath his clothing, carefully explaining their value. He told how much of this or that could be obtained at the post in exchange for the money. Billy accepted

the value arbitrarily because Tex told him it was there—but he could not understand why Mr. Gaudet, the trader, should want the round metal disks, or the oblongs of paper, that could neither be eaten nor worn. The explanation that Gaudet could exchange them for other commodities got no farther than to pass the buck to the next man for making a bad bargain. “All of which,” grinned Tex to himself, “is, in its ultimate analysis, quite reasonable.”

Tex got along better with geography, which, he argued, like charity, should begin at home. He drew rough maps of the country with which the boy was familiar, and the little fellow was quick to grasp their significance. History got along all right, consisting merely of a fund of interesting stories to which the boy never tired of listening. Tex found himself as much interested in the lessons as the boy, and at times was at his wit’s end to emerge with credit from under a barrage of questions.

Where at first he had looked forward to Sergeant Mayfair’s return, he now found himself dreading it. Several times he cursed himself for the thrill that accompanied the thought that the sergeant might have met with disaster in the course of his long patrol. With a curse, too, he would put away the thought that recurred frequently—to take the boy and strike for the outside. “Break a parole, would you? Well, maybe—but not a parole given to Mayfair. When I look *him* in the eye, I want to be able to look square!”

The education of Billy Jones was by no means confined to the regulation “three Rs.” Realizing that the boy’s environment must necessarily tend to roughen him, Tex took special pains to instruct him as to conduct, especially in the presence of women. His hat must always come off in their presence. He must not remain seated when a lady entered the room. He must seat them at table, and in every way must show them special deference. From an old apron Tex cut out a pair of napkins and insisted upon their use at meals. The boy must hold his knife, and fork, and spoon, so and so, and he must not reach to spear bread with his fork, nor must he eat with his knife. Much of this the boy had heard from his mother, but the fact that Tex considered them of importance impressed the boy immensely. His father, evidently caring nothing for the amenities, had been content to allow his wife a free hand with the boy and had been interested in teaching him only in matters concerning the hunt and the trap line.

Then, too, there were lessons in natural history—simple explanations of the reproduction and of the functioning of life, both animal and vegetable. Of the rotation of the earth around the sun, and the moon around the earth, and why the days are short in winter and long in summer. Of the reason for the migration of most of the birds, and the caribou, and the non-migration of

the owls and ptarmigan, and rabbits and other fur-bearers. Also there were practical lessons—the estimations of distances, the use of the compass, the telling of time, the judging of direction by the sun and the stars—and a hundred and one other bits of lore that would come to notice in the daily business of living.

By the end of May all the traps had been taken in. The ice loosened along the edges of the lakes and in the rivers, and ducks and geese and swans appeared from the southward. Each day the two tramped the ridges, hoping to discover the coveted den, but the winter snow was present only in soggy patches that rendered any attempt at trailing futile. It was during these days that the boy rapidly increased his proficiency in the use of the twenty-two rifle, and many ducks and geese were added to the larder, as Tex watched from a convenient spot while the boy crawled on his belly to the edge of a lake or a pond and potted a feeding bird.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BILLY FINDS THE DEN

ON the night of the last day of May it snowed heavily; the huge moist flakes floating down through the still air soon carpeted the ground with a thick mantle of white. Before daylight Tex struck out. With four inches of soft loose snow on the ground, he knew the boy would quickly tire, and realizing that this might be the last chance to discover the wolf den, he wanted to cover as much territory as possible by swinging in a great circle that would include all the nearer ridges among which he believed the renegade bitch had already whelped her pups. For twice within the past few days he had seen the tracks of the big white wolf where he had crossed a snow patch, and the wolf had been travelling alone.

He explained this to Billy as they ate their early breakfast, and, hiding his disappointment like the true tillicum he was, the boy watched Tex disappear into the darkness, then closed the door and set about washing and putting away the dishes. If a few tears splashed into the dish-water, there was nobody to see, so Billy didn't care.

During the hour that remained before daylight Billy got out his pencil and a sheet of his precious paper and began, with the utmost care, to copy the writing lesson Tex had prepared the night before. When it was finished he did the simple sums, and after that he got out the maps Tex had drawn and traced out trap lines and lakes and ponds and creeks. Then he turned to practical matters. "Two hundred and twenty steps one way, and twenty-two steps the other way—Tex's steps, not mine—that's an acre. And if it's a hundred steps to a rabbit or a caribou, that's a hundred yards, and you've got to raise your sights. And a mile is — —" The youngster frowned at the stove for a long time and gave up the problem. "I'll ask Tex again," he decided. "Tex says I'm learnin' fast, but I can't learn everything all at once, and if I don't know I must tell him. Anyway, there's three hundred and twenty rods in a mile, and a yard is a step; when trees are big they make logs, and when they're little they're pulpwood. I wish I knew as much as Tex does. He knows all about cattle too. He says there's thousands and thousands of cattle where he used to live, and he used to be a cowboy and ride on a horse. I wish I could see thousands of cattle—or even one cattle—and ride on a horse. Tex knows everything."

Daylight greyed the panes of the little window, and blowing out the candle, the boy drew on his mittens and carried in the day's supply of

firewood. The sun rose, and he cried out with delight at the beauty of the day—the dazzling whiteness of the snow that covered the ground and lay heavy on each bush and twig and spruce limb and bent them into bows of snowy white. Suddenly the air became filled with sound—a mighty honking and calling, so that it seemed to the boy as though all the geese in the world were pitching out of the air to join those that called to them from the water of a small lake only a quarter of a mile away.

Dashing into the cabin, he got the twenty-two, filled the magazine, slipped the cartridge box into his pocket, and struck off down the creek that flowed into the little lake.

A few rods from the house, at a point where the banks of the creek rose almost sheer, he paused to pump a cartridge into the chamber, so that the noise would not frighten the geese. At the click of the seating breech-block there was a slight sound from in front of him, a blur of motion, and there, standing motionless on the bank of the creek, staring at him with gleaming eyes, was the great white wolf!

For what seemed a long, long time the little boy stood staring. The big white wolf—here—right near the cabin—and Tex miles and miles away! There was something infinitely sinister in that motionless body, those glaring eyes. The hair at the back of the boy's head seemed to be standing on end, and there was a tickling, prickly feeling all along his back. Yet he was not afraid; he had no thought of turning and running to the cabin. What should he do? Suddenly he became conscious of the rifle in his hands, and with the utmost confidence in his weapon, he settled slowly on to one knee, raised the rifle, and sighted in the exact centre of the wolf's broad forefront.

At the crack of the gun the great beast leaped into the air and came down, snarling and snapping at his chest. He did not fall to the ground but, retaining his feet, tried to back away from the stinging thing, now and then rearing on to his hind legs as he bit savagely at his chest. Billy kept on firing as fast as he could work the action of the little repeating rifle. If the wolf would only hold still! The boy knew he was wasting cartridges, but he wanted that wolf as he had never wanted anything in all his life. If he could only kill the wolf and drag him to the cabin! Tex would never again think he was too little to go hunting. Tex would know he had guts.

There! That last shot must have hit him; that front leg was dangling oddly. As he looked, the boy cried out: "Nellie! Nellie! Here, Nellie! Good dog!" Out of the brush, into the open space beside the big wolf, had leaped the bitch that had run away. Rifle in hand, the boy started forward, forgetting the great white wolf in his eagerness to attract the attention of the dog. He loved Nellie. Almost since he could remember, they had played together by

the hour. With a cry of rage, he stopped dead in his tracks. Without warning the great wolf had leaped at the bitch. Billy caught a flash of gleaming white fangs as the two rolled over in the snow. There was a shrill yelp of pain, a confusion of snarls and growls, and Nellie disappeared into the brush. For a moment after her disappearance the big wolf stood as though undecided, then sedately turned and struck off down the creek, covering the ground in a peculiar jerky lope.

As the wolf passed from sight around a shoulder of the creek bank, the boy ran forward. At the spot where the snow was trampled he paused uncertainly. Red blood stained the snow in splashes of crimson; there was blood upon the trail of the wolf, and more blood leading into the brush where the dog had disappeared.

"He bit her!" he cried, with tears in his eyes. "He bit Nellie!" The wolf tracks blurred as two hot tears rolled down his cheeks. He wiped his eyes on the back of his hand and, turning abruptly into the thick bushes, began to follow the blood-splashed trail of the dog.

Curiously, the trail turned back upstream, and opposite the point where he had stood the boy paused. Nellie had passed within twenty steps of him while he was shooting at the wolf, and he had not seen her!

He hurried on. The trail was heading straight for the cabin. "Maybe she got mad at him for biting her and she'll run back home! Maybe she heard me calling her! Maybe I can catch her!" The boy panted the words jerkily as he hurried along the trail. Then, at a point only a hundred yards below the cabin, he halted and stared in astonishment. The tracks led straight into a hole that had been dug through a deep drift of the old snow. "It's the dog-house!" gasped the boy. "And—she's been living there!" It was true, Billy's father had constructed his dog-house by the simple method of dropping below the cabin to a point where the bank rose to sufficient height and constructing a dugout, the front of which he faced with logs. This made a warm, windproof dog-shelter that would defy the bitterest cold. The place had, of course, not been used during the winter, for the reason that there had been no dogs to use it. Therefore the entrance had been buried under a huge drift. When the denning instinct, aroused by approaching motherhood, came upon the renegade bitch, she remembered the warm, well-littered cave in the hillside, and, leading her lord and master to the spot, straightway proceeded to tunnel through the soggy snow to the entrance. Owing to the contour of the ground, neither Tex nor Billy had passed that way, and with the utmost cunning the two brutes had concealed their proximity to the cabin.

Dropping to his knees, the boy thrust his face into the hole and called softly: "Come, Nellie! Nice old Nellie! It's Billy, Nellie. Go fetch!" The

latter command was an inspiration that came to the boy as he remembered the hours they had spent playing their wonderful game where the boy would hide an old moccasin or a glove and the dog would hunt until she found it.

The words were greeted by a whimper, a wistful whimper it was—half awakened memory, half pain. But there were other sounds, curious sounds, and Billy thrust his head farther into the hole to listen. They were tiny sounds, and lots of them—thin little squeaks and whines. Suddenly the truth flashed upon the boy. “Puppies!” he screamed, the little voice thin with excitement and delight. Impulsively he wriggled deeper into the hole, but a growl from the interior gave him pause. He spoke to the dog, and again came the whimpering cry.

Billy debated. “If I crawl in there she might bite me. Maybe she’ll think I want to hurt her puppies. It’s dark in there, and maybe she’ll think I’m the big white wolf, and she’s mad at him ’cause he bit her.” He wriggled back and sat contemplating the hole. An idea occurred to him. Scrambling to his feet, he laid the rifle across the hole and raced to the cabin to return a few minutes later with a spade.

Picking up the rifle, the boy carefully refilled the magazine, made sure there was a cartridge in the chamber, and placed the gun conveniently at hand. “If that old wolf comes back to bite Nellie again, I’ll shoot him dead this time. I wish I’d killed him before. But I didn’t miss every time. I can show Tex the blood where he ran away.”

Bravely the little fellow set to work. The spade was heavy, and the old snow through which the tunnel led had settled into a compact half-frozen mass. He wished that Tex had not forbidden him the use of the axe. It was much sharper than the spade and not so heavy. By standing on top of the drift and chiselling with the spade, he found that he could break chunks of snow into the tunnel. When the aperture was filled he would discard the spade and clear it out with his hands. The work grew harder as the snow roof thickened because of the downward slant of the tunnel. The boy’s muscles ached and he rested frequently, lying on his belly in the cleared tunnel with his face at the hole that was getting nearer and nearer to the log wall of the dugout. He could hear the feeble whining and whimpering of the puppies more plainly each time. “There must be a lot of ’em,” he murmured as he lay and talked to the old dog while he rested—coaxing, scolding, cajoling—answering her whines of friendliness or her growls of warning as a detached chunk of snow rolled down the incline into the den.

Noon passed, but the boy gave no thought to dinner. Hour after hour he worked with dogged persistence. The spade grew heavier and heavier, and so tired and sore were his muscles that it was all he could do to keep the

tears from his eyes as he rested more and more frequently. But he wouldn't give up. Right here, almost within reach of his hands, was Nellie, and the puppies that both his daddy and Tex had said ought to be the finest puppies in the world. And they would be his—his and Tex's. If he stopped now, the big wolf might come and hurt them, or Nellie herself might carry them away to some other den where he and Tex never could find them. Then the whimper of the puppies would spur him on, and he would pick up his spade and chisel more snow from the thick roof of the tunnel.

The spruce trees were casting long shadows when the little fellow, peering into the hole, uttered a cry of delight. He was almost at the end of his job, for there, peeping out at him, scarcely two feet from his own face, were two little pointed muzzles. As his vision accustomed itself to the gloom, he made out four beady bright eyes glaring up at him as the eyes of the big wolf had glared. The next moment he laughed aloud. In wriggling for a closer view he had dislodged a small round ball of snow that rolled down into the aperture, and with the tiniest of growls the two puppies fled from the opening.

The next time he stopped to rest, his face came even with the door of the dugout. Cautiously he wriggled closer and peered into the black interior. A low growl greeted him, and the boy talked soothingly to the dog. "Nice Nellie. Come, Nellie, come, Nellie." It was too dark to see anything, but presently he heard a movement, and the next moment a warm tongue licked the bare hand that he had thrust ahead of him so that he could snap his fingers. "Good old dog! Good Nellie," said the little voice, and the small hand reached inward and patted the head and ears. Despite all his coaxing, the bitch refused to leave the den but, crouching at the opening, allowed the boy to pet her head and to softly scratch her neck and ears.

The dugout had been built for the accommodation of half a dozen dogs, and as Billy reached to pet the dog he squirmed farther and farther through the doorway. The warm tongue licked his face now, and he was petting the back over the powerful shoulders. Suddenly his fingers encountered clammy wetness, and the bitch shrank back with a low yelp of pain. "It's where the wolf bit her," thought the boy, and withdrew his hand red and sticky with blood.

He was inside the dugout now, and Nellie was nuzzling against him with low whimpers. Something soft and fuzzy touched his hand, and when his fingers closed about it he cried out sharply and jerked his hand away as the needle-like teeth of a puppy scratched the skin. Nellie licked his face, and he could hear the regular thump, thump, thump of her tail as it wagged up and down against the litter.

It was warm and comfortable in there. The litter felt springy and inviting to the aching little body. Nellie nuzzled closer and closer, and the boy laid his head on the soft fur of her side, as he used to a long time ago—“when he was little,” as he later explained to Tex. Soft, warm little balls of fluffy fur crowded and nuzzled about him, but he did not reach out and try to pick them up. It felt so good just to lie there. He would rest for a few minutes. Then he would try and get Nellie and her puppies to the cabin—wouldn’t Tex be surprised when he came home—Tex would be coming home soon—it must be getting dark . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

TEX GETS A THRILL

TEX struck westward for four or five miles and, keeping the cabin as a centre, swung in a semi-circle to the northward. Hour after hour he plodded, crossing and re-crossing ridges, examining the tracks in the snow. Fox tracks there were aplenty, and now and then the trail of a wolf—but not the big white wolf, whose tracks he had come to know well. Nor did he strike the trail of the renegade bitch. Once he came upon three caribou, but he refrained from shooting. There was no pressing need of meat with every pond of water teeming with ducks and geese, and the sound of the shot might put the big wolf on his guard.

Late in the afternoon he turned homeward. He was muscle-weary from his long tramp through the loose snow, but as his steps lagged he would buck up and hurry on. As the shadows lengthened he found his thoughts recurring again and again to Billy. It was the first time he had left the boy alone for any considerable length of time, and the thought gave him a distinct sense of uneasiness. "He's all right," he reassured himself time and again. "He won't stray far, and he knows the country all around the cabin as well as I do. He won't monkey with the axe, and he can't very well do himself any harm with the twenty-two. He's a damned fine little kid, and I'd bank on him for common sense against any kid I ever saw at twice his age. He's got the stuff in him." Tex halted abruptly and stared downward into the snow. Then he stooped and excitedly examined the marks that crossed his trail at a right angle. "It's the big white wolf!" he cried. "And—he's bleeding! What the hell——" He followed the trail for a few paces and again he stopped. "Thought first he was dragging a trap. But it must be a broken leg. Lost quite a bit of blood, too—and that blood never came from any leg!" He dropped to his knees and scrutinized the frothy red stain. "It's from the lungs! He's been shot. Hit hard, too. But who in the devil could have done it?"

The trail led downward into a dense thicket that fringed a tiny creek, and, rifle ready, Tex followed cautiously. Stooping low, he entered the dense growth and presently came upon a spot where the soft snow had melted by contact with a warm body. Here the snow was saturated with a wide red stain. Tracks led straight on toward the opposite edge of the narrow thicket, and the man saw that the beast had been labouring heavily and that the blood on the snow was wet and fresh. Redoubling his pace, he burst out into the

open and came to a sudden halt. There, not twenty yards from him, was the big white wolf struggling vainly to ascend the ridge—staggering, falling, weaving, tail dragging the snow, head moving slowly from side to side, one front leg dangling helplessly. He raised his rifle to fire, but even as he did so the great wolf made a last feeble leap at a low rock ledge, missed his leap, and crashed backward on to the snow, where he lay clawing and twitching aimlessly in what was evidently his death struggle.

Tex lowered his rifle and walked to the spot. As he approached, the beast made one frantic effort, the white fangs bared, the eyes gleamed hot and defiant, but the mighty muscles would not respond. The tongue lolled, the fierce eyes dulled and glazed. The big white wolf was dead.

Swiftly as the gathering darkness would permit, the man skinned the beast, marvelling at the beauty and thickness of the silvery fur. As he drew the pelt over the broken leg he stared wide-eyed. Then swiftly he picked from against the shattered bone a small misshapen object. It was a battered bullet—a soft lead bullet of twenty-two calibre! With redoubled speed he finished his task, pausing once more to examine the small hole that had drilled the deep chest to the lung cavity. Then, swinging the pelt to his back, he took his bearings. “Can’t be more than four or five miles from the cabin,” he reasoned. “Can it be possible the kid killed him? He must have—there’s no one else, so far as I know, within a hundred miles of us—and that wolf hasn’t travelled far coughing up blood at the rate he did. Good God! I wonder if anything could have happened to him! I was a fool to go and leave him—he’s only a baby—but he killed the big white wolf! That’s guts!”

Almost at a run, the man struck out for the cabin. He abandoned his first thought of following the back trail as he realized that the rapidly gathering darkness would slow him up immeasurably. He would strike straight for the cabin, and if Billy was not there he could take a lantern and work out the trail. But of course Billy would be there! When he topped that last ridge he would see the light in the window. And there would be boiled goose and he would listen while the excited little fellow told of the encounter with the big white wolf. Thus Tex reassured himself as he pushed rapidly through the soft snow.

But when he topped that last ridge there was no light in the window. With a deadly chill in his heart the man ran stumbling down the hill and burst open the door of the cabin. Hurling the wolfskin to the floor, he lighted a candle with trembling fingers and stared about the vacant room. The stove was cold. Billy was gone, and so was the twenty-two!

