BLUE PETE AND THE KID

Luke Allen

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BLUE PETE AND THE KID

The stranger in town would have been in a bad way had not Blue Pete intervened. Bruiser Salmon, who was dealing out the punishment, didn't take kindly to Pete's action but the 'forty-five' the half-breed nonchalantly fingered commanded obedience. Salmon swore to get even with Blue Pete.

But Pete, scarred from a hundred fights, was not the man to be cowed by threats, especially when he heard the stranger's tale of a missing heir and of Salmon's part in a stick-at-nothing plot to gain a fortune.

How Blue Pete settled the score and meted out his own kind of justice, is told in this action-paced story of flaying fists and burning bullets.

By the same Author

BLUE PETE RIDES THE FOOTHILLS
BLUE PETE AT BAY
BLUE PETE: INDIAN SCOUT
BLUE PETE WORKS ALONE
BLUE PETE AND THE PINTO
ETC., ETC.

BLUE PETE AND THE KID

By

LUKE ALLAN

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All the characters in this book are purely imaginary and have no relation whatsoever to any living person

CHAPTER I

BRUISER AND THE KID

A LINE of ranchers slouched up the steps that led from the bar of the Alberta Hotel to the lobby, and started diagonally across towards the chairs on the veranda usually reserved for them. It was the local grandstand for everything that happened in town that was worth watching.

In the lead was Cooney Featherston, proprietor of the Double Bar-Y, huge, easy-going, humorous, slinking along with deceptively limp movements that, everyone knew, could swing so swiftly into surprising agility. What his christened name was, for which "Cooney" was always used, no one knew. The nickname had arisen from the coonskin fur coat he had brought West with him almost twenty years earlier.

At his back were his five special friends. Scotty Runyon of the Lazy M was built on a plan so different that strangers were apt to laugh at seeing them together. Scotty was short and muscular, abrupt in his movements, the hardest-working rancher in the Medicine Hat district. Next came Rex Middleton of the Triangle H, long and lean, distinguished by a grey goatee of the conventional Kentucky colonel type. One of his hands often played with the adornment. Slim Manson of the Diamond K followed, his christened name long forgotten. He, too, was tall and lanky, the sober one of the lot. Ford Welch of the Double X possessed few visible qualifications for a group whose free-spending ways shocked his parsimonious instincts. Jim Allen of the T-Inverted R brought up the rear.

Bill Corwyn, owner of the hotel, temporarily behind the counter, raised his eyes from the latest copy of the local *Times* and grinned lazily as the wavering line passed. He yawned and lowered his head so that he could peer through the front windows below the partly drawn blinds.

"Better take another chair with you, boys," he advised. "I see Blue Pete's still there. There's room for another chair."

Featherston paused to look through the window, the line halting behind him. The far end chair on the veranda was occupied. He shrugged. "Oh, he'll skedaddle when he sees us," he said, with a grin.

"Hadn't you better do some scouting alone," suggested Scotty Runyon, "so he can make his getaway without walking over us all on the way? He's your special friend."

Featherston did not so much as smile. “Yes, I’m his friend; and if you knew him as well as I do, you’d all be his friends too. You know it’s he who keeps the rustlers away . . . or catches them if they try their tricks. We’d be in a devil of a mess sometimes without him, Mounted Police or no Mounted Police. Don’t forget that.”

Ford Welch shrugged. “And with it all he’s a breed. We can’t forget that either.”

“And with a mighty unsavoury past,” put in Manson. “You can’t blame us for being suspicious—just as the Mounties are.”

“Aw, you chaps make me tired,” exclaimed Cooney, with a sharpness unusual in him.

He started on. But after three steps he stopped abruptly and pointed towards the farthest and darkest corner of the lobby.

There in one of the large leather chairs a small figure lay curled awkwardly over an arm, apparently asleep. Beside him a burly, rough-looking man bent down, a hand on the sleeping man’s shoulder shaking him none too gently.

“Come on, Kid,” he was saying. “Come and have another. Your turn this time. You’re not half through yet for the day.”

The small man opened one eye and closed it again. “Drunk, just plain drunk!” he muttered in a tone of utter disgust. “Drunk again!”

The hand on his shoulder jerked him upright and shook him brutally.

“Drunk,” repeated the victim, “and I don’t want to be anything else.”

He tried to shake off the clutching hand, only to be shaken until his head jerked sickeningly from side to side.

Featherston took an indignant step towards them. “Leave him alone, Bruiser,” he snapped. “Can’t you see he’s drunk now? What do you want to load him up with more for?”

The one he called Bruiser turned with a heavy scowl on his coarse face. “What have you got to do with it? I’ll do what I please, so keep your nose out of things that aren’t any of your damned business.”

The rancher’s face darkened and his eyes flashed. He took two swift steps nearer, his fists clenched.

Bruiser stepped back and straightened, a nasty smile twisting his face.

Bill Corwyn had missed nothing; he never did, though in his lazy way he appeared to notice little—until the moment came to act. With a glide that, for all its swiftness, seemed only leisurely movement, he swung from behind the counter and stood between the two men.

He faced the angry Bruiser. He pointed to the door. “Get out!” he ordered. “Leave him alone.”

For a reason none had thought to put into words no one ever attempted to defy Bill Corwyn; no one had so much as considered it for many years. When Bill Corwyn spoke there was authority in his voice, a compelling force not to be challenged. Partially the explanation might be that he never demanded the unreasonable, never backed down after a demand. Something in his eye, in the low tone he used, so contrasted with his indolent movements that the effect was emphatic.

It was a difficult moment for Bruiser Salmon, the local bully, and he stood for a moment, his eyes flickering away. “I was just trying to get him out,” he explained weakly. “You don’t want a drunk sleeping in here.”

“That’s my business,” snapped Corwyn, with unusual sharpness. He waved towards the door and turned back towards the easy chair behind the counter, as if everything was settled.