Fitting his candle into the empty tin with its side out that served for a lantern, the man picked up the trail on the creek bank and followed it as

rapidly as his meagre illumination would permit. A few minutes later he paused and examined the spot where the boy had stood when he fired at the wolf. He uncovered several empty shells from the loose snow and hurried on to the point, some twenty yards distant, where the trampled snow was splashed with dark bloodstains. Ignoring the tracks, Tex flashed his lantern here and there, a horrible dread in his heart for the thing he expected to see. A full minute passed, and he breathed easier. The rays of the lantern had failed to disclose a torn little body, or scattered remnants of clothing, or the little magazine rifle. He turned his attention to the tracks. The trail left by the big wolf as he lumbered heavily down the creek was plain. But the tracks of the boy did not follow the trail of the wounded wolf. The man picked up other tracks which, even by the poor light of the tin lantern, he recognized as the tracks of the renegade bitch. Her trail, too, was splashed with blood—more heavily splashed than the trail of the big wolf. And it was her trail that the small footprints of the boy followed into the brush.

The trail doubled back toward the cabin, and as Tex followed it his heart once more sank within him. The boy had headed for the cabin—but he had never reached the cabin! He had followed the wolf-wild bitch, a renegade at best, now rendered triply savage by the wound and the fact that in all probability she had already whelped her pups. A thousand doubts and fears raced through his brain as he stumbled over the rough trail. He stopped suddenly, staring at the confusion of tracks and irregular chunks of snow. A ray of light glinted for a moment on metal. The rifle! So this was the end. He had found at last what he sought, but dreaded to find. Dully, as one stunned, he stared at the broken snow; then, reaching down, he recovered an object half buried by blocks of snow. It was the spade that had stood behind the door of the cabin.

Tex knew nothing of the dugout dog-house whose door had been buried all winter under the deeply drifted snow, but the fact of the spade started his numbed brain to functioning. How did the spade come to be here? The rifle—yes. It was what he had expected. That was natural. Unconsciously his eyes came to rest once more on the little gun. But—was it natural? His brain sprang alert again, grasping at straws. The rifle should be lying where it had fallen in the trampled snow, not laid carefully upon the stub branches of a fallen spruce. Methodically he directed the light of his lantern and disclosed the deep narrow trench leading at an angle into the snowdrift. The den! The whole horror lay clear and plain before him. The boy had tracked the bitch to her den, had run to the cabin for the spade, had dug in, and—

He flashed the lantern into the hole, and its rays were greeted by a hoarse, throaty growl—snarling, savage, menacing. For one brief instant Tex

stood as one petrified as red rage surged from his heart and took possession of his brain. Billy—in there! With his two hands he would tear that she-brute limb from limb for this thing that she had done! With a conscious effort he restrained himself from plunging into the hole and dragging her out to her death. The growls continued, rising in pitch from deep chest rumblings to venomous snarls of hate. Stepping backward, Tex reached for the rifle, made sure there was a cartridge in the chamber, cocked it, and set his lantern so that its feeble light concentrated on the black hole deep in the snow. He had gone down in there—the little tillicum—the unafraid— — “Oh, Billy—Billy!” The name forced itself in a groan from between the man’s lips. At sound of his voice the snarling growls redoubled in fury, there was a rustling of dry litter, and Tex brought the sights of the rifle to bear on the black mouth of the den. Then the rifle slipped from his nerveless fingers, his jaw sagged, and he knew that his knees were trembling violently, so that his whole body was shaking. For in his ears, mingled with the snarling growls, dominating them, was the sound of a voice: “Shut up, Nellie! Lay down! Get back there!” A small face stood out white in the rays of the candle lantern against the velvet blackness of the hole. A small, excited voice was calling his name. And eager shining eyes were staring up into his wide incredulous ones. “Oh, Tex, I found the puppies—there’s lots of ’em—and I shot the big white wolf—and he bit Nellie—and I dug her out—and I was so sleepy— —”

Somehow Tex realized that he was speaking, though his own voice sounded strange and unfamiliar to his ears. “Billy—Billy—come out here!”

Already the boy was wriggling upward into the light of the lantern. The eager expression had given place to a look of pain, and the small lips trembled. “Tex—you—you ain’t mad at me, are you? I—I was going to cook supper—only—I was so sleepy— —”

And the next instant the boy was snatched bodily into strong arms that nearly crushed the breath from his lungs and he was being carried through the snow to the cabin.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BILLY GOES TO SCHOOL

SERGEANT MAYFAIR beached his canoe at the jam of windfallen spruce that blocked the river a few yards below the cabin in which he had left Tex and the boy. There was a delicious softness in the air. Leaf-buds were bursting, and here and there on the hillsides the sombre browns and greys were relieved by splashes of young green. The last of the sodden snowdrifts had disappeared, and the whole North throbbed with new life and the feel of spring.

Turning toward the cabin, he passed around to the door which stood open to allow uninterrupted ingress and egress to a litter of lively puppies.

“Hello, Sergeant! Come right in! You’re just in time for supper.” Tex slipped some extra dishes on to the table and indicated a chair.

Mayfair seated himself at the table. “Smells good,” he smiled as the odour of the savoury stew with which Tex had heaped his plate reached his nostrils. “I’m hungry. Didn’t stop to eat at noon. Figured I’d have to keep pluggin’ along to get here by dark. How you been makin’ it?”

“Oh, Billy and I have got along fine. We’ve managed to keep pretty busy.”

“Seems like the kid’s grow’d quite a bit since I was here.”

“Oh yes, he’s growing every day. He’ll be a big man before long.” Tex smiled as he spoke, and the officer noted the look with which the man’s eyes rested for a moment on the boy. He changed the subject.

“Fine-lookin’ litter of pups. Where’d you get ’em? Seems to me there wasn’t any dogs here.”

“That’s Nellie,” Billy explained. “We used to have her a long time ago, when I was a little boy. She ran away with a big white wolf. And then she came back to the dog-house and had her puppies, and we caught her.”

“‘We caught her,’ is good,” Tex grinned. “While I was out trying to pick up the trail in the hills, Billy ran on to the big wolf and shot him with the twenty-two—got one slug into the brute’s lung and broke a foreleg with another. The bitch evidently came to find out what the trouble was, and the wolf turned on her and slashed her shoulder. Then Billy tracked her to her den in the dog-house, which has been buried under the snow all winter, and proceeded to dig her out. I ran on to the wolf so near all in that he died

before I could finish him. Then I came home and found Billy asleep in the den with the puppies while the bitch stood guard.”

“Half wolf, eh,” said Mayfair, regarding the puppies critically. “It’ll be interestin’ to see how they turn out. I’ve heard of ’em, but I never saw one—that is, one that I really believed to be half wolf. I’ve seen hundreds of ’em that were claimed to be half wolf, but shucks! Most people believe that all the malamutes and huskies are half wolf. And as a matter of fact, there’s no more wolf blood in ’em than there is in me.”

“It will be interesting to see what kind of dogs they’ll make. Did you run on to any more diphtheria?”

“No. Went clear through to McPherson, an’ came back along the coast, till I figured I was straight north of here, then I hit south. Didn’t miss it far. I hit the Porcupine only ten miles east of here.”

The meal over, Tex and Billy washed the dishes while Mayfair smoked beside the fire.

“Time to go to bed, Billy,” Tex reminded, when the task was completed.

The youngster stepped gravely to Mayfair’s side and offered his hand. “Good night,” he said.

“Good night, son,” responded the officer, taking the small hand in his own. “You’re a great little tillicum—killin’ the big wolf, an’ trackin’ the dog to her den, all alone. A big man couldn’t have done better.”

Instead of turning toward his bunk the little fellow hesitated and abruptly asked, “Does Tex have to go away with you?”

“Why—what makes you think he does?”

“’Cause he said he’d stay here till you came back and then he’d have to go away with you. He said he had to go whether he wanted to or not. I don’t want him to go away. We’re pardners, and if he goes I want to go too.”

“Well, now, that’ll be nice. We’ll just think about that. But you trot along to bed, an’ Tex an’ I’ll kind of talk things over. You don’t need to worry, son. If we go away we won’t leave you here alone.”

The boy went to bed, and for some time the two men sat smoking in silence. Tex was the first to speak. “When do we start?” he asked, after he was sure the boy was asleep.

Mayfair appeared to ponder the question. “I’ve be’n tryin’ to figure it out,” he replied. “How you fixed for grub?”

“Why, we’ve got plenty. Loads of it. Plenty to see us through to Rampart House.”

“I wasn’t thinkin’ about the trail,” Mayfair said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the fact is I’m in kind of a jam. I’ve got some important business to ’tend to, an’ I don’t just see how I can take you along. I was thinkin’ that if you could hang on here for a while maybe, it would work out a whole lot better for me.”

Through the blue tobacco smoke the shrewd glance of the officer regarded the other’s face. He noted that the man’s eyes lighted at the words and that there was no trace of the grim hopelessness of their last meeting. His reply indicated that life had come to mean more than a drab monotony of days. “Sure, I’ll stay, if it’s any accommodation to you. I’ll be glad to stay. Who wouldn’t—when you stop to consider what I’ve got ahead of me? Besides, I can do some prospecting. I believe there’s gold along this river.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” agreed Mayfair. “Porcupine Jack found gold over somewheres along the Porcupine. An’ over on the Bell young Jim Mitchell made a big strike. He went back to the States an’ got married an’ brought his wife back with him. They’ve be’n workin’ the location for two years now. They don’t want to go outside. I tell you, Tex, what a man needs is a woman—the right sort of a woman, I mean.” The old officer paused, noted the effect of his words on the other, and resumed. “Yes, sir, Jim an’ his wife are just as happy as any two folks could be. She come up into this country right from a city. I met Jim on the Mackenzie when he was goin’ out to get married. He wasn’t sure how it would work out. They’ve got a few Injuns around ’em workin’ that mine, an’ they don’t give a damn about the rest of the world.”

Tex nodded slowly. “Yes,” he answered, “with the right woman, a man wouldn’t give a damn about the rest of the world.” He leaned forward suddenly and knocked the ashes from his pipe with a gesture of impatience. “But what’s all that got to do with us? Let’s get down to cases. I’ll stay here till you come for me, if you can’t take me along. But we’ve got to get the fur to a post somehow. I don’t know anything about handling fur, and the winter’s catch would probably spoil when the hot weather comes along. The kid’s dad had quite a bunch of pelts, and Billy and I have managed to trap some more. I figured we’d take them down to Rampart House when you showed up.”

“How much fur is there? I’m travellin’ light—if there ain’t more than a canoe-load, I can take it in to Rampart an’ arrange a credit for the kid, providin’ you don’t need to bring back any supplies.”

“There’s not more than a canoe-load, and we won’t need any supplies till fall. They were stocked liberally for three of them, and there has only been

two of us, and we've managed to live for the most part off the nets and the snares and the twenty-two."

"You never found out the fellow's name, did you?" asked Mayfair after a few moments of silence.

"Yes. It was Jones," answered Tex, looking the officer squarely in the eye.

Sergeant Mayfair's expression did not change a hair. "Jones," he repeated gravely, as though trying to place the man. "Seems like I've heard that name somewheres before. Or mebbe it jest sounded like that. Anyway, it's a good clean name for the kid to start out with. An' I guess that's about all he has got, except this outfit."

Tex cleared his throat. "Well, not quite all," he said. "You see, Sergeant I've kind of taken a fancy to the little shaver. He's all there—plenty of guts and bright as a button. Give him half a chance and he'll make good, somewhere. And I figure I can just about do that—give him half a chance." As he spoke the man reached beneath his shirt and drew out a leather belt which he tossed on to the table. "There's money in there—fourteen thousand dollars. After my dad was murdered my mother sold our outfit and divided the proceeds evenly with me. She went back East, and I headed north and wound up working for Old Sam Mason, there in Blodgett. The money will never do me any good—where I'm going. It will educate the kid and give him some kind of a start in life. You take it, and if anything should happen to me, and the kid comes through, just see that he gets it. It ought to put him through school, and maybe give him a start. I don't want him to face the big game under a handicap."

Mayfair's eyes rested on the money-belt. "You'll be needin' it yourself."

"Not where I'm going."

"But it will pay for your defence."

"There won't be any defence. I told you I was guilty, didn't I?"

"What kind of a school do you want him to go to? There's missions in the country that will take him in for nothin'."

"I'd rather send him outside. There's a school down in Blodgett that I believe does a good job. Send him down there."

"You keep the money, an' we'll talk it over next time I come."

Tex grinned and pushed the belt toward the other. "Better take it," he advised. "It would take me quite a way if I decided to take the kid and pull out."

"Been figurin' on it?"

“Well, I’ve thought about it a time or two—yes.”

“Why didn’t you go?”

Tex shrugged. “No place to go, in particular, and— — Oh hell—I was on parole!”

“Yup. An’ you’re still on parole. Guess we won’t worry about that.”

“Oh, I’ll be here when you come back—barring an accident of some kind. But, really, I’d rather you would take the money. If anything should happen to me, I want Billy to have it.”

Sergeant Mayfair picked up the belt and, opening it, counted the notes. “Fourteen thousan’ is right,” he announced. “First thousan’-dollar bills I ever saw.” As he returned them to the belt he asked casually, “Suppose it happens to both of you. What’ll I do with it then? Anyone else you want to leave it to?”

The other was silent for a moment. “Yes,” he answered. “If anything happens to both of us, you can deliver the money to Miss Helen Mason, of Blodgett. She’s Old Sam’s daughter. She don’t need it herself. But tell her she can use it to give some kid an education. She’s interested in the school I spoke of. In fact, she started it. That’s how I happened to know about it.”

Idly fingering the belt, the officer made mental note of the name. “All right,” he agreed. “I’ll take care of it. An’ now let’s make up that fur pack. I’ll be pullin’ out at daylight— —”

“Just a minute!” At the interruption Mayfair looked up to see Tex leaning forward, regarding him intently. “I’ve got an idea. Of course I don’t know how feasible it is—that’s up to you. I don’t know the nature of the business that makes it impossible to take me with you. But you’re going back up the Yukon. Why can’t you take Billy with you?”

“What!”

“Yes—just that. I realize, of course, that it may not be possible for you to take him all the way through to Dawson, or you could take me too. But couldn’t you arrange to have him passed along up the river and then ticketed through to Miss Mason’s school in Blodgett? It’s this way. In the first place, I want him to have a decent education. Of course I know there’s plenty of time for that—he’s only seven. But here’s a thing that’s given me quite a bit of worry—when I’d let myself think about it. Here we are up here, God knows how far from a doctor. Suppose the kid should take sick? I don’t know a damned thing about medicine, and he might die for lack of the simplest sort of treatment. Then if anything should happen to me—accident, or sickness that would incapacitate me, or if I should kick out—where would he be? He might make a go of it till someone came along—but the

chances are long against it. A seven-year-old kid on his own in this country couldn't last, no matter how good he is. You see, Sergeant, as long as he stays here he's taking a double chance—if anything happens to either one of us, he's out of luck. If you can't take me along, I'll stay here and prospect and I'll give you my word to be here when you want me. But if you could take him—well, you see how it is."

Mayfair nodded slowly. "There's a good deal in what you say. But how about you? Livin' alone up here, you won't be any better off than you was before, Tex —"

"Oh, yes I will!" Tex interrupted quickly. "Before it was different. I haven't got anything on my mind now—not afraid someone's coming up and lay a hand on my shoulder. I'm past all that. I know what's coming to me, and whenever you say the word, I'll go down and face it. I'll be happy up here—damned glad of the brief reprieve from what's ahead. I have my work cut out too—trying to make a strike for Billy. Why, look here, Sergeant. If I can give that little fellow an education and leave him a claim that will give him a good start in the big game—my life won't be wasted, will it? Even if I am a—murderer."

"It sure won't, son. I've be'n kind of figurin', an' I guess maybe I can manage to get the kid down to this school, some way or other. But what's he goin' to say about it? Remember, he says you an' him are pardners, an' if you go, he wants to go too."

"He'll go, all right, when I explain things to him in the morning. He's a tillicum. And here's another thing, Sergeant. This kid is Billy Jones. Keep my name out of it absolutely. For all you know, this money comes from his folks—they left it to him when they died. I want you to promise me that under no circumstances will my name be mentioned."

"All right. I'll promise that. But how about the kid? Won't he mention your name?"

"He never heard my name—my last name. He knows me only as Tex—and there are hundreds of Tex's drifting around the country."

The two made up the fur pack before turning in, and in the morning Tex explained the situation to the boy. The little fellow listened without interruption until he had finished. He hung his head, and the small voice was very near to tears. "I don't want to go way off to school. I like it here with you. But tillicums must mind. And if you say I must go, then I'll go. But I can come back, can't I?"

"Yes, Billy, sure you can come back."

"And you'll be here? You'll wait for me till I learn things?"

Tex cleared his throat. "I'll be here if I can, Billy. You can depend on that. Of course something might happen so that I couldn't be here—like—like—well, you know, I might have to go away—like your daddy and your mama did. But I'll leave word for you. This is Sergeant Mayfair of the Mounted Police. He will know what's become of me. Find him when you get ready to come back. He'll tell you."

"And if I have to stay down to the school a long, awful long time, you'll come and see me, won't you, Tex?"

"Why—maybe I can. I'll sure try, Billy. You bet your life I'll try! just remember what I've taught you—about how to act—about taking your hat off, and handling your knife and fork and spoon, and being polite to ladies. And down at the school they'll teach you a whole lot more—lots more than I could ever teach you. Learn all you can—that's a little man. And now, good-bye! Sergeant Mayfair wants to get an early start, so you'll have to be going. I've put all your things in that duffel bag." Tex extended his hand, and the little fellow placed his own within it.

"Good-bye, Tex," he said bravely. "I'm not crying—it's just my eyes. I couldn't make 'em stop."

The little fellow took his place in the bow of the canoe, Sergeant Mayfair pushed off, and as the light craft, caught by the current, disappeared around a bend of the river, Tex Conway turned toward the cabin, swallowing repeatedly at the lump that had formed in his throat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SERGEANT MAYFAIR REPORTS AT HEADQUARTERS

IN DAWSON the grey-haired inspector leaned back in his chair and welcomed Sergeant Mayfair with a smile of genuine pleasure. "Back again, eh? How's everything? Sit down. How's the diphtheria? Did you get through to McPherson?" As he spoke he picked up the report that the sergeant had laid on the desk and ran his eyes over the lines.

"All cleared up, eh? No deaths an' no new cases since winter. Only two deaths back off the river—trapper named Jones an' his wife, up on the Porcupine."

"They were in bad shape when I found 'em. The man died right away, an' the woman lived a couple of days longer. They lived on the Porcupine, way to hell an' gone above Rampart House. No cases east of there. I went through to McPherson an' back along the coast, then dropped south an' hit the Porcupine again."

"Everything all right on the coast? Natives winter through in good shape?"

"Yes, two or three deaths, reported—all natural causes."

"H-u-m-m-m." The inspector looked up from the paper, his keen eyes twinkling. "How's this? Looks like a rookie's report."

Sergeant Mayfair grinned. "What's botherin' you—did I leave out a couple of inches of some Eskimo name?"

The inspector returned the grin. "If you did, I'd never know it. But here you report finding a man and his wife and a youngster six or seven years old in a cabin on the Porcupine. Then you report the deaths of the man and the woman and make no mention of the death or the disposition of the boy."

Mayfair was crowding tobacco into his black pipe. "Well, he ain't dead, an' his disposition's good—"

"Put up your pipe, Mayfair. That one deserves a cigar."

The old sergeant took the proffered smoke with a grin. "Thanks. Haven't had one in quite a while. I'll make out a special report. But first I want to talk it over with you."

"Shoot." The inspector prepared to listen with interest, for when Old Man Mayfair wanted to talk something over, that something was sure to be a thing of importance.

“While I went on to the Mackenzie I left the kid in the cabin with a fellow name of Tex Conway.”

“Tex Conway!”

“Yes, that’s what he said his name was — —”

“We want that man for something—murder, I think!” He paused, pressed a button, and ordered a certain file. “Here it is—Tex Conway, American citizen, about twenty-three, five feet ten, brown hair, blue eyes. Wanted for the murder of a teamster named Ole Johnson, back in Blodgett, Saskatchewan, on the night of the tenth of July, last year.”

“Yes, so he told me.”

“Told you? What do you mean?”

“He told me about killin’ this teamster—made a detailed confession.”

“And you didn’t bring him in?”

“No, I didn’t bring him along.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’d get convicted—sure.”

The inspector’s brows were drawn into a puzzled frown. “Look here, Mayfair, what the devil do you mean? Quit talking in riddles. You say this man made a detailed confession of this murder, and you didn’t bring him in because he’d be convicted.”

“Yes, sir. No jury in the world would acquit him, after they’d seen the evidence an’ heard his story. I didn’t bring him in because he’s a liar!”

“Liar!”

“Yes—he lied about the murder. He didn’t commit it.”

“Who did commit it?”

“That’s what I want to find out. If there ain’t anything more important, I’d like a special detail to find out just that thing.”

“Why in the devil should he confess committing a crime that means hanging or life imprisonment if he is innocent?”

“That’s another thing I want to find out.”

The inspector regarded the other intently. “What makes you think he’s not guilty?”

“I know he’s not. He ain’t a good liar. He told his story wrong end to. He forgot to start off with an excuse, an’ he laid stress on the fact that he left his laundry an’ his hat an’ his gun at the scene of the crime—evidence that would be sure to convict him. He’s no damn fool. He’d never have left those things there if he’d be’n guilty. He was range foreman for the Diamond-5

cattle outfit. I've spent considerable time in the cattle country. I've heard of Sam Mason an' the Diamond-5. It's a big outfit. An' I know damn well that no twenty-two-year-old man could get to be range foreman for an outfit like that unless he's capable an' smart. He built up that evidence, an' he's confessin' that murder to shield someone else. An', by the gods, he's too good a man to waste that way. I want to find the real murderer."

"You like him, don't you?"

"I do. He's a good, clean-cut man. Got plenty guts too. Shoved me out of the cabin when we ran on to those diphtheria cases—nursed 'em himself—said I was needed to carry on the patrol an' it didn't matter about him. No heroics about it—just plain common sense—an' then he volunteered to stay with the kid until I came back for him. I give him his parole."

"And do you expect he'll keep it? Do you expect he'll be there when you want him?"

"I left him there with the kid till I went to McPherson. He was there when I got back. An' he'll be there when I go back again."

The inspector's fingers drummed lightly upon his desk as his eyes studied the other. "If anybody but you had done this thing, Mayfair, I'd say he was a fool. Your record is long. You've made few mistakes. Frankly, I'm telling you I don't share your confidence in this man. You just told me he's a liar."

"Yeah. But he ain't that kind of a liar."

"As I see it," the inspector continued, "he has everything to gain by pulling out on you, and everything to lose by staying. If he is shouldering the responsibility for that murder to protect another, he would accomplish his purpose as well by pulling out and keeping us hunting him as he would by submitting to arrest and standing trial. As I see it, your course should have been to bring him down and let him wait behind the bars while you carried on your investigation."

"I thought of that," answered Mayfair, "but this seemed the better way. I think I know men. I'm stakin' my standin' as an officer on my judgment of this man. I'm not wrong. He stayed at the cabin while I made the long trip to the Mackenzie, an' he'll stay there till I release him from his parole. I made no mention of this case in my report because the cold black and white of a report sheet can't record it as I believe it to be. He's been a good man, an' he'll be a good man yet. He's only twenty-three years old. The trouble with lockin' him up would be that his case might be called an' he might be convicted before I'd had time to find the real murderer. When he walked into my camp that night on the Porcupine, I saw that livin' alone had got him.

There was no trail ahead. He was through. Life imprisonment, the rope, even—he viewed either one with indifference. Then came the chance to do somethin’ worth while—the nursin’ of the two sick people—the responsibility for the welfare of the little boy. His interest in life awakened. An’ it has continued because he has somethin’ to do—to think about—to be responsible for. He gave me what money he had on him, fourteen thousan’ dollars — —”

“Fourteen thousand dollars!” the inspector exclaimed. “Where would a cow-puncher get fourteen thousand dollars?”

“It’s what he’s got left of the fifteen thousan’ his mother turned over to him when she sold their outfit down in Texas—after Tex had shot the man that murdered his father.”

The inspector’s eyes widened. “So he had a record as a killer before he hit Saskatchewan, eh?”

“Yeah,” Mayfair answered. “It’s a record to be proud of.”

“But the money—this fourteen thousand dollars—why did he turn it over to you?”

“It’s for the kid—for his schoolin’ an’ maybe to give him some kind of a start in life. I brought the kid with me. Tex wants him taken to a certain school run by Miss Helen Mason, back there in Blodgett—an’ Blodgett’s where I want to do my investigatin’. I’m askin’ for a special detail to go outside an’ work on this case.”

The inspector’s brow furrowed. “All right, Mayfair. Go ahead. Report to the superintendent at Regina. I’m giving you a letter to him. I guess your long record warrants some special consideration. But in the meantime what will Conway be doing up there on the Porcupine?”

“Prospectin’. Tryin’ to make a strike so the kid’ll have somethin’ when he gets out of school—said he guessed his life wouldn’t be wasted if he could do that much for the kid, even if he is a murderer. But he ain’t a murderer—no more than I am. He’s a man, an’ a damn good man. It’s just as much the duty of a policeman to clear an innocent man as to convict a guilty one. As I see it, there’s a damn sight more to policin’ than is set down in the manual.”

The inspector nodded. “Yes, Mayfair, there’s the devil of a lot more to policing than is set down in the manual. Report back to me when you’ve completed your investigation. I need you here. This transfer is only temporary. Good luck to you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BILLY IS ENROLLED IN THE SCHOOL

ONE day, some three weeks after his interview with the inspector in Dawson, Sergeant Mayfair, with Billy Jones in tow, stepped from the train to the station platform at Blodgett, Saskatchewan. Mail pouches were exchanged, a trunk or two loaded, the conductor waved his arm, and the train started, gathered speed, and disappeared in the distance. Half a dozen small boys and an assortment of citizens, having witnessed the arrival and departure, turned reluctantly toward the steps that led to the wooden sidewalk.

One or two glanced with slight show of interest at the man in the uniform of the Mounted Police. One, a pouchy-eyed man with a paunch, who had been leaning against a baggage truck, spoke to him. Mayfair, noting the metal star that proclaimed the man to be the town constable, held out his hand in greeting. The man took the hand in a fat grip. "Glad to know you. Be'n quite a while sence any of the Mounted was here. Somethin' special? Anything I kin do fer you?"

"Why, yes. There's a school here—a school where they take boys—ain't there?"

"Shore they is. Right over yonder where you see that big roof through them trees. Dam' good school, they claim. Get a lot of boys there, anyhow. They come from as fer away as Winnipeg. An' even from the States. Costs 'nough—ort to be good. Costs six hunderd dollars a year. Public schools was good enough fer me. What I claim, they ain't no schoolin' worth six hunderd dollars to no one. Goin' to put that kid in the school?"

"Yes," Mayfair answered. "An' by the way, if you're not too busy this afternoon, I'd like to have a few words with you—sort of talk things over."

"Why, shore! They ain't nothin' goin' on, much. I promised the old woman I'd git to hoein' the garden this afternoon. But business comes first. Them weeds kin wait over till tomorrow. Tell you what you do. I'll wait here, an' when you git through over to the school you come back. Hadn't ort to take you more'n an hour or so, had it?"

"Probably not more than half that long. I'll be back as soon as possible."

Helen Mason laid aside her book and leaned back in her chair, placed in the shade of a large cottonwood tree on the bank of the creek, and idly watched the antics of the half-dozen small boys who romped about on the grass.

Overhead, fleecy clouds drifted lazily across a turquoise sky, the hum of insects was in the air, and the light breeze wafted to her nostrils the warm, moist scent of growing things. A wonderful day—a day in which to enjoy life in its fullness. But sadly Helen Mason realized that she was not enjoying life, and bitterly she wondered whether she would ever enjoy life again. Her glance wandered from the frolicking youngsters, lingered for a few moments on the rippling waters of the creek, and came to rest on the red roof of the dormitory. Her school was prospering even beyond her fondest expectation. Next year she would double the size of the dormitory and build additional class-rooms. Well-to-do people from eastern Canada, and from the States had taken kindly to the idea of the school in the Western cattle country and had entered their young sons. In fact, owing to the limited accommodations, numerous applications had been turned down, so that already the waiting list was long.

Despite the fact that she could have filled her dormitory with paying pupils, she had held steadfastly to her determination to take in one non-paying, under-privileged boy for each paying one—a determination that drew from her father and from practical-minded old Jack Trent half-serious, half-bantering criticisms of the folly of turning down paying pupils in favour of non-paying ones.

Sounds came to the ears of the girl as she sat there in the shade of the cottonwood tree—the shouts and gay laughter of the romping boys, and laughter and shouts of advice from the direction of the corral, where a half-dozen cowboys sat perched on the top rail watching one of their number “polish off a wild one.” Tomorrow the wagons would roll out on the beef round-up.

The realization brought a stab of pain to the heart of the girl—tomorrow the wagons would roll! It was just a year ago today that she had paused there beside the corral where Tex Conway sat re-stringing his saddle and had persuaded him to lay the work aside and walk to the store with her. Vividly she recalled the events that followed: the meeting with Eddie on the bridge, with his account of what had transpired at the lumber car between Al Blodgett and big Ole Johnson; the shouldering of Tex from the sidewalk by the big teamster; Tex’s threat that he would attend to him later, because he feared that a street fight would mean a jail sentence that would keep him off the round-up, and her own demand that he do it now; the teamster’s sneering taunt, and the clean-cut swift blows that rained on the man’s face and body until he was forced across the sidewalk and his head jammed through the window of the pool-room. Then Al Blodgett’s demand that Rattlesnake Dort arrest Tex, his boast that Tex would spend the next ninety days in jail, her

own scathing reply, and Blodgett's order to the constable to turn Tex loose. Then that last evening together, when they had sat alone on the veranda, the kiss with which they had parted when Tex left her to go to the bunkhouse. And later, after she had gone to bed, the sound of feet on the veranda, a hand knocking on the door, and the voice of her father mingled with the loud excited voices of several men. Then her father tapping on her door and telling her to get dressed and come out; the blustering, boasting attitude of Rattlesnake Dort, accusing Tex of murdering the big teamster and skipping out; the muddy eyes of the town loafers who accompanied him, leering into her own in the dim light of their lanterns. Then the departure of the men, and Eddie, white-faced and shaking, sneaking into the house from under the veranda, where he had crawled to await the departure of the men. Then, in answer to his father's questioning as to his whereabouts, his admission that he had been in the pool-room and heard big Ole threaten to chop Tex into mincemeat with the brass knuckles; he had returned home to warn Tex, and finding him seated in a dark corner of the veranda with her, he had withdrawn to wait beside the corral and had fallen asleep. When he awoke the veranda was deserted. He had dashed to the bunkhouse and, finding Tex's bunk empty, had hit for town on the run. He had heard a shot above the roar of a passing freight train and a moment later had stumbled over the body of big Ole, lying there in the mud, and that next instant, around the corner of a lumber-pile, he had come face to face with Tex. Then he turned and ran in a panic of fear, with Tex calling his name. He ran on and on, past the ranch—on up the creek. Then for a long time he had sat there in the dark. When he returned to the house Rattlesnake Dort and some men were on the veranda talking, and he crawled beneath to wait till they had gone.

That was Eddie's story—and after hearing it Old Sam Mason's face was very grave. And her own heart sank within her breast at his words: "Keep your mouth shut, son. Don't you never tell a soul that you saw Tex there in the lumber-yard—not Rattlesnake Dort, nor the Mounted, nor no one else—ever. The chances is no one will question you, not knowin' you were anywheres around. But if they do, you keep mum. If Tex shot Ole he figgered he had a right to. But the law might not figger it that way—an' him not heeled with a gun. Tex prob'ly realized that an' skipped out. I hope he makes it. I'm wishin' him luck."

Then her own impassioned denial that Tex had shot the teamster. She remembered that she had vehemently maintained that if he had shot him he would have stayed and faced the music; he would never have run away. "He is no fool! Even if he had gone away he'd never have left his laundry and his gun and his hat there where the first person to come along would see them."

And she remembered her father's reply—a shrug, and the words: “You may be right, daughter. Time will tell. If he ain't skipped out he'll be here tomorrow. An' as for leaving his hat an' laundry an' gun—a man's liable to do anything when he's excited.”

But tomorrow came and went—and many tomorrows—and Tex had not returned. He never would return, the girl thought bitterly. Realizing that everyone believed him guilty, she hated them for it and had withdrawn more and more within herself.

One day, a week or more after Tex's disappearance, she had saddled her horse and taken a long ride—a ride that had carried her to the mouth of the draw where she first saw Tex and had witnessed his encounter with Hank Chubb. It also took her past a dozen places that she and Tex had visited in the course of their rides together. Returning home, she unsaddled, turned her horse into the big pasture, hung up her saddle—and never rode again.

Her one interest now was her school. Not for one instant did she believe that Tex was guilty. She had a theory of her own: someone else had killed Ole Johnson and, knowing that Tex would be blamed for it, had killed Tex too—had killed him soon after Eddie had run away, that night, and had made away with his body. She had never voiced the theory, realizing that to anyone else it would sound far-fetched, impossible. But in her own mind the theory crystallized into a conviction. Deep within her heart was the awful gnawing of uncertainty—if she could only *know* that he was dead!

As she sat there, her eyes on the roof of the dormitory, a voice sounded in her ear and she turned to see that old Jack Trent had paused beside her on his way to the corral.

Despite his ill-health, old Jack had reassumed his duties as range foreman of the Diamond-5, and as he spoke he pointed toward the house, where a man in the uniform of the Mounted Police was approaching, accompanied by a little boy. “Looks like yer goin' to have another one of them there onder-privileged kids on yer hands. Here comes a policeman fetchin' one along, an'— Why, damn my soul, if it ain't Old Man Mayfair! Cripes, he ain't be'n around here sence God knows when! Usta be stationed in Regina, years back.”

As the two drew closer Trent greeted the officer. “Hello, Mayfair! Where in hell you be'n fer the last hundred years?”

“Jack Trent, by all that's good an' holy! Long time no see! I've be'n north, mostly—Mackenzie River country—Yukon. But don't tell me you're still able to fork a horse!”

“If I wasn’t I wouldn’t be wagon boss of the Diamond-5,” Trent laughed. “Who you got there—some rootin’-tootin’-hell-fer-shootin’ desperado?”

“No, just a little kid fer Miss Helen Mason’s school.”

“Well, here’s Miss Helen herself.” He turned to the girl. “Miss Helen, I want you should meet Sergeant Mayfair. Mayfair’s still a sergeant, but I’ve heard tell he’s had to fight the hull damn force to keep ’em from makin’ him commissioner.”

Sergeant Mayfair doffed his hat and smiled into the face of the girl. “Don’t heed him, Miss Helen. He was quite a fella himself, a good while back.”

Jack Trent passed on with a laugh, and Mayfair glanced at the boy, who had also removed his cap and stood holding it in his hand. “This is Billy Jones, Miss Helen. He’s an orphan. His mother and father died of diphtheria in a cabin on the Porcupine up inside the Arctic Circle, an’ he’s all alone in the world. He’s seven years old. I want to enroll him in your school.”

The girl was about to explain that the school was full, that there was no room for another pupil, when something in the little fellow’s face gave her pause. It was such a manly little face, so solemn and somehow pathetic—an orphan, his mother and father lying buried under the eternal frost of the Arctic. She cleared her throat.

“I—I believe I can take him,” she said. “As a matter of fact, we have our full quota now, but I believe I can make an exception in his case.” She turned to the boy. “Would you like to come to my school, Billy?”

The little fellow nodded. “Yes—yes, ma’m, I would,” he said. “Can I go look in the crick? Maybe I could see a fish.”

The girl smiled. “Why, certainly you can.” And as he hurried to the bank she turned to the officer. “How did you happen to select my school, Sergeant Mayfair?” she asked.

“Why—I—I promised his—his folks I’d take him outside an’ put him in a school. An’ when I got to Regina, I heard about your school, an’ bein’ as it was close by, I brought him here. I’m sorry if it puts you to any trouble—you bein’ full-up an’ all.”

“It’s no trouble. I’ll find a place for him. Poor baby—all alone in the world—of course I’ll take care of him!”

“That’s fine, Miss Helen. I’m shore glad you feel that way. Now, about money—”

“There will be no need for money, Sergeant. I have a rule here: for every paying pupil I take in one non-paying one, some under-privileged boy whose people couldn’t afford to send him to school—like little Billy Jones.”

The sergeant smiled. "I guess you'll have to figger Billy as a payin' pupil, Miss Helen." He paused and drew from his pocket a packet of bills. "Here's the money—fourteen thousan' six hundred an' forty dollars—the six-forty was the proceeds of a bunch of fur his pa had on hand when he died. The rest he had in cash."

The girl gasped. "But fourteen thousand dollars! For a trapper! He must have saved his money for years!"

"He was a savin' man," the sergeant replied, "but he prob'ly didn't make it all trappin'. He most likely done some prospectin' besides."

"But this is far and away more money than he will need here."

"You keep it for him. Teach him all you can, an' when he finishes here, see that he goes to some college. His folks was mighty anxious he should get a good education. I've done all I can, fetchin' him down here. The rest is up to you."

"And I'll do all I can to see that he gets the education his people wanted him to have," the girl answered.

"I'm glad to hear you say that. An' I'm mighty glad to be leavin' him in your hands. Good-bye, Miss Helen. I must be goin' now."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE
THE CONSTABLE TELLS A TALE

RETURNING to the railway station to find the constable seated on the platform patiently whittling at a chip, Mayfair glanced toward the open door of the building.

“Let’s go inside an’ sit down. Looks like we’d be alone in there.”

The other led the way into the waiting-room of the little station. “Yeh, we’ll be alone, except fer old Lem Stone. He’s the agent, but he’s so deaf he can’t hear it thunder.”

The two seated themselves upon a bench ranged along the wall, and Mayfair proffered a cigar which was eagerly accepted. “My name’s Dort,” the constable said, “Rattlesnake Dort, the boys calls me—kind of a nickname, like. My right name’s George. Anything you want to know, jest ask me. I be’n constable here fer ten year, an’ they ain’t nothin’ goes on that I don’t know about. Was it about that there robbery t’other night in the store? I know all about it. Know how much was took, an’ jest who done it. They was fourteen dollars an’ forty cents took out of the till, an’ two pair of shoes, an’ a pair of overhauls, an’ a suit of clo’s, an’ a box of jack-knives. He got in the back door, an’ likewise out it.”

The sergeant preserved grave decorum. “Mayfair’s my name, Sergeant Mayfair. Did you make an arrest?”

“No, not yet. I ain’t got no evidence. But I know jest who done it.”

“How do you know who done it if you’ve got no evidence?”