It was. Without another word Bruiser swung about and swaggered through the outer door, sending back a long-delayed, sneering laugh as he reached the veranda and started down the steps to the sidewalk.

Featherston had watched with frowning brow. He turned to Corwyn. “What’s come over the fellow to pay so much attention these last few weeks to the Kid? They never used to be seen together, though they both come from the Old Country.”

Bill Corwyn merely shrugged and picked up the paper.

“Oh, these remittance men!” sneered Ford Welch.

Corwyn’s eyes raised from the paper. “The Kid is no remittance man,” he said; and there was a sharpness about it that made Welch smile apologetically.

“Most of these young Englishmen are,” put in Middleton. “Even Bruiser himself, I’ll bet. He doesn’t do enough work to make a living of his own, though one wouldn’t expect a fellow of his class to have relatives rich enough to keep sending money. I don’t know about the Kid.”

“I do,” said Corwyn. “I should. He pays his bills regularly . . . . and the money doesn’t come from England.”

Welch laughed. “The trouble with too many of the young English lads we get out here is that most of them were kicked out by their families to get them out of the way, or to keep them out of trouble.”

“The Kid,” Corwyn declared, “wouldn’t get into trouble anywhere.”

Featherston continued to hold up the line. “I suppose it isn’t strange that fellow-countrymen like the Kid and Bruiser Salmon find something in common so far from home.”

Corwyn set the paper down on the counter with emphasis. “The Kid and Bruiser Salmon have nothing in common. The Bruiser tries to play it up, that’s all. And,” he added, after a pause, “I’d like to know why.”

“Perhaps the Kid pays for the drinks,” suggested Middleton. “You heard what Bruiser said.”

“He doesn’t get any drinks here,” Corwyn told them. “I’ve given orders.”

For a moment or two Cooney Featherston eyed the hotel proprietor, then, with a shrug, started on to the veranda, picking up a chair on the way. Just outside the door he set it down. He paid no attention to the startled glance of the half-breed seated at the other end of the veranda, who rose to his feet.

Featherston seemed then only to notice him, and with a smile he moved along the line of chairs towards the half-breed. “Stay where you are, Pete. You were here first; there’s room for us all. We won’t bother you.” He placed a hand on the half-breed’s shoulder and gently pressed him back in his chair, smiling down on the dark face.

Blue Pete’s eyes ran uneasily along the line of faces that had the good manners to appear not to notice.

Featherston turned away. “You know,” he said to his companions, “I don’t like that Bruiser. I never did.”

Ford Welch laughed nastily. “We all know he knocked the daylights out of your foreman, Cooney.”

“He *kicked* the daylights out of him,” Cooney corrected indignantly. “He’s made a reputation for himself around here as a rough-and-tumble fighter . . . because a fight to him is only a form of murder, with nothing dirty barred. He’s the typical street tough, a plain brute. He couldn’t fight like a decent man. . . . And usually he has at his back that gang of his, everyone of them as dirty as he is and ready to pitch in to help when things look bad for their leader. They’ve done it more than once, too. Anybody is half licked before the fight starts. Even the local police don’t seem to want to get involved with him; they’re more anxious to stay on his right side.”

“Too bad the Mounties don’t interfere,” said Middleton.

“The Mounties,” Cooney said, “don’t interfere in town affairs unless they have to, though the law gives them that authority. . . . In this case I wouldn’t think they’d hold aside much longer, or someone’s going to get killed. Chief Dolan would be tickled to death to leave Bruiser to them.”

Manson said: "You heard what the Kid said, that he doesn't want to be sober. What did he mean?"

"I've punchers like that," laughed Welch. "They'd like nothing more than to be drunk all the time—if they could afford to buy the whisky."

Cooney shook his head. "That isn't what the Kid meant. I'd like to know ——"

Suddenly he jerked his feet from the railing and leaned forward, his head over the railing. A stranger had appeared around the corner of South Railway Street, walking quickly and making straight for the bar door below the watching ranchers.

Featherston laughed as he pointed. "I'll bet the crease'll be out of those pants before he leaves this town. And what a smothering outfit for a day like this! Some one should show him the thermometer. Bet it's a hundred down there."

The stranger appeared not to notice the line of interested faces over his head. A large white handkerchief was in his hand, drawn again and again around his neck inside his stiff white collar. As he reached the bar door, he paused for a moment, removed his hat, and wiped inside the band. Then he vanished into the bar.

A chuckle ran along the veranda. "The refuge of everyone in distress, physical or mental," laughed Featherston. "Too warm? Let's have a drink. Cold? Let's have a drink. Dry? Let's have a drink. Life's great panacea. . . . The one that never did anyone any good."

He grinned along the line of faces on his left. "Go to it, you old sots. Start an argument." He rose. "By the way, let's have a drink."

A thought seemed to come to him, for he turned to the half-breed. "I'm not inviting you, Pete. Everyone knows you never touch the stuff—and you should be a lesson to us, with those muscles of yours, your endurance, and your eye behind a six-shooter."

Blue Pete grinned uncomfortably and wiped the back of a hand across this lips. "Reckon I don' need nothin' like that," he said, half apologetically.

"Well, it saves you a lot of money. And you don't need that, not like Ford Welch here. He's pretty near a teetotaller. Eh, Ford?"

He leaned abruptly over the railing. The stranger had just emerged from the bar. "Ah, it didn't take him long to wet his whistle. But then—— God help us!"

The exclamation burst from him as Bruiser shot from the door immediately behind the stranger, grabbed him by the shoulder, and struck him violently in the face.

CHAPTER II

BRUISER STRIKES

DOWN in the Alberta bar the fight had built up through a mere five minutes. As the stranger entered, a long line of patrons was strung along the counter, some finding it almost necessary for support, some looking forward eagerly to that stage, a very few hoping to escape earlier.

Bruiser had found a place near the door and stood resting both arms across the top of the counter, his fingers caught over the far edge.