“Who’n hell would do a trick like that except that there no-count, lanky, sneakin’, wapple-jawed Bill Atfield? Why, he owes me three dollars yet on a cow he bought off’n me eight year ago come September. An’ if he ever shows up with anythin’ new, I’ll git him, an’ don’t you fergit it. So if it’s about the robbery, you kin jest go on along an’ fergit about it. I’ll keep my eye on Bill. He’s too dam’ sneakin’ to come right out in the open an’ steal. He knows I’d git him!”

Valiantly suppressing a grin, Sergeant Mayfair nodded judiciously. “Well, we’ll leave it that way, then. We’ve got to kind of work together on these cases. I’ll leave this one entirely with you — —”

“You couldn’t expect to do no better than that,” agreed the man, swelling visibly. “An’ say, I wouldn’t mind bein’ in the Mounted myself. Course I’ve be’n here quite a while, an’ folks would hate to see me go, but they can’t

kick if I git the chanct to better myself. Likely they could find someone else for constable. 'Course it wouldn't be like havin' me, but they'd git along somehow—other towns does."

"Yes, that's so," Mayfair agreed.

"Where do you sign on?"

"Why, Regina would be the nearest point from here. If I was you, though, I'd kind of get in touch with headquarters by letter first. Kind of give 'em a line on yourself—experience an' specifications an' so on."

"Oh, they've prob'ly heard about me before now. They're al'us on the look-out fer good men, ain't they? But I guess you're right, at that. I'll write 'em a letter, then they kin either come down here er I'll go up there if they send fer me. I kin borry car-fare off'n Mr. Blodgett, the banker."

"That would be the best way. And now we've agreed how to handle this store robbery, is there anything else that I can give you any help on?"

"No, sir—not a dam' thing. Them boys that throw'd the rocks through the Methodist church winders—I know who they be, an' if they do it agin I'll git 'em—an' I don't need no help, neither. The way I say, if a constable ain't able to handle the crime sitcheration in his town, he better quit an' let 'em git someone that kin."

"That's so," assented the sergeant. "Let's see, along sometime last year didn't we hear somethin' about your work in a murder case—fellow named Ole somethin' or other was shot an' killed?"

"Well, now, I guess you did hear about it! They was a piece in the paper about it every week fer two weeks! I solved that there myst'ry in about ten minutes! Yes, sir—ten minutes after they found big Ole's body I was right there, an' after lookin' around a little I says, 'Tex Conway done it!' I says."

"Did you arrest him?"

"Hell, no! He'd went. Yes, sir. Hit fer the Diamond-5 corral an' saddled him a horse an' skipped to hell an' gone outa the country. I figure he hit fer the Montany line an' got acrost into the States. He know'd a dam' sight better'n to stick around where I could git holt of him! Le'me tell you, they ain't no murderers hangs round this town—not 'long as they know I'm constable they don't!"

Sergeant Mayfair eyed the man in open admiration. "That's mighty quick work, for a murder," he said. "Sometimes it takes us a year or more to clear one up."

"Oh well, you got to remember they ain't everyone got the experience that I've got. You boys in the Mounted does a mighty good job, though, at that."

"We do the best job we can," admitted Mayfair. "Have another cigar. That one's gittin' kind of soggy. As long as there don't seem to be anything special goin' on, I'd like to hear about that murder case, if you don't mind tellin' me."

The fat constable took the proffered cigar, removed the soggy butt from his mouth, and placed it in his pocket. He lighted the cigar and crossed one thick thigh over the other. "Shore I don't mind tellin' you. Take me, I read old man Pinkerton's book every oncet in so often, an' sometimes I git an idee out of it." He paused and fixed his listener with an eye of muddy mystery. "Do you know how they counterfeit gov'ment bonds?" he asked impressively.

"Well, I can't say that I do— —"

"I know."

Awed by the profound announcement, Mayfair nodded slowly. "That might come in awful handy sometime. You never can tell what you're goin' to run up against. But about this murder?"

"Well, it was in the summer, a year ago—July, it was, jest before the Diamond-5 wagons was due to roll. This here Tex Conway, he was wagon boss fer the Diamond-5. I was settin' to home in the kitchin. It was along about nine minutes to 'leven, an' darker'n hell, with the wind blowin' fer who throw'd the chunk. I'd pulled off my shoes, an' the old woman was threadin' her needle fer to darn up a hole I'd wore through the toe of my left sock, on account it had shrunk in the worsh an' my toenail had cut through. Well, I was jest about to pull my sock off when someone thumped on the door. Yes, sir—a minute later an' I'd had my sock off!

"'Come in,' I says, 'an' what the hell's the matter?' It was Joe Emerson, an' he comes bustin' in like somethin' was after him. 'They's a dead man down by the lumber-piles,' he says, lookin' back over his shoulder an' crowdin' around behind me. 'I stumbled over him goin' home!' 'Prob'ly some drunk,' I says. 'Who is it?' 'How do I know who he is?' he says. 'But he ain't drunk. It's startin' in to rain, an' I fell over him, an' I put my hand on a piece of board that's stickin' out from inunder him, an' it was wet—an' part of it's blood!' Joe stuck out his hand, an' I seen it was all red. 'Well,' I says, 'if he's dead he's got to be took outa the lumber-yard,' so I pulls on my shoes without waitin' fer the old woman to darn the hole in my sock, an' I gits the umberellar an' a lantern, an' my revolver, an' we goes out the door.

"At the corner, Joe comes to a halt. 'I seen enough,' he says. 'I ain't goin' back there!' 'How do I know where he's at if you don't come along?' I

says. 'You know where the lumber-yard's at,' he says, 'an' he's layin' in the mud right in the road!'

"I seen how Joe was scairt. He ain't got much nerve, an' I figgered how he wouldn't be much good to me nohow. So I seen they was a light in the pool-room yet. I'd jest left there a few minutes before an' went home. So I goes over there, an' there's John Surry, an' Pete Kublik, an' Skinny Balch, an' Ki Henry playin' a game of Kelly pool. I told 'em they was a dead man over in the lumber-yard an' they had to come along. Skinny an' Ki was willin', but Peter an' John Surry wasn't—their balls was alive, an' they could still win. So I waited, an' Pete, he gits an easy set-up on the twelve ball an' pockets it fer the game, so we borried another lantern off'n Jake Botz that runs the joint an' went over to the lumber-yard.

"Well, sir, it didn't take me long to see it was big Ole Johnson, an' that he'd got shot, what with the piece of board he laid on all red with blood that had run on to it. Someone had waited there betwixt two lumber-piles, an' when he come by they retch out with a gun an' let him have it there in the dark. 'Tain't more'n a minute 'fore I picks up a package of worshin' that was layin' there in the mud, an' then I picks up Tex's gun, which he'd dropped it there betwixt them lumber-piles. 'Boys,' I says, holdin' them relics up, 'this here is Tex Conway's worshin, an' likewise his gun!'" The man paused and blinked his muddy eyes owlishly into Mayfair's face. "I s'pose you'd like to know how I was able to git to the bottom of it that quick, eh? Well, sir, I'll tell you. I know'd it was Tex's worshin' 'cause I was in the pool-room jest a little while before an' I seen Jake Botz give Tex the package. Jake's woman, she takes in worshin' fer some of the boys. Big Ole an' Tex, they'd had a scrap in front of the pool-room that afternoon, an' Tex knocked Ole's head through the winder. I arrested Tex an' then turned him loose when Al Blodgett told me to. Ole, he got likkered up an' borries a pair of knucks off'n one of the boys an' claims he's goin' to chop Tex up with 'em. Jake, he warns Tex when he give him his worshin', an' Tex claims if Ole swings on him with them knucks he'll shoot him dead. Us fellers in the pool-room, we all heard him say that. It was a threat—that's what it was, an' no gittin' around it. Then a little while later I picked up Tex's hat where a limb had knocked it off when he started through the cottonwoods fer to git to the corral."

Mayfair nodded. "I can see how it would be easy to identify the laundry an' the hat as belongin' to this Tex. But how about the gun? What kind of a gun was it?"

"It was a forty-four Colt. Same as most cowboys carries."

"How do you know it was Tex's gun?"

The constable made a deprecatory motion with his hand. "I know'd it was hisn 'cause who the hell's would it be—layin' there where he'd jest shot big Ole? Policin', a man's got to use his head."

"What do you know of this Tex?" Mayfair asked.

"Well, he hit here an' got a job on the Lazy-K round-up a year ago last fall, an' old P. J. Blodgett fired him an' Sam Mason hired him an' made him wagon boss come spring. Sam, he owns the Diamond-5 an' he's as rich as old P. J. Blodgett, some claims. An' I guess he is, the way he throws money around. Why, I seen him myself, right there on that platform, one time when Miss Helen was goin' away, she's Old Sam's darter, Miss Helen is—the one that runs the school. An' he was down to see her off, an' she says, 'How you fixed fer change, Dad?' she says. 'I've only got a little with me,' an' Old Sam he reaches into his wallet an' give her two *twenties*! 'I'll send you a cheque Monday,' he says, an' her only goin' to Winnipeg, an' only goin' to stay a couple of weeks, at that! But speakin' about Tex Conway—I allers figured he'd stand watchin'."

"Why?"

"Well, a lot of things. In the first place, he was too damn handy with his fists. He knocked Al Blodgett down the night before he shot big Ole, jest 'cause Al kidded him a little. Then one night in a poker game he raised Al five hundred dollars. Yes, sir—tossed a five-hundred-dollar bill in the pot jest like it was a dollar. Al, he laid down three aces—an' Tex laughed at him an' tossed down his hand, an' all he had was a pair of fours. Now what I claim, what's a cow-puncher doin' runnin' around with five-hundred-dollar bills in his pocket? They don't only git forty a month—an' they blow it as fast as they git it. The way I figger, Tex, he done a robbery somewheres down in the States an' then skipped acrost the line." The man paused and chuckled. "That made Al mad as hell. But not half so mad as Tex courtin' Helen Mason. You see, Al, he'd be'n waitin' on Helen Mason, off an' on, fer quite a spell, an' folks had come to think how they'd git married 'fore long. But after this here Tex come along, Al, he didn't stand no show. Folks got to kiddin' him about it, till he'd git sore as hell, an' one night in the pool-room Al, he made some crack at Tex, when Tex was standin' at the counter. Al, he's quite a heft bigger'n what Tex is, an' he had a cue in his hands besides, but when Tex got through with him Al was in pretty bad shape, an' it didn't take him more'n two seconds to do it, neither. I seen the rookus, an' if it had be'n anyone but Al got it I'd say it served him right, but old P. J. bein' who he is, I didn't dast not to arrest Tex fer assault, an' the jedge, he fined him ten dollars an' costs." The man paused and winked knowingly. "You see, me an' Slim Baxter, he's the jedge, we both know'd what side our bread was

battered on, 'cause old P. J., he could lose us our job quicker'n a cat kin lick her whiskers.

"Well, that lickin' made Al madder'n ever. So the next day Al, he slips this here big Ole, which he was a teamster that worked fer old P. J., a bottle of hooch, an' he tells him to go after Tex when he come fer his worshin' that night an' give him a dam' good beatin', an' he'll pay the fine, if they is any, an' give Ole twenty-five dollars to boot. Ole, he drunk the likker, an' he's a fightin' fool when he's drunk, and he runs on to Tex walkin' along the sidewalk with Helen Mason, so he comes up an' shoulders Tex off in the mud. Ole, he's bigger, yet, than Al, an' he's half agin' as big as Tex, an' Tex, he steps back on to the sidewalk, an' his face is pretty white. He gives Ole one look, an' he says: 'I'll tend to you later,' he says. Then he turns to the girl, an' he says somethin' so low us that's be'n lookin' on don't hear it, but she shakes her head no an' she stamps her foot. 'Damn the round-up! Do it now!' she says, an' at that Tex steps in an' before Ole know'd what hit him he was backed acrost the sidewalk an' his head knocked through Jake Botz's winder. Then Tex wipes his hands off on his han'kerchief like hittin' Ole had got 'em dirty.

"Al Blodgett, he'd be'n watchin' through the bank winder, acrost the street, an' when he seen what's happened he runs over where I was standin', in front of the pool-room. 'Arrest that man,' he orders. 'This time he'll git what was comin' to him! Lock him up over Sunday. He'll git ninety days for this!' Helen Mason, she give him jest one look, like he was somethin' the cat had drug in, an' Al, he turns red an' then white. I locks Tex up in the calaboose, an' when I come back I seen where her an' Al had be'n talkin', an' Al turns to me an' tells me to turn Tex loose. He says Miss Helen told him how Ole shoved Tex off'n the sidewalk before Tex hit him—jest as if Al hadn't know'd it all along! Me, I was willin' to turn Tex loose 'cause Old Sam Mason, he's got to be figgered on too, around here, same as P. J.

"Some of the boys took big Ole in the back of the pool-room an' patched him up, an' Al slips him another bottle of likker, an' Ole borried them knucks off'n Pete Kublik, an' he makes his brag around the pool-room that he'll chop Tex Conway into mincemeat. Al kind of hints around that the only sure way would be to take a gun, but big Ole, he ain't got no guts fer guns.

"Well, we all kind of look fer trouble that evenin', an' I don't go home fer supper, not wantin' to miss a good fight. Al Blodgett, he goes home, but he's back in the pool-room pretty quick. He's there when Tex comes in fer his worshin', long about ten o'clock er so. Then he steps out an' I don't see him no more that night.

“When Tex don’t show up, an’ it runs along towards ten o’clock, Skinny Balch says, ‘He ain’t goin’ to show up tonight. Young Eddie Mason was in here an’ heard Ole throw his brag, an’ he’s prob’ly told Tex about it. I’ll bet Tex is up to Old Sam Mason’s home, sparkin’ Helen.’ The rest of ’em laughed, an’ it made Ole madder’n ever, drunk as he was by that time, so he up an’ he says: ‘By God,’ he says, ‘I’m jest as good as any dam’ cow-puncher! If he kin go up to Old Sam’s house, so kin I. We’ll have it out right in Old Sam’s settin’ room if Tex is afraid to step outside!’ An’ with that he goes out the back door, an’ he ain’t be’n gone but a few minutes till Tex comes in fer his worshin’.

“Well, I wasn’t goin’ to traipse clean up to Old Sam’s house to see no fight, an’ mebbe not git to see it then. So I goes home, an’ the old woman give me hell fer bein’ late fer supper— —”

“Why didn’t you arrest him?” asked Mayfair.

“Arrest who?” asked the constable in surprise.

“Why, Ole, of course.”

“Arrest him! What fer? A man’s got a right to make his brag, ain’t he?”

“He was drunk wasn’t he? An’ he was carryin’ brass knucks.”

“Oh, shore. But Ole, he’s a local boy, an’ they ain’t no real harm into him. An’ the knucks wasn’t hisn. He borried ’em off’n Pete Kublik. An’ besides, I know’d it would tickle Al if Tex got beat up with them knucks, an’ I figgered if I’d kind of lay off, it would sort of be doin’ Al a good turn.

“Well, as I was goin’ on to say, I went home an’ ketched hell, an’ had jest got the old woman peaceable enough so she’d darn my sock, an’ I was jest goin’ to pull it off when there come a hell of a knockin’ on the door— —”

“Yes,” reminded Mayfair, “you told me about that, and about finding the body— —”

“An’ about me spottin’ it fer murder an’ bein’ able to say right off who done it.”

“Yes. An’ I suppose now, with Tex out of the way, this Al Blodgett has got clear sailin’ with Helen Mason, eh?”

“Hell, no! She won’t have nothin’ to do with him no more. Seems like she must of got mad as hell at Al that day, ’cause she ain’t never got over it. She don’t ’pear to go with no one—jest stays to home when she ain’t takin’ a bunch of them kids from the school out fer a walk. Al, he’s give up tryin’, I guess. Leastways, he’s goin’ pretty heavy on the likker lately.”

Mayfair nodded. “Did they hold an inquest on the teamster?”

"Shore. Old Doc Towne, he's the coroner, he helt an inquisish next day, an' the jury give a verdick of murder at the hands of a person or persons unknown to be Tex Conway. Doc, he dug out the bullet which it had went in jest over big Ole's heart an' fetched up agin' his backbone. It's plain as the nose on yer face what came off: Ole, he steps out the back door, headin' fer Old Sam's, an' he seen Tex go in the front door fer his worshin'. So he hangs back, prob'ly takin' another nick er two at his bottle. Meanwhile Tex gits his worshin', an' Jake tips him off about Ole's layin' fer him with them knucks. Tex claims he'll shoot Ole if he comes at him an' he goes out an' heads fer Mason's. Ole, he seen him go an' takes out after him, an' when he gits to the lumber-piles Tex hears him comin'. So he steps between two lumber-piles an' when Ole comes along he pulls his gun an' lets him have it. Then he dropped his gun an' his worshin' an' skipped to the horse corral, losin' his hat on the way. I questions young Eddie Mason, but he claims he ain't told Tex about Ole braggin' what he's goin' to do. Eddie claims he didn't know nothin' about no murder. But he looked kinda funny when he said it, an' I wouldn't be s'prised if he knows more'n he'll ever tell.

"So you kin see fer yerself it's a clear case agin' Tex, an' if he ever shows up around here I'll arrest him good an' proper. They can't no dam' cowboy from the States come up here an' kill off our local boys without hearin' from me about it—an' don't you fergit it!"

"That's the spirit," Mayfair applauded. "But wasn't there any other investigation? Didn't the Mounted Police take the matter up?"

"Oh yes. They sent a young rooky constable up here, an' he talked to me an' a few others, an' when he'd got through he seen how it wasn't no use to dig into it no deeper, so he made his report out, an' I guess Tex Conway is posted all over Canady. Old P. J. an' Al, they got out a kind of a handbill, like, givin' a description of Tex an' postin' a thousan'-dollar reward fer his arrest. They sent out them handbills to the police all over Canady, an' the States too. On account, they claimed, 'cause Ole was workin' fer them when he was shot. But they won't ketch Tex. No, sir—I figger he's got back to the States long ago—an' we won't never git him back. You can't blame 'em none, down in the States, fer not turnin' him over—they don't like to have their local boys git hung, no more'n what we like to git ourn shot."

"No, I suppose not," agreed the sergeant. "By the way, did you think to save that bullet, an' package of laundry, an' the hat?"

"Shore I did. The hat an' the worshin' an' the gun I'm savin' fer evidence in case Tex would ever show up. I've got the bullet too. Doc Towne, he dug it out of Ole's backbone an' give it to me. But hell, the bullet don't amount to a dam'. It's jest a common forty-four bullet, like any forty-four gun

shoots. I put it by, along with the other things, 'cause it happened to be handy to."

Mayfair rose to his feet and tossed his cigar-butt into a sawdust-filled spit-box. "I'm obliged to you for tellin' me the story," he said. "I'm always interested in a smart bit of police work. I've be'n at it for a long time myself — —"

"Well, you jest remember what I've told you, an' you'll git your chanct yet. I'll tell you, if I git on the force I'll see't you do. I like the way you listen."

"Yes, listenin' sometimes pays — —"

The other was on his feet now, and he clapped a fat hand familiarly on Mayfair's shoulder. "I'll tell the world it does! These here folks that's allus runnin' off at the head, it don't git 'em nothin'. Keep yer eyes open, an' yer ears dug out, an' yer mouth shet—that's me, every time!"

"That's right. What little I've be'n able to pry out of you has sure interested me. In fact, I'm so interested that I'm goin' to ask one more favour of you."