"Your turn, Buck," he announced to the drunken cowboy standing beside him.

Buck Raymond, a rider for the Triangle H, frowned. "Who says so?"

"I says so. Don't you remember I put one up for you not so long ago in the Royal? Your turn, I said."

"I heard yu," snapped the cowboy, turning his back.

Bruiser's big hand reached out slowly towards the gun in the cowboy's belt.

It never reached it. One of the bar-tenders had never taken his attention from Bruiser, though he appeared not to notice him. "Drop it, Bruiser," he ordered. "That's enough. Behave yourself or I'll call the police."

Bruiser laughed contemptuously. "Go ahead. Call 'em. They know better than to lay a hand on me. Anyway, I was just having some fun with Buck. I want a drink, that's all."

"It 'ud better be all," threatened the bar-tender.

Bruiser scowled at him. "Or what?"

The bar-tender placed both hands firmly on the counter. "The boss is up in the lobby."

That was different. Bruiser's laugh had a different tone. "Oh, Bill knows I never make trouble in his place."

"Well, do you want to pay for your own drink, or don't you want one at all?"

Before Bruiser could reply the door was pushed open and the stranger entered, still wiping his face with the spotless handkerchief. He stepped up to the bar and found a place beside Bruiser.

The latter rolled to one side and stared insultingly, running his eyes up and down the stranger. He even reached out and pinched the cloth of his coat.

"Real good English stuff, too," he said. "They don't make cloth like that this side the Atlantic. And such a bee-u—tiful hanky. Irish linen, I'll bet a doughnut." He laughed and patted the stranger's shoulder in a patronizing way. "Slick, I call it, head to foot."

His victim merely stared back in silence, but the expression in his face said louder than words that words were not needed. It sent the blood rushing to Bruiser's face.

The stranger turned away and ordered his drink.

As it was slid to him, Bruiser grabbed it. "No thanks to you, stranger," he said. "You don't seem to know that in this burg strangers set 'em up. This'll teach you."

He failed to get the drink. Suddenly the stranger's hand shot out. It came down edgewise on Bruiser's wrist and broke it loose.

Bruiser jerked back with a twinge of pain showing in his face. It crimsoned with fury. As he raised his fist to strike, the bar-tender flung an arm across the counter and caught him by the shoulder.

"None of that, Bruiser. Jerry," he called to the bar-tender near the steps to the lobby. "If Bruiser makes another move, call Bill."

Bruiser wrenched himself free. He stepped back, glaring at the stranger who, ignoring him, emptied his glass.

A coin dropped on the counter, the stranger wiped his lips, and, without even glancing at the furious Bruiser, moved back to the door and passed outside.

For a single long moment Bruiser glared after him. Then, when a laugh broke out along the counter, he muttered a curse and made for the door.

From the veranda above their heads the line of ranchers watched every move.

"He'll murder him," muttered Ford Welch, as the stranger staggered back in startled surprise at the blow, and commenced to fling off his coat. "The tenderfoot doesn't know what he's up against there. Someone should interfere. Bruiser knows he has an easy mark."

But Cooney Featherston had sized things up. He shook his head. "Hm-m, I don't know about that."

The next moment his companions, too, didn't know. Bruiser had made a rush, even as the coat was tossed aside, plainly hoping to catch the other

unprepared. But the stranger stepped nimbly aside and, even as the coat touched the sidewalk, his fist caught Bruiser on the side of the face as he passed.

Bruiser swung about at the same moment, enough to fling out an arm that caught the stranger across the throat, almost knocking him down.

They faced each other then. Something had apparently warned Bruiser not to be rash, for he advanced cautiously, his chin lowered close to his chest, a mad glare in his eyes and his teeth clamped together.

Slowly the stranger retreated. He was puzzled as to what it was all about. The little affair in the bar appeared insufficient groundwork for this, and, being in strange territory, he was uncertain what to do, how seriously to take the attack.

A crowd had gathered from nowhere, as it always does at a fight. The bar had emptied on Bruiser's heels, and from the stores along Toronto Street a flood of spectators raced to see what was happening.

A single swift glance the stranger threw about him, as if seeking an explanation, then he ducked as Bruiser swung a vicious blow at his face. It grazed an ear, but his own fist crashed into Bruiser's nose, and blood spurted.

From the crowd that now ringed them a breath of surprise was audible. But in the front four or five young fellows commenced to cheer Bruiser on. "Go to it, Bruiser. Soak the tenderfoot. Learn him what's what in this town. Knock the guts outa him."

Cooney Featherston spat noisily over the railing. "That's Bruiser's gang. They always get into it. There'll be more of them before it's finished. Then, stranger, watch out. They scent prey like a vulture. . . . Left alone, it looks as if the tenderfoot can handle the situation. But they won't leave him alone, and heaven help him!"

Bruiser's heavy voice sliced vicious oaths over the scene as he hastily wiped away the blood with the back of one hand.

The stranger stood, waiting. He was prepared to end the fight there—as he was prepared to continue.

Suddenly Bruiser rushed.

He had picked the moment well. His opponent, sensing danger from the inside ring of spectators, had edged his way round towards the hotel wall. He did not notice the curb. His foot caught in it, and he stumbled. Intuitively, it seemed, he exaggerated the stumble to a real dip, so that his hands touched the sidewalk.

And Bruiser, unprepared for that, shot headlong over him to the sidewalk. There were bloodstains where his face struck.

For a moment, he lay, half stunned. The stranger did not move, but another glance he threw about him, as if appealing for someone to intervene and stop the senseless and gory fight. But in his glance was no suggestion of fear.

Bruiser rose, now blind with fury. Again he rushed to the attack. And as if he realized that his fists would never reach that hated face, he flung out both arms. One of them caught the stranger and dragged him closer until both arms were about him.

For a moment Bruiser tried to wrestle his foe from his feet, since both the stranger's arms were caught tight to his sides. It failed, though there was a difference of thirty pounds in their weight.