"Anythin' you want. I'm allus glad to accommodate a friend."

"I'd like to see the laundry package, an' the hat, an' the gun, an' the bullet, if you don't mind."

"Why, sure! I wouldn't show 'em to everybody, but us bein' in the same business, you might say, I'll be tickled to. Come on over to the house; it ain't only jest down the track apiece."

The man led the way, waddling down the track, until he turned into a by-path that led to a ramshackle house which abutted the right-of-way.

A red-faced woman looked up from her stooping position in a small garden patch.

"D'ye come home to hoe the potatoes like you said you would?" she asked.

The fat constable favoured her with a withering look. "The potatoes kin wait till tomorrow. Can't you see I'm busy?"

"I see you got the train through town all right without no one stealin' the engyne."

The man passed on into the house without deigning to reply to the wifely gibe, and Mayfair followed. To the officer's surprise, the place was meticulously neat. "Your wife seems to be a good housekeeper," he ventured.

"Too dam' good. She brags that folks could eat off'n her floors. But who'n hell wants to eat off'n a floor? I claim if a man wants to track in a little mud, rainy days, or lay his coat on a chair, 'stid of hangin' it up behind the door, he'd ort to be let do it. But it ain't no use augerin' with her. I've give it up an' let her have her way—inside."

The man passed into another room, and returned a moment later with a long pasteboard box, which he laid on the table and removed the cover. Mayfair examined the laundry, the gun, and the Stetson hat with apparent interest while the constable kept up a running fire of comment and explanation as to the exact position of each in regard to the body. At length the sergeant picked up the bullet.

"That there's the bullet," Dort explained, "that Doc dug out of Ole's backbone just before the inquis. Wasn't no sense diggin' it out, that I kin see. We know'd he was shot. But Doc likes to be doin'. What'n hell anyone wants to be proddin' around in dead folks fer is more'n what I know. I hate to touch one, let alone claw around in him." The constable waved a fat hand with an air of superiority. "Well, there you be. That there's the evidence that proves Tex done the murder."

Still fingering the bullet, Mayfair smiled into the man's face. "Do you know," he said, "I'd like to have this bullet. As I told you, I'm always interested in good jobs of policin', an' I'd like to be able to say, 'Here's the bullet that killed Ole Johnson, in the famous murder down in Blodgett. It was given to me by Rattlesnake Dort, the constable that handled the case!'"

The fat man beamed. "Jest take it right along, an' welcome," he urged. "I know how you feel about it. I like to collect sooveneers myself. Got spoons right here in the house from five different hotels, an' a couple of towels out of a Pullman sleeper." He paused and grinned. "Them towels come dam' near losin' me my job—I went down to Winnipeg fer to fetch back Tim Wilson, which he'd inbezzled some money off'n Old Sam Mason. I didn't take no sleeper, but comin' back we was in the smoker, an' they was a sleeper next car back. Three or four of the local boys had towels out of sleepers, an' I seen the chanct to git me a couple. The train was goin' like hell, so I tells Tim to wait there a minute, an' I steps acrost into the sleeper an' goes into the worsh-room, which there was a couple of fellers in there tellin' stories, an' I listens a minute or two, an' then I told the one about the old nigger woman an' the preacher, an' they laughed, an' one thing led to another, an' they wanted to know about where I come from, an' I told 'em about goin' down to fetch Tim back, an' one of 'em has a bottle, an' after while I works around an' gits a couple of towels in my pocket, an' goes back in the smoker, an' dam' if Tim ain't gone! Yes, sir, he'd hopped off at some

little station or other, an' I hadn't even noticed the train had stopped. Well, I had a hell of a time explainin' about it when I got back—an' you bet if Tim ever shows up around here I'll nail him sure as hell."

"You say there's a lot of forty-four guns around here that you know of?" Mayfair asked as the man relapsed into silence.

"Yes, there's quite a few. Dam' near all the cowboys packs 'em—either that or a forty-five. The twentieth of July we most gen'ally al'us have a big shootin' match. Usta have it Dominion Day, but the last couple years we shoved our celebration over to the twentieth, on account of because all the Lazy-K an' Diamond-5 cowboys is in town on Dominion Day, it bein' right between round-ups, an' they git to raisin' too much hell, besides outshootin' our local boys, so's they ain't got no chanct at the prizes. Most everyone gits out an' shoots, an' they's rifles an' revolvers of all kinds. Al Blodgett an' Ki Henry an' young Eddie Mason is the best with revolvers. They make them three stand back of the line—handycap, they call it. You'd ort to come down if you're over around these parts. You'd see some real good shootin'."

"Maybe I will," answered Mayfair. "I'm figured pretty good with a revolver, myself. What is it—free-for-all?"

"Shore! The stores puts up prizes, an' they's lots of match shoots fer side bets. An' plenty of pools when each man puts in so much an' the winner takes the pot."

"I'll try to be here," said the sergeant. "Well, I'll be pullin' out on the next train. Sure you can handle things here—the store robbery, an' the Methodist church windows?"

"Jest you leave it to me! Go right ahead with what ever else you've got to do, an' don't worry. I'm on the job here every minute. So long!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
HELEN HEARS OF TEX

ONE day, a week after Sergeant Mayfair's departure, Helen Mason was again seated beneath her favourite tree, reading, while the boys played their romping games. A sudden hush in their noisy activity drew her attention, and her eyes strayed to a group at the lower edge of the grass plot. One little fellow stood with set lips, facing the others, who had collected behind one of the larger boys who was evidently taunting the youngster who stood alone. Suddenly the lone one leaped forward, there was a yowl of pain and a blur of motion as the two forms merged into a writhing, twisting tangle of arms and legs. A moment later the girl was stooping and pulling them apart. The youngster who started the battle rose at the first touch of her hand, stood very straight, and, removing the cap from his head, waited with his eyes on the larger boy, who lay prone, blubbing in his sleeve.

"What's all this?" asked the girl. "Why were you fighting?"

"It was him! He started it," cried one, pointing to the youngster who stood, cap in hand.

"Never mind telling tales. Let these boys answer for themselves."

She turned to the little fellow, who stood still scowling at the whimpering boy on the ground. "Why did you fight him, Billy?" she asked.

"He called me names. He said I didn't know anything. And they all said I was afraid. And I'm not afraid. I didn't know about their game because I never played games. There are no boys to play games with—only me. Tex and I work and hunt and look at the traps. And sometimes we slide downhill. But we don't have games. But I ain't—I—I aren't afraid. I'm a tillicum. I've got guts."

"No, I'm sure you're not afraid. But it isn't nice to fight—"

"Yes, ma'm, it is," contradicted the little fellow, eyeing her with the steady gaze of absolute conviction. "Tex says to fight like hell and never run an inch. Anyone can run, but it takes guts to fight, and if you get in the first licks you've got the fight half won."

"Why—why—what talk!" the girl exclaimed, staring aghast into the serious blue eyes upraised to hers. And—Tex! Who was Tex? The name bit into her brain with a stab of keenest anguish. The other boys crowded about, awaiting with eager anticipation the punishment the lady was sure to mete out to the new boy who swore. Even the one on the ground had risen to a

sitting posture and was drying his eyes on his sleeve the better to witness the discomfiture of his victor.

“He said ‘hell’,” whispered one to another, in awed anticipation. “And he licked Budge—fair fight,” said a third.

“Miss Austin, of Form One, would give him two days’ bread and water for ‘hell’ and ‘guts’,” whispered one.

“And Miss Roberts would give him ten across the hand for fighting,” another opined. “But Miss Mason, she ain’t a teacher. She owns the school. He ain’t afraid of her. Maybe she’ll make him hold soap in his mouth—my mother does.”

Of these whisperings the girl was unconscious. She was staring fascinated into those blue eyes that returned her gaze frankly—unafraid, unconscious of any impropriety of word or deed.

“Who—who is Tex?” she found herself asking. “Your father?” And waited, breathless, for the answer.

“No, ma’m. Tex is my pardner,” replied the little fellow.

His partner! Just another little boy. Of course there must be thousands of Tex’s—but—

A gong sounded from the mess-hall, announcing dinner, as the girl realized that the name had revived a hope long dead—revived it only to dash it in fragments at her feet and rouse to poignant anguish the old pain in her heart. She was a fool to have thought even for an instant that this waif, this little boy from nowhere, could have known her Tex.

“Run along, boys,” she found herself saying, “and wash your hands and faces and comb your hair. Then hurry back. We are having dinner out here today. See, there is the table over there under the trees.”

The boys scampered away, even the miracle of a fight and two “swear words” going unpunished, forgotten in anticipation of dinner out under the trees. For most of the boys knew the good things that would be on that table. The lady bountiful often had boys from the school as her guests, six or eight at a time, and the lucky few were always the envy of the many left behind.

Ablutions over, the boys raced for the table, where the lady awaited them, standing beside her chair at the head of the table that seemed fairly to bend under the weight of the good things with which each plate was heaped.

Noisily the youngsters crowded into the empty chairs—all but the new little boy with the serious blue eyes. Gravely he walked to the lady’s side, drew the chair out slightly, and bowed with the air of a courtier, even as the clear blue eyes frowned open disapproval of the lads who were already seated.

Helen Mason glanced down at her little cavalier, a warm smile upon her lips, took her seat, and as the boy started for the vacant chair down toward the foot of the table, she detained him with her hand on his arm. "Wait a minute, Billy."

Glancing toward the chair at her right, which had been pre-empted by the boy who had blubbered, she said: "Will you please take that seat down there? I want Billy Jones here beside me where I can talk to him." And as the larger lad sheepishly complied, the youngster seated himself with a bow.

"Thank you," he said. "I like you ever so much. Better than anybody—next to Tex and Sergeant Mayfair."

"How old are you, Billy?" Helen asked abruptly.

"I'm seven—and when the snow comes I'll be eight."

The girl felt her heart go out in a rush of affection for this baby, this little man who fought honestly and well because he had been taught that it was right to fight, whose talk was the talk of the outlands and whose manners were the manners of the drawing-room, who proclaimed himself a tillicum, whatever that meant, and who had a pardner named Tex.

"Where is it you live?" she asked.

The small brow knit in a frown of perplexity. "I don't know—just ezackly. It's by a river—a long, long ways off. It took a long time to get here—in a canoe with Sergeant Mayfair, and then a steamboat, and another canoe, and then a great big steamboat, and the ocean, and then on the cars. Do you like the cars?"

"Why, yes—that is, when I want to go any place."

"But I like a canoe better," said the boy. "Tex and I have got a canoe. And in the winter we have a sled and snowshoes, and next winter we'll have dogs for our sled."

"But your father and your mother? Don't you remember them?"

"Oh, they are dead. I was awful sorry. That was when Tex first came—Tex and Sergeant Mayfair. My daddy died then, and Sergeant Mayfair and I lived in a tent and we dugged a grave and Tex lived in the house with my mama, and then she died and we made the grave bigger and put 'em in it. Then Sergeant Mayfair went away and Tex stayed. He's good. He helps sick people."

"Is he a doctor?"

"I don't know what that is, but he tried to help my daddy and my mama, but he couldn't, so they kicked out, and — —"

"They—what?"

"They died—that's what you say when they die—or sometimes you say they cashed in. That's what Tex says." He paused abruptly, his eyes on the girl's face. "Did you ever kill a wolf?" he asked. "A big white one?"

Helen smiled. "No, I never killed a wolf. I never even saw a white one."

"I did," announced the boy proudly. "I shot him with the twenty-two, and he bit Nellie."

"Nellie? Who is Nellie, your sister?"

"No, ma'm. I ain't—haven't got any sisters. Nellie's a bitch." The girl gasped at the announcement, then smiled at the boy's next words. "And she had her puppies in the dog-house under the snow, and I dug her out. Tex said I've got guts, and he makes me learn things. I can add numbers, and read what he writes down on the paper, and sometimes I don't get it right, but most always. And he teaches me to always be polite and to take off my hat in the house and when there's ladies, only you're the first lady I know, 'cept my mama. And I must stand beside their chair and seat them at the table—because they're ladies, you know. And not eat with my knife, or hold it funny, or my fork either, and not leave my spoon in my cup——" The boy paused abruptly and glared across the table at a youngster who was in the act of spearing a piece of bread from a plate in the centre of the table. "Quit reaching with your dam' fork! God's sake, what will the lady think about that! Ask for what you want, Tex says!" He returned his eyes to the girl and resumed his interrupted conversation. "And Tex says we must always be polite and good to ladies and girls. And he knows all about everything. And he says he didn't give a dam' about anything till he found me—but he did, though—I know—'cause in the night, sometimes, he talks out loud, and he talks to Helen."

"Helen!" The word was a gasp, and the little boy's eyes widened in wonder as he stared into the face that had leaned suddenly so close to his own.

"What's the matter?" he asked in alarm. "You're so white, and your eyes — —"

"Who is Helen? Tell me! And what is his other name—Tex's?"

The boy, half frightened by the tenseness of her tone, faltered: "I—I—I don't know—I—I—I guess that's all the name he's got—just Tex!"

With a mighty effort the girl pulled herself together. She forced a smile to her lips, though her hands, concealed by the table, were claspings and unclasping till the nails scarred the palms. "There, there," she soothed, in a voice she tried in vain to hold steady. "Now tell me all about it. I'd like so much to know. Please, tell me all about it."

“Yes, ma’m. But I don’t know. I asked him once who is Helen. And he looked at me kind of funny, and he said how do I know about Helen, and I said, ‘You talk to her sometimes when you’re asleep, and I hear you.’ And he said: ‘She’s a girl—the most wonderful girl in the world—and I love her so, Billy.’ And then he said, real cross: ‘But that’s all past and gone, and I’ll play the game.’ And I asked him what game, and he said: ‘A dam’ tough game,’ and then he laughed—but not like it was funny—it was a kind of a different laugh— —”

“But what is his name— —”

“His name is Tex.”

“Tex what? Think hard, Billy. It’s terribly important! Didn’t he ever tell you his other name? Was it Conway?”

“No, ma’m. Just Tex—that’s all.”

“Did he ever tell you where he came from—what he used to do before he found you?”

“Yes, he said he used to ride horses and look after cattle, but I never saw a horse or a cattle till Sergeant Mayfair showed me some.”

How she managed to finish that meal Helen Mason never knew. Tex—her Tex—was alive! Through her whole being there surged a wild strange gladness, a perfect frenzy of joy and hope that seemed to pulse through her veins with every beat of her heart—all at once to atone for the long months of uncertainty and pain. It was true! Tex was alive! No slightest doubt assailed her. He had talked in the night of Helen—of her—he had been a horseman and had looked after cattle! Somewhere—on some far-off Arctic river—Tex was alive and—playing the game. But where? And what game? “A dam’ tough game,” Billy had said. What kind of a tough game—and why? Somewhere this waif of the far outlands had known her Tex—had lived with him and had learned to love him as people love their God. Over and over in her brain the question repeated itself: Where? Where? Where? Within the Arctic Circle, Sergeant Mayfair had said. But why hadn’t he mentioned Tex? The boy said he had come by canoes and by steamboats and by cars. That conveyed no idea to the mind of the girl, except the idea of vast distance. Tex was alive, but he was a long, long way from Blodgett—in a wilderness, somewhere in the Arctic where there were no other boys, Billy had told her, and no ladies, and there were wolves, and dogs to pull the sled. In the far, far North—but the girl realized that the North, beyond the railways, was all but boundless in its vastness. And from this far place Tex had sent Billy Jones to school—to her school—to the school she had told him she would start as soon as the wagons rolled last year. Her heart leaped

at the thought that he had sent the little boy here so he could be near to her. For some reason Sergeant Mayfair had purposely avoided any mention of Tex. But she knew now that it was he who recommended her school, and not anyone in Regina. But this game Tex was playing—the “dam’ tough game”? Why was he playing it? And why was it past and gone? She knew Tex had never killed big Ole and then run away—she knew that despite all the investigations, and the inquest, and what everybody else believed. But why had he gone away? And what did he mean by “the game”?

Over and over in her brain these questions kept recurring until they became only a meaningless routine of words, as she lay back in her chair under the big cottonwood tree and watched the fleecy clouds drift across the blue.

Nearby the boys were playing their games, but their shouts sounded far away. As she turned to watch them for a moment, she saw that Billy Jones was not playing with the others. He was standing alone beside the creek, staring down into the water. Hot tears filled the girl’s eyes and coursed unheeded down her cheeks. “Poor dear, he’s lonely—lonely for Tex.” She leaped to her feet, dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief, and, hurrying to the creek, seated herself on the bank, and drew the boy down beside her. He smiled.

“I like to see the fish. Sometimes Tex and I catch trout.”

“Tex and I have caught trout together too,” she answered slowly.

The boy was staring wide-eyed into her face. “Do you know Tex?” The small voice trembled with eagerness, almost with disbelief, thought the girl as she smiled into the blue eyes.

“Yes, Billy. I know Tex. You see, Billy, I’m Helen—the Helen Tex talks to when he’s asleep.”

The little fellow leaned close against her, resting his hand on her knee. “Oh, and Tex loves you, and so do I!” he said.

Then her arms were about the boy and she was hugging him to her breast. “And I love Tex, and I love you too. And we’ll find him, Billy, and we’ll keep him with us—always.”

When she released him the blue eyes were blinking rapidly. “But what are you crying about?” he asked. “Tillicums don’t cry. And you’re a tillicum, and so’s Tex, and so’m I. Tex says we mustn’t cry.”

She was smiling through her tears. “That’s right, Billy, we mustn’t cry. We’ll find him, and we’ll be so happy together—we three. You’re just the dearest, sweetest little boy in the world!”

“Let’s go now and find Tex. I don’t like the school, and the boys and the men down here. I only like you. And in the night, when no one can see me, I cry too—even if I am a tillicum. I want to go to Tex. I like Tex and I like you, and Sergeant Mayfair. But not other people!”

Sergeant Mayfair! He would know the answers! He would know where Tex was—and maybe he would know why he was there! Then, of a sudden, her blood turned to ice within her veins. Sergeant Mayfair—a policeman! They had charged Tex with murder—those fools who had conducted the investigation. She saw it all now. Tex was in jail some place—and he had sent the boy on to the school without letting him know. But surely there would have been news of the arrest! Everyone would know—would be talking about it!

“You’re so white again,” said a small voice at her side.

“Oh—Billy—did—did Tex come with you—part way?”

“No, just me and Sergeant Mayfair. Tex stayed home at the cabin to trap and prospect and take care of Nellie’s puppies. There’s six of ’em. And they’re half mine and half Tex’s, and you can have half too. He wanted me to go to school, so I came with Sergeant Mayfair, and Tex didn’t come. I want to go back to Tex, and you want to go too. When can we start?”

“Bless your little heart! We’ll start just as soon as ever we can. But first we’ve got to find Sergeant Mayfair. You see, we don’t know where to go.”

The boy’s face fell. “But he’s gone away on the cars, I guess. How can we find him? If we could find him, he would take us back. Tex says Sergeant Mayfair is a damn good man.”

The girl smiled. “Didn’t Tex ever tell you that it’s wrong to swear?”

“Swear? What’s swear? No, he didn’t ever say swear.”

The smile widened and Helen laughed happily. “I’m glad he left something for me to teach you,” she said. “Run along now; there comes Miss Austin all dressed for the nature-study class. You’re going to walk up the creek to the pond today and learn about tadpoles and things. We’ll have to wait till I can find Sergeant Mayfair, and that may take a long time—a week, maybe. But you be a good boy and make the best of things, and just as soon as we can we’ll go to Tex. Tomorrow I am going away on the cars, but I’ll come back soon.”

“Can’t I go with you on the cars?”

“No, not this time. You see, I’m going to Regina. I know the superintendent, and he’ll tell me where I can find Sergeant Mayfair.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

SERGEANT MAYFAIR DABBLES IN SCIENCE

AFTER SERGEANT MAYFAIR took leave of Rattlesnake Dort he walked back up the track and on to the single street of the little town. A sign caught his eye, and he turned in at a doorway between the drugstore and the pool-room and ascended a flight of wooden stairs, pausing before a glass-panelled door which bore the legend:

DR. TOWNE

Office hours 2 to 4—7 to 8 P.M.

WALK IN

He turned the knob and entered. A young girl rose to her feet from a chair before a small desk. "Is there something?" she inquired.

"Is the doctor in?"

"Just a moment. Won't you be seated?" She disappeared through an inner door, and a moment later reappeared. "The doctor will see you. Will you step inside?" She resumed her chair, and the sergeant stepped into the inner office to be greeted by a pleasant-faced, white-haired man who looked up from a microscope placed on a table near the window. "What's your trouble? You don't look very sick."

"Never been sick a day in my life— —"

"And want to know what the trouble is, eh?" smiled the doctor. "Well, describe your symptoms."

Mayfair returned the smile as he reached into his pocket and laid a small object on the table. "Did you ever see that bullet before?" he asked.

The doctor adjusted a pair of spectacles, picked up the bullet, and, holding it to the light, subjected it to minute scrutiny. "Yes," he answered without hesitation. "That is the bullet that killed a teamster named Johnson, a year ago. I removed it from his spine at an autopsy I performed before the inquest."

"You are positive this is the same bullet?"

"Absolutely."

"A year is quite a while. Would you mind telling me how you can be sure of it?"

"I don't perform many autopsies — —"

"But there are a great many bullets fired from forty-four calibre guns that don't find lodgment in people's spines."

"I grant you that. But in this case I am positive of my identification. Step closer. See that scratch—there on the mushroomed nose of the bullet. That's where my forceps slipped."

Mayfair studied the scratch for a moment. "I don't suppose," he said, "that you remember just what pair of forceps you used—the pair that made this scratch?"

"Why—yes." The doctor moved to a glassed instrument case ranged against the wall, opened the door, and withdrew a certain pair of forceps. "Of course it would be impossible for me to remember to a certainty, at this late date, were it not for the fact that I know I would have used these particular forceps for an operation of that nature."

The officer took the instrument, examined it, and, drawing his revolver from its holster, threw it open and removed the cartridges. Then, upon the surface of one of the bullets, he made a scratch with the point of the forceps similar to the one on the mushroomed bullet. "Now, Doctor, I notice that you have several other forceps there. Let me see them, please."

When the doctor wonderingly complied, Mayfair carefully scratched the other bullets, each with a different pair of forceps, and making a slight identification mark upon the bullet scratched by the first pair, he wrapped each bullet carefully in a separate piece of paper and placed them in his pocket.

"And now may I inquire what this is all about?" asked the doctor as he returned the instruments to their case.

"My name is Mayfair, of the Mounted Police, and I am quietly investigating the Johnson murder. The positive identification of that bullet may be the means of bringing the guilty man to justice. Mind you, I'm not making any promises. But if a certain man down in Toronto knows his stuff, as I think he knows it, I believe I can promise to have the guilty man behind the bars within a couple of weeks."

"You refer to . . . ?"

"His name is Halguard. He is a sort of a scientist, in his way. He has added a lot to the science of identification by fingerprints, and also he is said to be able to tell to a certainty whether or not a certain bullet was or was not fired from a certain gun."

“Not quite satisfied with the work of our local Sherlock, eh?” grinned the doctor.

“Well, maybe not. Maybe I’m just playin’ a hunch. I hope you will make no mention that any investigation is goin’ on. A great deal may depend on secrecy. I just had all the details from your local constable, without, I think, lettin’ him know that I was gettin’ them.”

“Very likely,” answered the doctor dryly. “I think anyone could steal the bank, building and all, and Rattlesnake Dort wouldn’t know it was gone until someone mentioned it.”

“How about the pool-room?” grinned Mayfair.

“Oh, Rattlesnake would miss that right away. No, the pool-room is safe. Seriously, that man was murdered, all right, but I think they got away on the wrong foot, accusing that young Tex Conway of the crime.”

“Why?”

“I knew him, slightly. He was range foreman for Old Sam Mason—a good, clean-cut young man, apparently. Certainly not the type of man who would shoot a man down in cold blood, nor was he the type who would have run away if he had killed in self-defence. Frankly, I believe there was a double murder committed that night. I believe Conway happened along at the time of the murder and was murdered too, and his body made away with, after evidence had been fixed to make him appear the guilty party.”

“Have you got any suspicions as to the real murderer?”

“W-e-l-l—no—none that I would care to voice.”

A train whistled in the distance, and Mayfair turned toward the door. “Good-bye, Doctor, I’ll see you again. Don’t mention my visit, please. I’m catching this train!”

From Blodgett, Sergeant Mayfair went straight to Regina, and within an hour of his arrival he was closeted with the superintendent. Straps counted for little between the superintendent and the oldest sergeant in the service—fast friends, these two, and comrades of many a bitter trail, each holding the other in supreme respect.

The superintendent listened attentively as Mayfair talked. “And do you really believe it can be done?” he asked when the sergeant had finished. “I’ve heard something of this man Halgwaard and his experiments. But it seems incredible that a bullet can be traced to the particular gun that fired it. The proof would have to be mighty convincing. Remember, lives hang in the balance. And I don’t believe the courts would admit that kind of evidence—not yet, at least.”

"I believe it's possible," Mayfair replied. "If what I have read of it is true, I know it's possible. You know I'm not one to grab on to new theories. I think I'm what you'd call conservative. But this looks reasonable. As for the courts, even if they wouldn't admit the man's findings as evidence, if the identification of the bullet would lead us to the right man—the murderer—we would then have a mighty good chance of getting hold of other evidence that the court would admit. Might even get a confession."

"You say you want to go to Toronto. Why can't you mail Halgvaard this bullet?"

"I thought of that, but it seems to me, when we consider the importance of the man's findings—not alone in regard to this particular crime, but in clearin' up future crimes—that I'd like to go down an' see exactly how it's done, Finger-print identification is already an established fact—and if this 'finger-println' 'bullets is as accurate, don't you see what a great factor it is goin' to be in the investigation of crime?"

"Yes—if it works. I guess you're right, Mayfair. We ought to look into it—and there is no one I'd rather delegate the job to. Go ahead. Find out all you can about it—remembering all the time that the evidence has got to be convincing to a jury."

And so the sergeant went to a certain private laboratory in Toronto. Ranged along its walls were cabinets displaying firearms of every known make and pattern. After a brief wait he found himself facing a man whose very air seemed to radiate a quiet competence to do the thing he set out to do.

Introductions over, Mayfair launched into an outline of the facts—the facts as he knew them. But he was halted after the first few words by the wave of a hand. "Please do not give me any details of the crime—if a crime has been committed. My office is not to investigate crime, nor to adduce theories. It is simply to answer two questions—no more. What type of small arm fired a certain bullet? Was this certain bullet fired from that certain gun? These questions I shall undertake to answer, and to prove to the satisfaction of a jury. Whether your case stands or falls upon my findings is no concern of mine."

Mayfair nodded. "That suits me. It's better so."

"Have you the bullet in question—and the gun?"

"I've got the bullet. I hope to get the gun later."

"Come with me," invited the man, and led the way into a room fitted up with peculiarly constructed microscopes, lighting devices, bullet mounts, and various complicated contrivances for microphotography. Here Mayfair

met a young assistant nearly as competent-looking as Halgwaard himself, and an hour or more was spent in giving the officer a rough idea of the functions of the various instruments. Finally he produced his mushroomed bullet and handed it to Halgwaard. After a brief microscopic examination the man looked up. "I can answer the first of the two questions," he said. "This bullet was fired from a revolver—forty-four calibre, right twist."

"How do you know that?" Mayfair asked.

"Simple enough. This is an unjacketed lead bullet, and you can see by the markings that it was fired from a gun using the right twist. Colt is the only modern American manufacturer using the left twist. I shall now fire a bullet from a Colt of the same calibre, and I will then be able to point out the difference in the marks left on the two bullets." Suiting the action to the word, the man recovered the bullet that he fired into a tank containing water and a thick padding of cotton batting. "There," he said, "you can readily see for yourself that the markings made by the twist of the gun are the reverse of these others." And Mayfair did see for himself, and as the realization of the infallibility of the mute evidence dawned upon him, the impression it registered was almost one of awe. A bullet fired a year ago in the lumber-yard at Blodgett had in about six minutes been traced to the type of gun that fired it.

"There's no way of tellin' what make of right-twist gun this bullet was fired from, I suppose?" he asked.

Halgwaard shook his head. "Not yet," he admitted. "I can eliminate several of the cheaper guns. This bullet was fired from a gun of excellent manufacture—such as the Smith & Wesson—but to state absolutely that it was fired from a Smith & Wesson—no. Possibly when I've carried my investigation and experiments farther along—a year from now—ten years—I may be able to tell you to a certainty what make of gun fired that bullet.

"But if you should bring me a suspected gun, I can positively state that I can tell you to a certainty whether that gun fired this bullet or not. This is possible because each gun places individual markings on every bullet fired from it—markings that no other gun could possibly impart to it. Bring me your suspected gun, and I'll fire a bullet from it, then mount the bullet beside this one and examine them under the microscope, and in a very few moments I can tell you beyond any doubt whether your bullet there was fired from that gun or some other."

"There is one thing more, in regard to this particular bullet," Mayfair said. "It was removed from the victim a year ago, and has been in the possession of a local constable. It will be necessary to show that this was in fact the bullet that was removed from the victim's body. The coroner who

removed it identified it by a certain scratch across the mushroomed end, made by his forceps. Can you positively state, and prove, that this scratch was made by those particular forceps—that it could not have been made by another pair of forceps, even of similar pattern?”

“Very easily. There are no duplicates in nature. Micromasurement and microphotography will show to a certainty what particular forceps was used.”

“Show me, then,” answered the officer, producing from his pocket the paper-wrapped cartridges. “Here are some bullets taken from my own gun. I have scratched each with a different pair of forceps. One is scratched with the forceps that the coroner said scratched the fatal bullet. I know which that bullet is. Let me see you pick it out.”

The man took the bullets with a smile. “Too simple to be interesting,” he said. “In bullet identification we must work with scratches and marks invisible to the naked eye in most instances, and here you hand us scratches that, under the microscope, will look like the path of a snow-plough!” He busied himself for a few moments, then handed Mayfair one of the bullets. “Here you are. Your photographs will be ready tomorrow. Nothing now remains but for you to bring in the gun, and we will tell you, and prove to your own satisfaction and to the satisfaction of any reasonable jury, whether the gun in question did or did not fire this bullet.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A SHOOTING MATCH

THE noon train slowed to a stop before the little station at Blodgett, and Sergeant Mayfair stepped to the platform to be greeted by Rattlesnake Dort. It was the twentieth of July, and the town was gay with bunting, its streets lined with the teams of nesters and settlers from miles around, who had come to town to participate in the deferred Dominion Day celebration. Somewhere in the distance a brass band was playing. The constable was resplendent in celluloid collar, flaming red necktie, and a new brown derby hat. A pair of brilliantly yellow shoes shone out from beneath trousers of funereal black, while across a vast expanse of green-and-red waistcoat stretched an enormous brass cable chain.

“Hello, Sergeant!” he called, in a voice that commanded the attention of the bystanders, as he extended a pudgy hand. “Come down fer the shoot, did you? I kind of thort you would! I was tellin’ the boys down to the pool-room only a little while ago: ‘I’m goin’ over to the train,’ I says. ‘I’m kind of lookin’ fer my old friend Sergeant Mayfair of the Mounted to show up,’ I says. ‘He kind of promised me he would a while back—an’ when he comes,’ I says, ‘you’ll see some shootin’ that is shootin’,’ I says.”

Mayfair smiled. “Now I’m afraid you’ve gone an’ whetted these folks up to see some fancy shootin’. As a matter of fact, I ain’t so good. There’s lots of the boys in the service that can beat me at it. I kind of like to shoot, though, an’ I thought I’d run down.”

“Well, we’re glad you come, ain’t we, Al?” He turned to a young man who stood slightly in the background. “Come here, Al. I want you should meet Sergeant Mayfair. Him an’ I’s old friends—an’ both of us is what you might say wise to the police game. We ain’t neither one of us what you could call spring chickens no more. This here’s Al Blodgett, Sergeant. His pa, old P. J., he’s the banker, here, an’ owns the store, an’ the Lazy-K outfit, an’ is prob’ly our promenintest citizen, barrin’ Old Sam Mason. Anyways, between the two of ’em they’ve managed to git together the heft of the land an’ money around this end of Canady. Al, he’s a good sport. Him an’ young Eddie Mason is goin’ to give you a run fer yer money when it comes to revolver shootin’. Ain’t it so, Al?”

The younger man acknowledged the introduction with a handshake and winked at Mayfair. “If you listen to half of what this old windbag tells you, you won’t have time for much shooting, I’m afraid.”

“Windbag, eh? He-he-he! Al, he’s allus got to have his little joke! Don’t pay no ’tention to him, Sergeant—less’n he says he’ll buy a drink.”

Mayfair was quick to note that the eyes of the young man were on him at the mention of a drink, and he took care to show no offence.

Blodgett proceeded cautiously. “Well, you know, I’ve been known to do just that little thing. Of course I don’t know how our friend here looks at it—it’s breaking the law, you know—that is, technically. But I might be able to lay my hand on something that’s not half bad.” He paused significantly, and Mayfair grinned.

“I don’t use it myself,” he said, “but I’m sort of off duty today. At least, I shouldn’t presume to interfere with my friend’s enforcement of law in his own bailiwick.”

“I get you,” grinned young Blodgett. “Well, jump in, and we’ll take a little spin, and then we’ll go up to the restaurant. I don’t suppose you’ve had dinner?”

“No,” answered the sergeant as he followed the others to a smart surrey drawn by a spanking team of blacks.

“We’ll all eat together, then,” said Blodgett as he picked up the reins. “This is my party. You don’t have to go home, do you, Rattlesnake?”

“Hell, no!” came fervidly from the rear seat, into which the fat constable had settled with a sigh of comfort. “Not with no likker on my breath, I ain’t goin’ home! I’ll wait till night to go home, an’ make one ketchin’ hell do fer the hull day.”

Outside the town young Blodgett pulled up beside the road and, reaching under the seat, withdrew a bottle, from which he pulled the cork. He passed the bottle to Mayfair, who declined with a smile. “No—really. Never liked the taste of it, an’ in my business there’s lots of times when maybe it would do more harm than good.”

“Guess you’re right, at that,” Blodgett agreed and, holding the bottle to his lips, took a stiff drink, after which he passed the bottle back to the constable, who held it at a strong gurgling angle until the younger man reached for it. “Here, what the hell do you think that is? That stuff costs money these days!” He held the bottle to the light, and Mayfair saw that nearly half its contents had vanished.

“That’s good stuff, Al,” said the constable, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. “Few drinks of that would set a man up— —”

“Set him down, you mean!” grinned the other and, helping himself to another drink, returned the cork to the bottle. “Wait till the old lady gets hold of you.”

“She will—you don’t need to worry! She kin smell a little drink of likker further’n I kin smell a skunk. I won’t hear the last of it fer a week—but what I mean, likker like that’s worth it.”

Dinner over, the three again stepped into the surrey and drove to the shooting-range at the edge of town. Quite a crowd had collected to compete for prizes offered by the local stores, or to watch the various contests, and the three made their way to the range that had been reserved for the heavier-calibre pistols. Mayfair was introduced to three or four young men, including Eddie Mason.

A judge appeared, sporting an official ribbon. “How about it, boys—want to start the heavy artillery a-goin’? This here range is fer thirty-eights an’ up. Sheldrup’s Hardware has put up a fishin’-reel fer first prize an’ a silk line fer second an’ a minnie pail fer third. The distance is twenty-five yards, ten shots, freehand shootin’.”

“All right, let’s go!” said Blodgett and, reaching beneath his coat, drew his gun from its holster. Sergeant Mayfair found his eyes glued to that weapon. It was a forty-four-calibre Smith & Wesson revolver!

Shooting his own forty-five Colt, he did not do so well in that contest, taking third prize, which he promptly presented to the constable. Eddie Mason took first and Al Blodgett second.

During the contest Mayfair did some rapid thinking. He must get possession of that gun—and must get it without arousing suspicion as to his reason for getting it. A ruse occurred to him, a ruse he had worked once before. Watching his chance, which came when Blodgett turned aside to talk to some friends, he raised the gun from the ledge and glanced at its serial number. A few moments later he had transferred the number to a small notebook and returned the book to his pocket.

Another event was called. A six-shot, rapid-fire contest, at fifteen yards. This time Blodgett won, and won so handily as to evoke the veteran officer’s admiration. “That’s quite a gun you’ve got there,” he said. “What is it?”

“Smith & Wesson. You bet she’s a good gun! Like to try it?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead.”

A fresh target was put up, and Mayfair emptied the gun. “She’s a sweet talker,” he agreed admiringly, as he stood turning it over in his hand. “I never shot one before. You don’t see so many of ’em in this country. Mostly Colts. Seems to me there was a forty-four Smith & Wesson reported stolen in Regina a year or so ago—guess I’ve got the number here in my notebook.” Laying the gun upon the ledge, he produced the book and

deliberately thumbed its pages. "Here it is—Smith & Wesson, forty-four calibre, Number X076392, reported stolen from stock by Renfrew & Dupree, dealers, in Regina."

As Sergeant Mayfair read the notation, young Blodgett, who had picked up the gun, glanced casually at its number. Suddenly he looked up, puzzled. "What's that?" he asked. "Just read that number again!"

"Number X076392," Mayfair repeated.

"Why—why—that's this number!" cried the other. "There's a mistake somewhere! I bought this gun myself."

Reaching for the gun, the sergeant carefully compared the figures. "That's queer," he said. "Must be a mistake somewhere. Where did you buy it?"

"At Renfrew & Dupree's!"

Mayfair laughed. "I guess it's simple enough to account for," he said easily. "In reporting the theft they put down the wrong number, that's all—unless —"

"Unless what?" Blodgett interrupted eagerly.

"Why, unless someone's switched guns on you. Have you ever loaned this gun! Has it ever been out of your possession?"

"Not for a minute! No, sir! When I'm not using it I keep it in my room under lock and key. There's not a chance in the world that anyone but me ever had possession of this gun. And another thing—just a few days after I got it I scarred the butt. See that nick? We were trying it out down behind the blacksmith shop, and I dropped it on a piece of scrap iron. You were there, Rattlesnake, you remember."

Thus appealed to, the fat constable nodded vigorously. "Yump—thash right, Mayfair. Al dropped it an' made that nick. Dam' shame—new gun, too. I'd know that gun if I sheen it in Egypt."

Mayfair turned to Blodgett. "Of course you understand that I don't for a moment believe you stole this gun. I believe you bought it just as you said you did. You will realize, however, that it is to your own interest, as well as to the interest of the dealers, to have this matter cleared up. Undoubtedly their records will show the sale of the gun to you."