And in that moment Bruiser became the brutal fighter Medicine Hat knew. His knee came up violently. It caught the stranger in the groin.

With a stifled cry the stricken man went limp, his face contorted with pain.

A victorious leer broke over Bruiser's blood-stained face, and he flung his victim brutally to the pavement.

"That's the stuff to give him, Bruiser," applauded his friends. "He's got what was coming to him."

Bruiser shrugged his big shoulders. With legs braced, triumphantly he stood, sneering down on the writhing man.

"He won't go striking anyone again for a while, I'll bet," he jeered, "not till he knows who he's hitting."

He laughed. His teeth bared, and he drew back his foot to kick into the helpless man's face.

The heavy boot never reached the white face.

CHAPTER III

THE STRANGER STRIKES

UP on the veranda the half-breed had watched every move in the fight, saying nothing. As Bruiser's knee struck, he rose swiftly to his feet. And as the boot drew back to complete the victory, the half-breed's hand flashed to his belt, and a bullet struck the sidewalk so close to Bruiser's raised boot that he staggered back.

Even before he could raise his eyes to see who had fired at him, Blue Pete vaulted the railing. He pushed through the crowd and strode before Bruiser.

"Yuh dirty skunk," he snarled. "Yuh done one dirty thing, then yuh thought yuh'd do 'nother. Yuh ain't doin' it. Git back, an' fast." His gun hung limply in his hand, but no one ever thought of trifling with Blue Pete when he had a gun.

The man lying on the sidewalk opened his eyes. "Don't—let him—go," he gasped. "Keep him. I'll be all right in a few moments."

Blue Pete smiled. "I reckoned on that," he said. "Yuh ain't through 'th him." He turned to Bruiser. "An' you ain't neither. Yuh're stickin' right here, like he wants."

Bruiser's eyes moved across the faces in the ring, and behind his friends he read no encouragement to defy the half-breed's order.

"If you hadn't a gun I'd murder you," he snarled through closed teeth.

Blue Pete grinned. "Yep . . . ef yuh cud. But this ain't my fight. Mebbe some day I'll give yuh a chance to try . . . 'thout guns."

He turned to the stranger, now slowly rising. "Take yer time, stranger. Yep, he's stayin', buddy."

For a few moments the stranger leaned against the wall, smiling his gratitude.

Suddenly he straightened and stepped forward. "I'm all right now. I know the kind of fighter he is, and I'm ready for it. I've met his kind before. Thanks a million." He looked over the heads of the crowd. "I hope there are no police to interfere. I want to see this thing through. I want no mercy, and I'll give none."

With a leisurely stride he moved towards Bruiser. A slight smile appeared on his face, but the look in his eyes robbed it of any mirth. Bruiser,

plainly nervous now, stooped to a half-crouch, fists held before him, teeth bared over a tight jaw that protruded in an exaggeratedly threatening manner that brought a laugh from some of the onlookers.

Suddenly the stranger leaped. Bruiser, taken by surprise, tried to dodge, gasping with the effort to hasten the action of muscles that refused to obey. He was too late. A fist crashed straight into that bloody nose with a sickening thud, and blood splashed anew. The nose looked flatter.

Bruiser stumbled back into the arms of his friends. They caught him, shocked and fearful. Protectively they clustered about him for a moment.

They stared at the stranger. On his face had come a look of animal ruthlessness that sent a quiver of dread through them. He took a step nearer and stopped. Bruiser's young friends blocked advance.

The stranger sneered. "Yes," he said, "yes, skunk's the word." He turned to Blue Pete. "You were right. A skunk never runs—but it doesn't depend on a crowd of friends to protect it. Such a brave skunk this one is!"

Before that crushing sneer Bruiser recovered himself. He swept his friends aside and, his face a mess of blood through which his eyes glared murder, he stepped forward into the open space his opponent left him. His teeth grated together.

"Now," he snarled, "you'll know what a real fight is, you Easterner. You'll know—if you're able to know anything when I'm through with you." The words were hissed through lips over which blood trickled steadily. "I wasn't half fighting before."

The stranger laughed. He seemed almost to be enjoying himself now—with the terrifying relish of the lion prone on its victim.

"Of course you weren't fighting. Not fighting, decent fighting, as we know it in the East. What you had in mind, was murder, fighting like a wild animal—or that I'd run. That's the only kind of fighting you understand. Only you didn't manage to get away with it, thanks to my friend here who realized that I was then unprepared for a brute like you. Well, I'm prepared now. Yes, it'll be what you call a real fight—and I'm going to put you where you won't be able to fight for a long, long time. I'll fight according to your rules."

There was a sudden movement at his back. Blue Pete had started away from the wall. Roughly he pushed his way through the crowd and cut across the street to the corner of South Railway Street.

It startled the stranger for a moment, but he did not move.

The half-breed had disappeared round the corner.

A dozen long strides, almost at a run, and he planted himself before a Mounted Policeman, barring his way.

"Bes' keep outa this, Sergeant," he pleaded. "Yuh'd spile it."

From behind the unwashed windows in his office in the Mounted Police barracks on the other side of the railway tracks Inspector Barker could see the outer fringe of the crowd gathered about the fight, and he had sent Sergeant Mahon to investigate.

Mahon studied the anxious face before him. "What's the matter? What's going on there? The Inspector wants to know."

"He'll know. But ef yuh butt in he'll be sorry, an' so'll the hull town. Bruiser Salmon's gittin' wot's bin comin' to him fer a long time."

"You mean it's a fight?"

"Sorta. Bruiser's sort. New chap—tenderfoot—he's sorta tearin' Bruiser to bits, er I'm a c'yute. He don' call it no fight, but he's spillin' a lota Bruiser's blood, whatever 'tis."

The Sergeant's expression relaxed. "You mean Bruiser's getting the worst of it?"

"He's got some of it awready. Thar's more comin'. Bruiser's goin' to git murdered."

"Are there no local police around?"

Blue Pete laughed scornfully. "Didyu expect any?"

The Sergeant straightened. "But, Pete, we can't let that sort of thing continue. If Chief Dolan's men don't turn up——"

The half-breed patted him on the shoulder. "Jes' tell th' Inspector not to worry none. I'll see nobody's murdered." He scowled. "I'll see even Bruiser ain't murdered, 'cause I wanta hev a hand in that. Him an' me we gotta settle 'long that line some day. Leave it to me, Sergeant. I'll see——"

"What about Bruiser's friends? They're sure to be there. They'll pitch in if Bruiser's getting the worst of it."

Blue Pete touched the butt of his gun. "I'm 'tendin' to that. I put a bullet awready so close to Bruiser's foot it must be numb 'th the wind of it. That was jes' when he was goin' to kick. They won't risk no more, not them skunks. Jes' turn round an' go 'tother way."

"But the Inspector?"

"Tell th' Inspector I'm doin' better'n stoppin' a fight. I'm stoppin' a lot o' them later. When Bruiser's licked he won't be lookin' fer no fights fer a long time. Now I gotta git back. I wanta see that lickin'."

The Sergeant smiled, pulled down his tunic, wheeled on his heels, and set off back along South Railway Street.

In the meantime the fight had fluctuated. Bruiser had rushed once more, to the encouraging cries of his friends. Again and again he plunged to the attack, swinging his fists and cursing. But his fists encountered little that was satisfying. Twice an arm, desperately flung out, had connected with some unvital part of his opponent's body, and the latter merely laughed. And with each laugh a fist planted itself on some part of Bruiser's face. Not heavily—that was what puzzled the ranchers staring down on the scene from the hotel veranda.

Cooney Featherston explained: "He doesn't want to end the fight until he's messed Bruiser up so much he'll be out of commission until the mess is healed. He could end the thing any time, but it would only be a knock-out."

His companions were too excited to reply. Scarcely breathing, they leaned forward, watching every move.

The stranger stepped quickly from side to side, evading Bruiser's rushes with ease, waiting for something. When his fists connected, blood splashed until he himself was spotted with it.

The crowd waited. In a vague way they realized what was happening, but they could scarcely believe their eyes, for Bruiser Salmon had been an unbeaten bully so long.

His friends took up a cry: "Kill him, Bruiser, kill him. You can do it. Knock his head off. Kill him."

Bruiser tried but got nowhere—except that his face was swelling visibly beneath the blood. Surprisingly he had attempted nothing unconventional since Blue Pete's bullet stopped his threatening boot. Almost unconsciously he realized the danger, for the smile never left the stranger's face as he moved nimbly about the ring, ducking and dodging and side-stepping.

By the time Blue Pete returned, he was merely flicking his open hand into Bruiser's face, laughing aloud.

Bruiser's end was in sight, whenever the stranger wished. The crowd knew it. Bruiser's friends knew it, and it hurt them almost as much as it did the gory man in the ring.

Blue Pete edged through the crowd to his former place against the hotel wall. His gun was in his hand now, for he sensed that he might need it.

As the stranger circled about his blindly furious foe, his back for a few moments to Bruiser's friends, a foot shot out. He stumbled over it, fell forward. But before Bruiser could take advantage of it he was up and safely out of danger.

Blue Pete did not move. His gun did not rise. Even his voice was low as he said: "Next foot wot does that's goin' to git a bit o' lead in it."

Cooney Featherston, up behind the veranda railing, heard it. He came to his feet, pushed past his companions, and stumped down the six steps to the sidewalk. He shouldered his way roughly through the crowd and touched Blue Pete on the shoulder.

"Better put it away, Pete. We'll attend to this." He beckoned to his five companions, who hurried down and ranged themselves beside him.

Cooney faced the crowd, a large figure of two hundred and forty pounds, but with no surplus, no handicapping, fat. "You heard what I said? All right, that's all."

Blue Pete grinned and thrust the gun in his belt; but the pat he gave it reminded every member of the crowd that it was there and ready when needed.

For a few moments the fight had slowed down. Bruiser wiped away some of the blood with his hand. He was glad of a moment's respite. Physically and mentally he was in agony. Almost he welcomed the defeat he saw coming, merely to get it over with, to get away to hide his shame. But he could not break it off now.

With a long breath he braced himself for one supreme effort. Starting forward, as if to renew the attack, as his opponent held his ground, he stopped abruptly and lashed out sideways with one foot, straight at the stranger's solar plexus.

It never reached it. As if all the time he had waited for it, the latter doubled swiftly back, seized the threatening foot in both hands, and with a heave jerked Bruiser from his feet.

Before the big body reached the sidewalk, the stranger swung about. Raising the leg he held, he whirled.

"Out of the way," he warned, "out of the way!"

The half-breed leaned forward. "Easy, boy, easy!" For Bruiser's heavy body was whirling about at arm's length, no part of him touching the sidewalk.

The stranger did not seem to hear. As the whirling body came around towards the wall, he heaved and loosened his grip.

Blue Pete managed to get an arm before Bruiser's head, but his shoulder crashed into the wall, with almost two hundred pounds behind it. There was a sickening crack, and Bruiser fell limply to the walk and lay still.

The stranger did not so much as glance at the still body. He laughed. He picked up his coat and wiped his hands on the large handkerchief.

"I won't kick him," he said.

"My God!" It breathed from a score of startled and shocked throats.

The stranger had his coat on now. He bowed to Blue Pete. "Thanks!" he said, and made his way to the hotel steps, the crowd parting silently before him.

CHAPTER IV

THE SEARCH

IT was the following day. The stranger dropped slowly down the stairs into the lobby of the Alberta Hotel and walked across to the desk.

"Is the proprietor in?" he inquired of the clerk.

"Bill, you mean? Yes, he's in having breakfast, I think. Want to see him?"

"If you please."