"Of course they will. And you're dead right about my wanting the thing cleared up! I don't want to be in possession of a gun that's reported stolen."

"Just so. Now I suggest that you go before a notary and make affidavit as to the purchase of the gun, placing the time of purchase as nearly as possible, and also swear to the fact that it has never been out of your

possession. Then I'll take both the gun and the affidavit to Regina with me and personally see that your title is made clear."

"That looks like the sensible way to do it," Blodgett agreed. "And I'm much obliged to you, Sergeant. Slim Baxter's a notary. I'll slip over now and make the affidavit, and be back in time for another shoot before I take you to the train—that is, if you're sure you don't want to stay over. It looks like a big night tonight," he added, with a grin at the fat constable, who laughed inanely and cut a clumsy pigeon-wing. He was evidently much the worse for sundry surreptitious trips to the Blodgett surrey during the course of the contests.

"Better shtay over, Mayfair. We're all good fellash, y'know. Have hell of a good time tonight—'f th' ol' woman don't fin' me firsht." He winked elaborately, his whole face twisting ludicrously, as he pointed to the burnished metal star that glistened against his black coat. "I run thish town, an' she'sh wide open tonight. The keysh of the village ish yoursh! Gotta keep out of th' ol' womansh way, though, er I'll ketch hell, proper."

Mayfair joined in the laugh and declined the invitation. As Blodgett drove off to find the notary he shot a match with young Eddie Mason, while the constable, with owlish solemnity, proceeded to polish his star with his handkerchief dipped in cigar ashes moistened to a greyish-brown paste with tobacco juice.

Two hours later, with both the gun and the affidavit in his pocket, Sergeant Mayfair boarded the train for Toronto, and just as he disappeared inside the car a little boy broke from the grasp of the girl who was holding his hand and rushed after the departing train. "Oh, there he is! There he is! And he's gone—and he didn't take me!"

Helen Mason overtook him after a chase that led past the water-tank, and, crying piteously, the little boy watched the train disappear in the distance. "Who's gone, Billy? What do you mean?" she cried.

"Sergeant Mayfair! He got on the cars! I saw him! And he's gone back to Tex! And he didn't take us!"

"There, there, Billy boy—don't cry! You know tillicums don't cry. Maybe that was someone else. Even if it was Sergeant Mayfair, he's coming back. You remember, Billy, I went to Regina, and a man told me that Sergeant Mayfair was coming back here. And when he comes, Billy, he'll come to see us—the man promised that he would. And he's a man who knows—a man who never breaks a promise. I've known him ever since I was a little girl, and he told me that Sergeant Mayfair is working to find out something very important—something that may make us both very happy—

something that may bring Tex back here where he belongs. Wouldn't you like to stay here, Billy—with Tex and me—always?"

"Oh yes! 'Cause I love you, and I love Tex too! And can Nellie come—and the puppies? Tex says they'll be the best dogs in the world when they grow up, 'cause they're half wolf, and you can have half, and Tex can have half, and I can have half."

"Yes indeed, Nellie and the puppies can come! And we'll all be so happy!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE
THE BULLET AND THE GUN

“WELL, did you find the gun?” Halguaard greeted Sergeant Mayfair with a smile.

For answer the officer placed the weapon in his hand. “There it is. It’s up to you now. What I want to know—is this the gun that fired the bullet that killed Ole Johnson?”

“You forget,” reminded the other, “that I know nothing about any Ole Johnson, nor any killing. Rather, the question for me to answer is: Was the bullet you brought me fired from this gun?”

“All right. Was it?”

“We’ll know shortly. Perhaps you would like to see the tests.”

Mayfair nodded, and stepping to a cabinet, the man selected two guns. “We have here two specimens of this model,” he explained. “We’ll get some test bullets.”

The three guns were loaded and fired into water containing cotton, the bullet from each being recovered and properly tagged. To the naked eye the bullets looked identical, but the micrometer had a different story to tell. The expert explained, as he continued the experiment: “These two guns from our collection are clean. The gun brought in by you has received only casual care. Its barrel is not crusted and pitted, as some neglected barrels are, but you can plainly see on the bullet the marks left by the slightly fouled barrel. These marks, on comparison, will tell us at a glance whether the fatal bullet was fired by this gun. You will observe that the bullets from these two clean guns are more lightly marked—but none the less distinctly. Each carries decidedly different markings, yet both were fired from clean barrels of guns supposed to be in every way duplicates.”

The proof of this statement was plainly visible even to Mayfair’s untrained eyes. “I can see how a pitted or rusty barrel might leave its mark on a bullet, but I don’t see what makes the difference in the bullets from these clean barrels. They’re new guns too, by the looks.”

“One directly from the factory—the other from a retailer’s stock. Each has, of course, been fired a few times for test purposes, but was immediately cleaned. Yes, both are new guns. Several factors contribute to the different markings on the bullets. The rifling cutters account for much variation, for these instruments, though made from the hardest of tool steel and grinding

through a barrel only slightly less hard, in a bath of oil, never rifle two barrels exactly alike—for the same reason that, under the microscope, a razor-blade presents a different edge after each shave. Not only that, but the instrument never cuts two grooves alike in the same barrel, although in the higher grade factories it is reset and re-honed twice each day. Moreover, the steel shavings, pulled ahead of the cutter, revolve and twist through the barrel in haphazard fashion, scratching the metal in patterns that are never twice alike. These scratches are extremely light, but are always present, and invariably leave their marks on every bullet fired from the barrel. It only remains for microphotography to reproduce them enormously enlarged. These, mind you, are the variations due to the rifling instrument alone, and from a factory of very high standards. There are other variations too numerous to bother you with, and of course all variations are vastly more marked in guns from factories of lower standards. The cheaper the gun that fired the bullet, the easier it is to trace that bullet to the gun that fired it. But no factory has ever yet, no matter how high its standards, turned out two guns barrels alike—nor ever will.” As the man worked over his instruments, Mayfair pondered his words, and shortly the other faced him. “I have your answer,” he said, picking up Blodgett’s revolver. “This is the gun that fired your fatal bullet. Your photographs will be ready tomorrow.”

“You made quite a stay of it,” smiled the superintendent as Sergeant Mayfair stepped into his private office in Regina.

“Well, two trips to Toronto take quite a while — —”

“*Two* trips! Why two?”

“I took the bullet down, an’ then I went back to Blodgett after the gun an’ took it down.”

The superintendent looked puzzled. “Why couldn’t you have saved the expense of the second trip by taking both down the first time?” he asked.

“It cost a little more, but I figured I was justified. If I’d tried to save that extra car-fare, the whole job might have gone for nothing—an’ an innocent man might have been convicted of murder to boot. You see, I was goin’ on a hunch. I had nothin’ on the man I suspected. I had to get hold of the gun that fired the bullet that killed the teamster, an’ I had to get it without its owner suspectin’ that I wanted it. He’s the son of the local banker, an’ he ain’t cramped any for money. He could have owned more than one gun—a dozen, if he’d wanted them. An’ I had to know what kind of a gun I was lookin’ for before I made my play. It was a play I couldn’t make but once, an’ if I’d got

the wrong gun, I'd have lost my chance to get the right one because he'd have be'n suspicious right away."

"And now you've been and come back—what did you find out?"

"I found out," answered Mayfair impressively, "that it's a proven scientific fact that no two revolvers or pistols or rifles ever leave the same marks on a bullet, and that a bullet can be traced to the gun that fired it with absolute certainty—an' the proof can be placed before a judge an' a jury so they can see it with their own eyes."

"Sold on it, eh?"

"Absolutely. An' so will you be after you've gone over these." He produced a packet of photographic prints, and for more than an hour the two studied them, the sergeant explaining, step by step, the process that had produced the results.

At the end of the session the commissioner leaned back in his chair and eyed the pile of prints upon his desk. "It looks to me as though they had developed something big here—a science of as great importance in criminal investigation as the science of fingerprints has come to be. All that remains for you now is to show that the owner of the gun did, in fact, fire it with deadly intent at the teamster."

"Not at the teamster—that is, he didn't know he was firin' at the teamster. He thought he was firin' at Tex Conway. The darkness was responsible for his mistake. But of course that makes no difference in the status of the case."

"None at all. If the intent to commit murder can be shown, the identity of the victim cuts no figure. I congratulate you, Mayfair, upon your work, and I hope you can bring it to a satisfactory conclusion."

"This affidavit will go a long way toward that. Al Blodgett has sworn that he has owned this gun for two years and that it has never been out of his possession during that time. I'm hoping for a confession. At any rate, I've accomplished one thing—even if Blodgett's conviction fails, I have cleared Tex Conway from suspicion."

The superintendent nodded. "You have," he said. "I'm withdrawing the order for his arrest. But you told me he admitted shooting the teamster. Why in the devil would he confess a crime he never committed? Was he such a good friend of Blodgett's that he would go that far to cover up for him?"

Sergeant Mayfair grinned. "Hardly! In fact, Conway an' Blodgett hated each other's guts. Conway's tryin' to cover up for someone, all right. Who that person is I don't know—yet. I have found out, though, that Old Sam Mason's daughter Helen passed Blodgett up in favour of Tex Conway. But it

don't stand to reason that Tex would think that she shot Ole Johnson that night. Like I said, I don't know the answer now—but I will."

"Oh, by the way, Mayfair, Helen Mason was in here the other day inquiring for you. She seemed very anxious to find you. I told her you'd be going back to Blodgett in a few days. Better look her up."

Mayfair nodded. "Yes, I'll look her up, all right. I've got somethin' to tell her that I think she'll be mighty glad to know."

CHAPTER THIRTY

SERGEANT MAYFAIR IMPARTS SOME NEWS

AT RENFREW & Dupree's, Mayfair established the fact that the Smith & Wesson revolver Number X076392 had been sold to Albert Blodgett some two years previously. "Kind of a coincidence, in a way," said the manager of the concern, as the officer was about to depart. "We received a letter only today about that particular gun. This Blodgett, the purchaser, charges us with having reported the theft of that gun from our stock. Of course the thing is preposterous. Right here on my desk is the letter I have just written asking him what in the world he means."

"You can tear it up," advised Mayfair. "I'm goin' to run down to Blodgett on the next train. I happen to have certain business with young Blodgett, and I can promise you that you will hear nothing further of the matter."

Ascertaining that Al Blodgett was on duty at the bank, Sergeant Mayfair crossed the track, walked through the lumber-yard and the cottonwood grove toward the Diamond-5 ranch house. Pausing near the corral, the officer glanced toward the young woman and the little boy who stood on the bank of the creek peering into the water. As he advanced toward them the two looked up; the next instant a sharp cry broke upon his ears, and the boy was running to meet him. "Oh, it's him! It's Sergeant Mayfair! And he did come back!"

The officer caught the youngster up and swung him high then set him on his feet before him. "Hello, Billy! How's everything?"

The boy seized his hand and tugged it in his impatience to hasten his steps toward the creek where the girl stood waiting, her lips parted in an eager smile. Letting go of the officer's hand, the youngster rushed to the girl's side. "This is Helen—she said I could call her Helen, and Tex loves her, and so do I, and we want you to take us back to Tex—right now! And then Tex will come back with us, and we'll bring Nellie and her puppies, and we'll give you one!"

Mayfair grinned and doffed his hat.

The girl offered her hand. "Sergeant Mayfair, I'm mighty glad to see you again. You see, I've heard so much about you from Billy that it seems

almost as though we were old friends.”

“I hope we will be, Miss Helen. I think I have some news that may interest you.”

“News! From—from him?” Her voice faltered slightly, and the officer was quick to note the shadow of apprehension that killed the smile on her lips. “I mean,” she hastened to explain, “from Tex Conway? Is—is he— —”

“He’s all right, Miss Helen. Or was when Billy an’ I left him a couple of months ago. You don’t need to worry about him. The news I meant ain’t from him, direct. But it concerns him just the same.”

“Come on over to the veranda,” she invited. “We can sit there and talk.”

The two seated themselves in wicker chairs, and Billy perched himself on the top step. “I don’t know just exactly how to begin what I’ve got to say, Miss Helen. I suppose you know that Tex is—er, that is, he’s be’n wanted for a—a certain crime.”

“Oh yes,” the girl answered, and Mayfair noted the touch of weariness in the voice. “For the murder of that horrid teamster. But he didn’t do it. I can’t imagine how anyone that knew him could ever believe that he’d commit a deliberate murder and then run away. It was all a terrible mistake.”

“Yes, it was a mistake—a fool blunder. But everything is all right now, Miss Helen.”

“All right! What do you mean? Have they found the—the real murderer?”

“Yes, ma’m. I’m goin’ to arrest him in a few minutes an’ take him to Regina.”

“Arrest him! Is the murderer here in town? Oh, is there anyone in the world so contemptible that he could stay right here all the time, knowing that people believed Tex guilty—knowing that at any time he might be arrested and convicted of a crime of which he was innocent?”

“Yes, this man did just that. An’ if I’ve got him sized up right, I’d say he’d have set by an’ watched Tex convicted—hung, even—without battin’ an eye.”

“Who is he?” Tense, wide-eyed, the girl awaited the reply.

“His name is Al Blodgett.”

“Al Blodgett!” The name was almost a shriek. “Oh, the wretch, the miserable— —” And then she burst into violent sobbing, and Billy was hammering with small fists upon Mayfair’s guarding forearm.

“You’re a bad man—to make her cry! I’ll tell Tex!” Despite the girl’s hysterical outburst, the officer could not help smiling at the puny attack.

Running to the girl's side, Billy threw his arm protectingly about her and scowled at the officer. "Don't cry," he soothed. "Tillicums don't cry. I won't let him hurt you. I'll fight hard as hell— —"

"Here, here! What's all this?" In the doorway, a few feet distant, stood a tall, grey-haired man who stared in amazement from the smiling officer to the sobbing girl and her valiant protector.

At the sound of the voice the girl looked up quickly, and a moment later she too was smiling through her tears. "Oh, Dad, this is Sergeant Mayfair, of the Mounted Police. He has brought such wonderful news, and yet, in a way, it's horrible too." She paused as a shudder shook her frame. "It was Al Blodgett who killed Ole Johnson!"

"What!" The word exploded from the older man's lips.

"I always knew Tex was innocent!" cried the girl. "Even when everybody thought he was guilty—yes, even you, Dad, and Eddie, too."

Old Sam Mason turned puzzled eyes upon the officer. "But—I don't quite understand. The motive, you know. In Tex Conway's case there was clearly a motive. He'd be'n attacked once that day by this teamster—an' the fellow was evidently layin' for him to finish up the job. Accordin' to witnesses in the pool-room, Johnson had threatened to follow Tex to my house, here, and there were brass knuckles on his hands when they found him." Mayfair made as if to speak, but the other stayed him: "Hold on a minute. I'm not stickin' up for Al Blodgett. I don't like him. But let me warn you—you'd better be damn sure of your ground before you accuse him of murder. His father, old P. J. Blodgett, is a man of considerable wealth an' considerable power around these parts. Mind you, I ain't sayin' Al didn't do it. But what possible reason could he have had for shootin' a drunken teamster—an' especially Big Ole? Hell, Ole worked for P. J. for years! An' that very day Al had got Ole likkered up an' promised to give him twenty-five dollars if he'd beat Tex up. Ole tried it, an' Tex knocked hell out of him. Then he borrowed those knucks an' laid for Tex in the lumber-yard. I figure he jumped Tex an' Tex shot him' an' knowin' that with P. J.'s money an' influence against him he wouldn't stand a show, he beat it. Tex had a reason, all right—but what reason would Al have?"

"No reason whatever," answered Mayfair. "The killing of the teamster was a mistake. My hunch is that the bullet that killed the teamster was meant for Tex Conway. Don't it occur to you that Al Blodgett might have had a reason for putting Tex out of the way?"

For the space of moments the older man stood staring into the officer's face. Then, slowly, his eyes came to rest upon his daughter. "Oh," he

muttered, half under his breath, "my God!"

As the others hung on his words, Mayfair told of his chance meeting with Tex Conway on the Porcupine River, of his own disbelief of the man's confession, of the new zest in life Tex found in caring for young Billy, of his own interest in the case, of his talk with Rattlesnake Dort the day he brought Billy to the school, of his suspicion of Al Blodgett when Dort mentioned that Helen had passed him up for Tex, of his securing of Blodgett's gun, of the tests at Toronto, and finally that he had in his possession the absolute proof of Blodgett's guilt. When he had finished, the girl leaped to her feet, her eyes glowing. "I want to go to him—Billy and I! Yes, right up to that cabin! There on the Porcupine! Right where he is! Oh, we can go—can't we?" She appealed directly to Sergeant Mayfair, who was smiling broadly.

"Why, as far as I can see— —"

Old Sam Mason interrupted. "Now, now, daughter! That's impossible — —"

"It's not impossible, is it, Sergeant Mayfair? And I'd love it. And Eddie can go too—he's always wanted to take a trip into the wilderness! And Sergeant Mayfair will take us!"

"But hell's fire, Helen! You don't realize how far it is—way to hell an' gone up there in the Klondike, or somewheres! An' besides, the sergeant has prob'ly got other business to 'tend to. Cripes, the Mounted Police can't be expected to drop their work an' take you damn near to the Arctic Ocean—just because you happen to want to go!"

"We'll get other guides, then—Billy and I! I love Tex—and I'm going to him! And I'm going to start right now. As soon as I find Tex we'll be married—so there!"

Sam Mason regarded Mayfair with a grin of surrender. "I guess the 'so there' settles it," he said. "If you can tell me where I can get holt of the proper guides, I'll pay 'em well, besides payin' all expenses. I must have good ones, though."

Mayfair returned the grin. "If you think I'll do, I'll be glad to take the responsibility. An' you don't need to bother about any pay—except the expenses of Miss Helen an' Billy, an' young Eddie, if he's goin' along. It happens that as soon as I get Al Blodgett behind the bars at Regina, I'm returnin' to the North. I'm attached to G Division, with headquarters in Dawson. The inspector give me this special detail when I asked for it. Now I've got to report back there. An' the detail won't be finished till I go up the Porcupine an' release Tex from his parole."

"It seems all settled, then," said Sam Mason, with a shrug of helplessness. "My daughter's floutin' me with connivance of the police. But I don't mind sayin' that I'll be glad to have Tex Conway back on the job. Jack Trent's about through. An' if Helen makes her threat good an' marries him, maybe I can hold him this time!"

The laugh that followed was interrupted by Billy Jones. "And I can go too, can't I? I hate schools, and Tex said—and Sergeant Mayfair too—that I'm a good man on the trail!"

Mayfair regarded the youngster with a face of exceeding gravity. "Why, yes, Billy. I guess I'll have to take you along. I'm not so sure but I'll have to prefer charges against you for assaultin' an officer in discharge of his duty. But we'll talk that over with Tex." All of which went entirely over the head of the youngster, who nevertheless joined happily in the laughter. He was going back to Tex! And, in his tiny cosmos, Sergeant Mayfair was once more a great man!

Sam Mason walked with the sergeant as far as the corral as the latter was taking his departure. "There's one thing about this that I don't get at all," he said. "Why in the devil should Tex deliberately build up evidence against himself and then confess to that murder, as you say he did, to save Al Blodgett?"

"He didn't—to save Al Blodgett—you can bet on that. He did it to save someone, though. I guess we'll have to wait for Tex to tell us who."

Old Sam Mason gasped suddenly and stared at the officer wide-eyed. "Good God!" he cried. "Hold on—I'll bet I know who he was coverin' up for; Eddie! Eddie Mason—my son!"