The clerk hesitated. Bill Corwyn was seldom asked for; he came when he wished to come, and those who wished to see him waited. But the stranger remained expectantly, and the clerk stepped out from behind the counter and passed through the dining-room door.

In a few moments Bill Corwyn emerged and stepped in behind the counter. In the meantime the stranger had moved across the lobby and had dropped into one of the huge leather chairs that lined the walls.

Corwyn did not even glance towards him; he seemed to be unaware of his existence, as he settled back in a chair and picked up a newspaper.

The stranger watched for a few moments, frowning a little, then he rose and approached the counter. Corwyn did not raise his eyes.

The man on the other side of the counter cleared his throat.

Corwyn looked lazily up. "Good morning, Mr. Pierson. Did you sleep well? Want to see me?"

"That's why I sent for you," said Pierson, frowning a little.

"Oh?"

"I wonder if you could help me, Mr. Corwyn."

Corwyn turned and looked behind him. "Were you speaking to me? *Mister* Corwyn isn't here, that I can see. I left him back East many years ago. He died as soon as he came West."

There was a twinkle in his eye, and Pierson reacted to it: "I find so much to learn out here that it looks hopeless."

Corwyn chuckled. "You're thinking of your friend, Bruiser Salmon. Better start now to learn. I'm Bill Corwyn. If I tried to cling to the Mister they'd railride me out of town. Last time I was called Mister was in court, and even the judge winked when he said it. And now what can I do for you

—except cash a check? We cash no checks here for strangers. The time we got our lesson was from a stranger dressed for all the world like you. I have the check framed in my room as a reminder. It was a cheap lesson at a hundred."

Pierson laughed. "I don't need a check cashed. I carry a letter of credit from the firm. Banks everywhere recognize it."

"If that isn't it, then what's the trouble? Yesterday you acted as if you needed help from no one. I saw that little affair. After it was over I went out and checked to see that Bruiser's head hadn't chipped one of the bricks. I was going to give it to you as a souvenir of a job well done . . . mighty well done, I'd say. And you have the blessings of the whole town to back me on that."

"The support that came along at the right moment was useful," declared Pierson, with a wry smile. "I needed it at that moment. It was an unexpected and unpleasant introduction to the town, with no bearing whatever on the purpose of my visit. You'll wonder perhaps what that is."

"Not at all, not at all. We get all kinds . . . and if they were all like you we'd ask for nothing better." His usually expressionless face split into a wide grin, and he reached out and patted Pierson's shoulder. "The hotel is yours. Even that's not enough to pay for the show you put on, stranger."

Pierson shook his head. "Nasty affair, wasn't it? I don't care for too much of that sort of thing in a strange town, where I don't know the police."

"Don't you worry about that—or about them. This strange town owes you more than a bow. The police? They don't deserve what you did for them. I don't mean the Mounties; they won't butt in until they have to. . . . My one regret about that nice little party is that Blue Pete saved Bruiser's neck. We could do without Bruiser Salmon in the Hat."

"Is that the name of the Indian who wouldn't let the fellow kick me? I certainly owe him something—though at the moment I didn't care what part of the fellow struck the wall first. It would be a nasty mess if I'd killed him—as he deserved. I've business to do here. I can't waste time in a court—even though that's my business. I'm a lawyer."

"Bless you, we won't hold that against you," Corwyn returned, with a laugh. "But Blue Pete's not all Indian. He's a half-breed. The best puncher, the best shot, in the whole West . . . and the hardest to get to know well. Lawyer, you say. Looking for someone? Most of them that's looked for hustle out this way. We make good citizens of some of them—even if it's in the cemetery."

"Yes, it happens that I *am* looking for someone, but not to make trouble for him. Far from it. There's a cartload of money waiting for him. His father has died over in England and has left him a fortune. The heir is supposed to be here in the West. His name is Mason."

Bill Corwyn whistled through his teeth. "Get behind a barricade before it's known, or you'll be rushed off your feet. Does the fellow live here in Medicine Hat?"

"We don't know. All we know for certain is that he came West. We got that from a bank in Toronto where he has an account."

"You said his name was Mason."

"Yes, Norman Mason. Do you know anyone of that name?"

Corwyn thought for a few moments. "New name to me . . . and I get them all if they hit the Hat. Your story is really nothing new out here. So many of the young Englishmen who land here, lured by the stories they've read of the West, and of the Mounted Police, are sons of wealthy fathers. Many of them are remittance men, and as a rule we haven't a lot of use for them—until they learn the ropes and discover that we don't give a damn for what their father is. Sometimes they go to seed, just laze away on their remittances, idle and drunk. Then sometimes Fate takes a hand and kills off the intervening heirs back home and—bang!—they have enough to justify keeping sober for the rest of their lives. They're really seldom a bad lot at heart. Some of them even get into the Mounted Police. We've a couple of them right now, and they're as good as they make them."

He frowned and shook his head. "Of course there's the other kind. That chap you mauled yesterday, Bruiser Salmon, is one of them. He's English-born. What they'd probably call a rotter over there. But, rotter or not, he's managed to get round him a group of bad eggs, the shiftless fellows about town, the roughnecks. He's brought them together, and they're a pain in the neck to the local police."

Pierson made a wry face. "I met some of them out there yesterday. But this Norman Mason—no one back in England appears to have kept in touch with him, except the dead father. With him gone we can't get much help from that direction."

"Do you know if he was shipped out here to get rid of him?" asked Corwyn. "We've a lot like that. They sowed a crop of wild oats back home, and the easiest way—for their relatives, and even for the local magistrates—was to ship them out here, to give us the trouble of taming them. I believe it was taken up in parliament at Ottawa."

Pierson did not reply for a few moments. “This Mason couldn’t have been like that. If he’d been a remittance man there’d have been some record of where the money was sent. I’ve been searching now for two weeks as I came along. Someone remembered that he was fond of horses, so I thought he might have come to a ranching country like this.”

“Rather expensive search,” Corwyn remarked.

“Yes, but the estate can stand it.”

“Tell you what you’d better do, Mr. Pierson. Pay a visit to Inspector Barker. He’s the head of the local Mounties. You’ll find him at the barracks. That’s the unsightly, faded, one-story building just across the railway tracks on Main Street. He’ll know, if anyone will. He keeps pretty close track of everyone who comes into the district to stay—and this district extends for more than a hundred miles in all directions—except towards the East. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Mounties know already your favourite breakfast food, the size of your collars, and your police record back East. I’ll admit that Sergeant Mahon was in here last night inquiring about you. He even studied your hand-writing in the register. Of course I had nothing to tell him.” He winked. “But I could read in his face that he knew all about the fight.”

Pierson looked uncomfortable. “I’m glad the police didn’t interfere.”

“So are we,” laughed Corwyn. “We’ve wanted a job like that done for a long time. I’ve even wondered at times if I hadn’t better tackle it myself. You can bet the Mounties know all about it. That they didn’t butt in shows how tickled they are at the way it turned out. Yes, you’d better trot over and have a talk with the Inspector.”

Pierson turned away. “Thanks. I think I will. I tried your local police, that gold-braided Chief you have. I wasn’t impressed. I got nowhere with him. Inspector Barker, you said. I rather like the name.”

“We rather like the man who owns it,” said Corwyn.

CHAPTER V

BLUE PETE WARNED

BLUE PETE descended to the lobby of the Royal Hotel and crossed to the dining-room. He wasn't really hungry, and he had delayed breakfast in the hope that the urge to eat would come—and that the dining-room might have emptied. Somehow things were never the same in town. He didn't like the town; it made him uncomfortable, self-conscious, and his visits were infrequent. Something always seemed to happen while he was there, some disturbing experience that forced him into an embarrassing limelight.

Out on the prairie he was prepared for anything, took everything in his stride. In town he never knew what would happen. For instance, that nasty fight yesterday before the Alberta Hotel. If only he hadn't happened to be there! If only he'd kept out of it! But then nothing like that ever did happen in town that didn't somehow involve him.

And yet—and yet—he shuddered at the thought of it. If he hadn't been there, that stranger would have been nearly killed before Bruiser Salmon was satisfied. That threatening boot! It sure would have made a mess of the helpless face on the sidewalk. And then, later, if he hadn't been there, the stranger might right now face a charge of murder, for Bruiser's head was on the way to that brick wall. As it was, Bruiser was in the hospital with a broken shoulder. Oh, well, there it was.

A dozen diners raised their eyes from their plates as he entered. He felt it and flushed, as he slouched through the room, looking for an empty table.

From one near the kitchen door a hand waved invitation; a face smiled a welcome. They belonged to a big, red-haired man, the head bar-tender of the hotel, known only as Red. In the act of shoving a half-slice of brittle bacon into a cavernous mouth Red grinned and waved.

With a feeling of relief Blue Pete made for the table and seated himself opposite the solitary occupant.

"You're late this morning, Pete," Red greeted him. "Oversleep?"

"Naw. Bin awake sence five er so. Jes' wasn' hungry. Near passed breakfast up." He grinned. "Ef I stayed in bed like this out at the 3-Bar-Y, Mira'd send fer Doc Grange. Thar ain't nothin' here to do, that's wot. I gotta wait fer them ridin'-boots."

Red's face widened to a sly grin. "You sure had somethin' to do yesterday, Pete, unless folks was lyin'. All they talked about las' night in the bar."

Blue Pete frowned. "I din' do nothin'. Yuh mean the fight. That stranger didn' need no help from me. Jes' oncet, when Bruiser went to kick him when he was down. Somebody hadta butt in."

"Damned sorry I missed it. Why'd it have to come off in front of the Alberta. Bet it was worth a cool fifty in the bar afterwards." He sighed. "That's the worst o' bein' right here across the tracks from the Mountie barracks. Can't spit out in front without the Inspector wonderin' if there isn't a law ag'in' it. Things are gettin' too soft around the Hat. Sometimes think I'll skip away up north to that new railway. I'll bet things are tough there. Funny how I miss things like that."

" 'Twasn' funny," Blue Pete told him. "Not fer Bruiser leastwise."

"Oh, that blighter! They say he'll be out of circulation for a few weeks, that's all. I'd like to have been able to send a cabbage or a rotten egg to his funeral."

A waitress entered, and Blue Pete gave his order.

"Yah," he said, "I heerd suthin' crack when he hit the wall."

"And they say his nose was knocked clean around to the back of his head, pretty near. Too bad you stopped him hittin' the wall real hard. But, say, that new guy, he must be some fighter. Bruiser's done a lot o' fightin' round here, and so far—till yesterday—he come out good." He stopped and gobbled down another slice of bacon. "But he always happens to have that gang with him when he fights. It loads the dice in his favour right at the start."

Blue Pete nodded. "They butted in yestiday, the skunks. They'd 'a' piled in too but fer Cooney Featherston."

"Don't gimme that, Pete," Red laughed. "It was you put 'em in their place. An' you kept Bruiser so he couldn't leave till the new guy had another chance at him."

"Wal-l, I jes' nachully thought the tenderfoot shud otta hev that chance. I didn' do nothin', jes' played 'th my .45."

Red wiped his plate off with a slice of bread and thrust the bread into his mouth, and his head shook gloomily. "You'd best watch out, Pete. That ain't considered healthy about the Hat, not with that gang."

"Wotchu mean?"

"They'll be layin' for you, them toughs. And they won't stop short of murder. They jus' couldn't let this thing go without tryin' to get back at you. They'll be lookin' for you."

Blue Pete bit off a slice of buttered toast. "I ain't hard to see." He grinned.

"Well, keep yer .45 handy."

"Reckon I got fists—'less they take to shootin'. An' they won't try that here in town."