The sergeant's brows drew into a frown. "Eddie!" he exclaimed. "Where does Eddie come in?"

"I'll tell you where Eddie comes in! He was in the pool-room that evenin' an' heard Ole threaten to chop Tex up with them knucks when he come for his washin', an' Eddie run home to warn Tex an' found him an' Helen settin' there on the veranda, an' not wantin' to butt in, he goes down to the corral to wait for Tex, an' he falls asleep, an' when he wakes up Tex is gone—so he hits for the pool-room, an' in the lumber-yard he hears a shot an' then stumbles over Ole's body, an' the next minute he come on to Tex just around the corner of a lumber-pile—an' he turned an' hit for home. Tex called to him a couple of times, but Eddie kep' on runnin'. He told me about it after Rattlesnake Dort an' some of them pool-room loafers went away after questionin' me an' Helen, an' I told him to keep his mouth shut. You see, I figured, like Eddie did, that Tex had shot Ole when he came at him

with the knucks. Yes, sir! There's your answer! Tex, he strung that evidence around an' confessed to shootin' Ole because he thought Eddie had shot him—you see, the kid had threatened to shoot him earlier that day if he jumped Tex—just a fool threat like a kid would make. But when Tex heard that shot an' found Ole layin' there in the mud, an' then seen Eddie runnin' away, he took that threat serious an' figgered Eddie'd shot him. He knew if Eddie was to get convicted it would damn near kill Helen—an' me—so he fixed things up to look like he done it, then skipped out—an', by God, that's what I call a man!"

Sergeant Mayfair nodded. "He's a man, all right—an' a damn good one!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE ARREST

AL BLODGETT glanced through the grillwork at the teller's window as Sergeant Mayfair entered the door of the bank. "Hello, Sergeant," he said, stepping from the cage and offering his hand. "Well, did you get that matter straightened out in Regina?"

Mayfair nodded. "Yeah, I found out from their own records that Renfrew & Dupree sold the gun in question to you, just as you said."

"I knew you would, that is, if the boneheads had sense enough to keep any records. The more I thought about it, the madder I got, so I sat down the other day and wrote 'em a hot letter—told 'em they better watch their step about making mistakes that caused their customers embarrassment and annoyance, and hinted that a suit for damages might serve to drive the lesson home."

"I wouldn't be too hard on 'em, if I was you," answered Mayfair, his eyes on the other's face. "You know, you've made some pretty serious mistakes yourself."

"What—what do you mean?" asked the younger man, his face paling perceptibly as he met the steady gaze of the old officer.

Mayfair glanced toward the girl, who was busy at a tabulating machine. "Maybe we'd better have a little talk in private," he suggested.

"This way," Blodgett said and, leading the way into his father's private office, closed the door behind them. "We can talk here. The old man is out of town. Sit down," he invited as he settled himself into an armchair behind the flat-topped table. Mayfair drew his chair close beside the other, who drew a box of cigars from a drawer. "Smoke?" he asked, and when the officer declined he lighted his own cigar with fingers that were not quite steady. "What do you mean—about some mistakes I've made?" And, without waiting for a reply, he asked suddenly: "Is it about that whisky?"

The sergeant detected a hopeful tone to the question, as though the speaker would have welcomed an arrest on the liquor charge.

"No," he answered. "I told you that any liquor infringement was up to your local constable. The first mistake you made, Al, was when you decided on murder as the proper means for getting rid of a rival."

The younger man's face, pale before, went chalk white, and the paper-knife with which he had been nervously toying fell to the thickly carpeted

floor. Then, as suddenly, reaction flushed his face dull red, and Mayfair noticed the damp of tiny sweat beads on his forehead. "It's a lie! What do you mean—murder? It's—"

"Don't get excited, Al. An' don't yell—the girl might hear you, out there. The next mistake you made was in not bein' sure of the identity of your man when you reached out from between them lumber-piles that night an' fired. You thought you was shootin' Tex, an' that Johnson would be blamed for it." He paused, but the other offered no reply, merely sat staring into the officer's face, his hands gripping the arms of his chair. "The third mistake was in keepin' the gun you killed Johnson with. Then there were other mistakes—like makin' that affidavit statin' that you had bought the gun a couple of years ago an' that it had never be'n out of your possession since you bought it. An' lettin' me have the gun was another mistake—a serious one, from your standpoint. Albert Blodgett, you are under arrest for the murder of Ole Johnson, on or about the night of the tenth of last July. An' it's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you."

"It's a lie! I was home that night! I didn't even go to town!"

"Constable Dort, an' Jake Botz, an' others say you were in the pool-room shortly before Tex Conway came in for his laundry that night."

"That's a lie! I went directly to my room after supper and never left it till the next morning. Both my mother and my father can swear to that!" The young man's tone was assuming confidence. "And you'll find that in this town their word is good before any jury. I've got an alibi that will knock your fool arrest into a cocked hat!"

Mayfair tried a bluff—a shot in the dark. He summoned a smile, tolerant, almost pitying. "There will be no question raised as to the veracity of your parents," he said. "But it will be so simple to show that you could easily have left your room and returned to it without your parents bein' any the wiser."

The other winced slightly, but recovered himself and came back in a tone more belligerent than before: "How about the positive evidence against Tex Conway?" he snarled. "His package of laundry, and his gun and hat—found on the spot! And how about the fact that he skipped out that night and hasn't been seen since? If you're hunting for the man who killed Ole Johnson, go find Tex Conway!"

"Contrary to the general belief," Mayfair answered patiently, "Tex Conway didn't kill Johnson. You killed him. The evidence against Conway is purely circumstantial, besides bein' too damn plain. The gun an' the laundry an' the hat was planted there to make it look like Tex done the job."

"You mean to say that I planted those things there! You're crazy! When would I get — —"

"You didn't plant 'em there; Tex did," the officer interrupted. "But it didn't work. Because I've got positive proof that the bullet that killed Johnson was fired from your gun—the gun that you swore had never be'n out of your possession since you bought it."

"Why would Tex build up evidence against himself? And what do you mean—positive proof?" sneered the other. "That's a forty-four gun of mine—but there are plenty of forty-fours in the country! If this fool charge ever comes to trial, we can produce a dozen forty-fours right here in town. And who in hell is going to say that it was my gun that fired that bullet?"

"I am, for one," answered Mayfair in a tone of quiet conviction, "an' there will be a couple of others—experts—men who have spent years in developin' an' perfectin' the science of bullet identification. Their testimony will not be theory, it will be fact. We have the bullet, an' we have the gun, an' we have photographs to prove to the jury, by evidence they can see with their own eyes, that that particular bullet was fired from that particular gun an' that it could have be'n fired from no other. It seems, my boy, that you've failed to keep pace with the advance of science—an' that is another mistake you've made."

The quiet truthfulness of the tone carried its weight of conviction. A spasm of fear contorted the bloodless face, and the young man pulled himself together with an effort. "My father will bust you for this!" he cried in a trembling voice.

Mayfair did not reply. Thrusting his hand into his pocket, he tossed a pair of handcuffs on to the table. Shrinking against the back of his chair, Al Blodgett stared at the irons in horror. "Put 'em on," requested the officer, "an' get your hat. We're goin' to Regina."

The other made no move. "Look here, Sergeant," he said suddenly, "my father will fight this case with every dollar he's got. You'll never get a conviction. We're alone. I don't know whether you're bluffing or not. But I don't care to take a chance. What is that evidence worth to you—if you've got it?"

"Worth?" asked the officer, his brow knitting into a slight frown. "I don't quite understand — —"

"Oh, you understand, all right! What's it worth? How much money—cash—will you take to turn that evidence over to me and forget all about this case?"

Mayfair pondered for a moment. “I—I have never thought of evidence before in terms of cash,” he replied hesitatingly.

A swift gleam leaped into the other’s eyes at the apparent hesitation. “Ten thousand dollars, cash—before you leave this room?”

“Ten thousand dollars would be a cheap price for a man’s honour.”

“Twenty thousand, then—but that’s the limit.”

“Have you got twenty thousand dollars in cash?”

“I’ll get it. You can walk out of this room with it in your pocket.”

“Where can you get that amount of money at so short notice? Your father, I believe, is out of town.”

“What’s that to you? Will you take it?”

“Willin’ to add embezzlement to murder, eh?”

The man winced at the words. “Why not? Good God! I don’t want to hang, do I?”

“Slip on the bracelets, Al. It’s gettin’ along towards train-time.”

“Do you mean you won’t take it?”

“There’s some things that money won’t buy.”

“Fifty thousand!”

“Not fifty thousand, nor a million.”

“You fool! You damned fool! That’s more money than you ever saw—or ever will see, if you turn it down! Do you think I’m going to stand trial—to hang, maybe—for killing that drunken loafer? He wasn’t worth the little finger of my left hand!”

“He had the right to live.”

“He had the right to die too!” cried the man, his face twisted with rage. “Damn him! If he’d stayed where he belonged he’d have been alive today!”

“If you’d have stayed where you belonged, he’d have be’n alive today too.”

Al Blodgett rose to his feet and thrust out his hands. “Slip ’em on, then—if you won’t listen to reason. By God, you’ll wish you had listened! Your evidence is all bluff! You’re a fool if you think you can convict me! I’ve got friends! And I’ve got money behind me!”

Rising, Mayfair slipped the handcuffs about the man’s wrists. “You’ve made a lot of mistakes, Al. Twenty years of policin’ have taught me that most criminals do.”

On the station platform they came upon Rattlesnake Dort, who greeted them vociferously and paused abruptly to stare aghast at the manacles on Al

Blodgett's wrists. "Well, what an' the hell!" he blurted.

"He's under arrest for the murder of Ole Johnson," Mayfair explained curtly, and as the train pulled in the constable stepped close and whispered into Mayfair's ear: "I allus figgered he done it," he said. "Couple more weeks an' I'd nabbed him myself."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO
BACK ON THE PORCUPINE

IT was a very happy and a very congenial little party that debarked from the Portland at Dyea Beach and proceeded to Chilkoot Summit, where they were joined by the sergeant's wife. Helen Mason and Annette Mayfair liked each other from the first, and when, at length, Annette heard the whole story, and the part her husband had played in it, she threw her arms about him and, in sight of all, planted a rousing kiss upon his lips, so that the bluff old soldier-policeman flushed scarlet to the ears. "Oh, he is grand—my husband!" she cried happily as she joined in the laugh at his discomfiture. "All the bad people in the world, they fear him, and the good people, they love him. Is it not so? You love him, don't you, Billy? Because you are good, I know!"

The little fellow smiled up into her face. "And I love you too! You are good. But I ain't—aren't—always good when I swear, Helen says. But she says Tex is good, and he swears. I don't see how that is."

Sergeant Mayfair joined heartily in the laugh that followed. "I think, myself, you're a pretty hard character," he said. "You assaulted me once, in performance of duty—an' you admit you swear, an' now you're openly makin' love to my wife! I think I'll have to turn you over to Father Judge when we get to Dawson."

"I'm going to stay with Tex and Helen," the boy replied, edging toward the girl, who threw her arms about him and drew him close.

"Yes, you are, Billy—always."

At mention of the old priest, Annette clapped her hands. "Oh, I have an idea! It is a grand scheme! We will stop at the mission and take the good Father Judge with us! He will be glad of the chance to make such a grand trip in such good company—" Mayfair laughed, and the woman forestalled comment. "Oh, I know what you want to say—I think myself such good company!" She appealed to Helen. "Why not? My husband makes the trips nearly always with Indians. I am better company than Indians; he thinks so too—or he would not have married me! We are all good company—so we will take Father Judge with us, for he is good company too. And you and Tex shall be married there in the cabin! You see, I call him Tex, though I have never seen him. But I have heard so much that I know him already." She smiled into Helen's face. "And you will be so

happy—but not as happy as Tex—because you *know* you are going to marry him! But he—poor fellow—he thinks he’s going to be hung!”

“I’ll bet he’ll wish he had!” predicted brother Eddie, and adroitly dodged the dipper of cold water the girl dashed at him.

“Look, Annette,” whispered Sergeant Mayfair a few evenings later, as the boat rounded the last bend before reaching the mission. “We will arrive there for the sunset!”

Helen Mason heard the words, and noted the swift movement with which the woman pressed her husband’s hand. And then she looked away. For she realized that those words, commonplace to her, had recalled some never-to-be-forgotten incident in the romance of two lives. And she fell into a reverie, watching the banks slip past, until the bow grated on the gravel and she saw the tall, straight form of Father Judge, his silver hair gleaming in the last rays of the sun, as he welcomed them to the mission. . . .

It was nearly a month later that three canoes, containing the party and their luggage, each manned by two husky Indians, beached on the shingle below the jam of spruce tops near the cabin where, in the spring, Sergeant Mayfair and Billy Jones had taken leave of Tex Conway.

The moment the canoes touched shore Billy scampered up the bank and raced for the cabin. Leaving the others to follow, the sergeant ascended the bank after him and arrived at the cabin as the boy was pushing at the door.

“No one home,” said the officer as the two stepped into the room. “He’s out prospectin’, I guess. Tell you what we’ll do—we’ll move the stuff up here, an’ the girls can be gettin’ supper. Tex will be hungry when he comes, an’ it’ll be a big surprise for him—to find supper all ready.” Mayfair outlined his plan rapidly, for he saw that the little fellow was near to tears with disappointment at not finding his “pardner,” as he proudly called Tex.

“And he’ll be s’prised to see me too,” he said, falling in with the scheme, “’cause he thinks I’m at the school. And he’ll be s’priseder to see Helen, ’cause once he told me she was a closed book, an’ she ain’t—aren’t no book at all—’cause she loves him.”

“Yes, she does, Billy,” the sergeant said. “She’s a great girl—an’ you don’t want to forget that. Oh, he’ll have surprises enough, don’t you worry. But come, we’ve got to get busy. You an’ I’ll get the wood an’ the water, an’ the women can start cookin’, an’ the Siwashes can pack the stuff from the canoes, an’ Father Judge can smoke an’ look on. His job will come later,” he added with a grin, as he glanced toward the two women and the priest, who were listening to his words.

Catching the spirit of the occasion, the girls, followed by the priest, went into the cabin, and the Indians, assisted by Eddie Mason, began to pack the supplies and duffel from the canoes.

“Come on, Billy,” called Mayfair. “I’ll chop it an’ you carry it in,” and, followed by the boy, he led the way to a dead spruce that showed a hundred yards or more from the cabin.

Billy had trudged back with his first load of firewood when Mayfair glanced up to find Tex Conway standing close behind him, watching the chips that flew from the axe. “Hello, Tex!” cried the officer, extending his hand.

Tex shook the hand. “Hello, Sergeant!” Mayfair noted that there was no enthusiasm in the voice. “Well—you’ve come for me, I suppose. When do we start?”

The officer leaned on his axe and regarded the other with twinkling eyes. “How’s prospectin’?” he inquired, ignoring the question.

“I haven’t had much luck—taken out a little gold—not much. Located some mineral in the ridge back yonder, but I don’t know how good it is.” He turned wearily and glanced toward a ridge where a yellow scar showed high upon its side. “Well, it’s all over now. If there’s anything to this, you’ll have to look after it—for Billy.” He paused, then laughed—a short, dry laugh. “It’s a tough game, Mayfair—but I’ll play it through. Let’s get it over with. When do we start?”

“You don’t need to start till you’re good an’ dam’ ready,” replied the officer gravely. “You see, Tex, from the first night you talked to me—that night you walked into my camp an’ told me about killin’ that teamster—I knew you was lyin’ — —”

“*What!*” The word crashed from the man’s lips, and Mayfair saw that his face had gone white.

“Yup,” he continued. “You’re a liar, Tex. But you ain’t a very convincin’ one. So I slipped down to Blodgett an’ done a little investigatin’ when I took Billy to the school. Well, it didn’t take so long to locate the guilty party — —”

“You—you arrested him?” Tex’s face showed hard, and there was an ugly glint in his eyes. “And—you — —”

“Yes, I arrested him. He’s in jail back there in Regina right now, an’ a clear case against him.”

“God damn you!” The curse rasped from between drawn lips, and, by a visible effort, the man refrained from leaping upon the officer. “That boy—that kid—and he did it for me! Because he thought that drunken bastard

would beat me up—kill me, maybe! And you—you go back there and arrest him—ruin his life, because of the impulse of a moment—break his sister's heart—and his old father's! By God, I thought you were my friend! I wish you'd died of diphtheria— —”

“Tex! Tex!” The name, almost a shriek, came from the lips of the girl who was rushing toward them. “Oh, what are you saying? What do you mean—speaking to Sergeant Mayfair like that! He's worked night and day to clear your name of that horrible crime—and—and you— —”

Tex Conway's jaw had dropped, and he was staring at the girl as one in a trance.

“Helen! You here!” His words were a mere croak. “What—what does it mean?”

“It means that we're going to be married right there in that cabin—and we're going back to Blodgett! But why were you swearing so at Sergeant Mayfair? Oh, tell him you're sorry—that you didn't mean it! If you only knew what he's done for you—for us! And why did you leave your laundry and your hat and your gun there so people would think you did it? And why did you run away? And why did you tell Sergeant Mayfair you killed that horrible teamster?”

The others had come up, and Tex was staring at them in dumb amazement. He found his voice. “Helen—I—I don't understand. I did it to save him—I knew you loved him so—that it would break your heart— —”

“Break my heart! Loved him! Are you crazy? I despised him! I loathed him! What do you mean? You knew I loved only you!”

“Who—who do you think I'm talking about?” asked Tex, catching sight for the first time of Eddie, who was grinning his full appreciation of the drama.

“Why, Al Blodgett, of course! Al Blodgett killed the teamster! But it was you he meant to kill!”

Tex leaped forward and gathered the girl into his arms. “My God, darling—I thought it was Eddie who killed him! You remember he threatened to that afternoon, and when I heard that shot as I was going home with my laundry, and then saw Ole's body lying there and saw Eddie running away, I thought he'd shot Ole—and I knew he'd done it to save me. I knew, too, that if he should be convicted it would just about kill you, and Old Sam. So I did the only thing I could think of—I strung my stuff around there and hit the trail.”

Young Eddie chimed in: “It was pretty terrible for me too. You see, I was hurrying to the pool-room to tell you about Ole laying for you with knucks,

and then I heard the shot and stumbled over Ole in the dark—and then I saw you—so I thought you’d shot him, and I ran home as fast as I could leg it. Come on—I’m hungry. Let’s eat!”

A small figure emerged from the cabin and, surrounded by a whole litter of puppies, dashed across the intervening space and catapulted itself upon Tex. “Oh, Tex! I found her for you! I found Helen! And I brought her up here! And we’ll all go back there and live together! Helen says so! And she can have half the puppies!”

Tex laughed happily as he swung the little figure from the ground. “You bet we’ll all live together!” he cried. “Only you’ll have to change your name to Conway. Helen’s going to. And you are too.” Then abruptly he turned to Sergeant Mayfair and extended his hand. “If you’ll take it—and forget what I said. God, man—when I think what I owe you . . .”

“Just forget you owe me anything—even an apology,” grinned the sergeant. “I like to hear a real good cusser get unlimbered once in a while. How about it, Father?”

And, from his infinite wisdom, the good Father Judge spoke, and as he spoke his lips smiled. “There are times, and there are places,” he said. “It is not for me to say.”

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.

[The end of *On the Rim of the Arctic*, by James B. Hendryx.]