He dropped his head over the bowl of porridge set before him and fell to emptying it.

Twenty minutes later he left the hotel by the back entrance. For some reason he felt more sensitive than usual about Inspector Barker. Until Red had revived the picture in his mind he had almost forgotten the fight, and he had no wish now to discuss it with the Inspector. The use of guns within the town was discouraged by that official, and he remembered that his .45 had figured rather prominently in the fight.

The back door of the hotel opened into the hotel yard, from which a gateway led out on Main Street. Of course Inspector Barker could look straight up Main Street from his office across the railway tracks, but the back gate of the hotel seemed far enough away to make the half-breed feel less conscious of those official eyes.

Red had rubbed it in, for even as he passed along the hall to the back door, Red had called out to him from the bar-room:

"Don't forget what I told you, Pete."

Out in the yard the half-breed faced the stables, and he struck across to them. As he opened the door, a familiar whinny greeted him, and his dark face broadened to a grin. Entering and moving along behind several cow-ponies to a box-stall, he reached in and tickled the ears of a pinto that rubbed against his arm.

Blue Pete laughed aloud. "They treatin' yuh right, ole gal?" he asked. "Wanta git back out in the open? Wal-l, so do I, an' durn soon. But them boots gotta be finished fust. That's why we come. An' they won't be done till to-morrow—er soon, he said. This shure ain't no place fer you ner me, ole gal, is it?"

He pushed the stall door open, made certain the bedding was thick and clean, and the manger full of hay, rubbed the pinto down with a handful of

straw, tickled the spotted nose that kept nuzzling him as he worked, closed the door, and returned to the hotel yard.

Just before passing out to the street he stopped, holding his chin in his hand. He felt certain Inspector Barker's eyes were there behind that office window, waiting for him to appear on the street. Suppose the Inspector knew he had fired that shot yesterday, a cowboy exuberance discouraged strenuously of late in town. Even if Chief Dolan did nothing about it, the Inspector would have something to say when they met.

But he straightened his shoulders and stepped out into the street. There were things that had to be done before he could leave town, and the sooner they were done, the sooner he could get away. With a long, stiffening breath, he turned directly up Main Street towards the south, not so much as glancing in the direction of the Mounted Police barracks.

It made no difference. He could feel the Inspector's eyes boring into his back.

The stores along the street were opening for business, with owners and clerks busy sweeping the sidewalk before inside duties called to them. Now and then someone spoke to him. Everyone stopped to look or speak. To those who spoke he presented an embarrassed grin; for the others he would have liked to frown. In every face he read comment on the fight; and he wanted nothing more than to forget it.

He was self-conscious about it now. He had acted without thinking, had interfered with something that was none of his business. Mira always said that was what he did. Looking back on it, he couldn't understand what had made him play such a part, first shooting so close to Bruiser's foot, then standing there with his .45 ready, until Cooney Featherston intervened. A hundred eyes were on him before the scene was over—and he always felt miserable when people stared at him. . . . He wondered if anyone would tell Mira.

He had reached the corner of Fourth Avenue, and he stopped to glance along it towards Toronto Street.

The *Times* sign hanging over the street caught his eye, and he turned and made his way towards it. Entering a doorway, he climbed several steps and opened a half-glass door on his right.

The small room he entered was cut off from the rumbling presses by a seven-foot partition of boards. At one side of the room was a high desk nailed to another board partition, and on the opposite side of the room was a desk at which sat a smiling young woman, holding a sock she had been darning.

The smiling face looked up into the dark face of the half-breed. "Why, hello, Pete! It's a long time since you were in to see us. Brought some news? Any rustlers out round the Hills these days? Steve's hungry for news for this week's edition. No murders, no rustling, no mysteries—no nothing. There's a nice front page space for anything that's startling."

Her eyes twinkled. "Of course, a first-hand report of that affair yesterday in front of the Alberta——"

"Jes' called to pay the 3-Bar-Y brand ad., Mrs. Claver," Blue Pete snuffled and drew the back of a hand across his lips, while the other extracted a roll of bills from a pocket.

Laura Claver rose. "I wish they were all as prompt as you, Pete. The 3-Bar-Y never lets its account run long unpaid." She went to the desk nailed against the wall and opened a large day-book resting on it.

A door in the rear partition opened, and her husband entered. His hands were inky, and a daub marked his forehead. "Say, Laura, how do you spell ——" He saw the half-breed then, and his hand shot out.

He withdrew it before Blue Pete could touch it, and he looked at it ruefully. "That's the worst of an editor running a press. He can't shake hands with his best-paying advertisers. What's the news round the Hills?"

His wife laughed. "I've asked him that. He hasn't opened up yet."

"Well, if he won't open up to you, no use me trying." He winked at the half-breed. "That's why I keep her round the office—to milk visitors of news. She's irresistible—or that's how I find her."

He dodged a playful slap from his wife.

"Ain't no news," Blue Pete told him. "I was jes' payin' fer the ad."

Claver sidled nearer and placed the edge of one hand close to his lips. "Come on, Pete. Give me the low-down on that fight yesterday. I want to get ahead of the news."

Blue Pete shuffled his feet uneasily. "Reckon yuh know it all awready, Steve. Lots was thar to see."

"Yes, and they say you played a big part in it."

A look of concern appeared in the half-breed's face. "Bes' not say nothin' 'bout that. I don' want Mira to know. I shudn' 'a' butted in. Do' know why I did."

"Everyone else knows. Someone had to stop their dirty tricks, that Bruiser Salmon gang."

"Someun else wud 'a' did it. On'y I do things 'thout thinkin', that's all. 'Tain't news now, none of it. Everybody seen it."

The editor shook his head gloomily. “I’ve got to say something about it, or the News’ll have a scoop.”

“But—but everybody knows awready. I seen that as I come up Main Street jes’ now. Yuh got lots else to fill up.”

Laura Claver touched his arm. “He won’t so much as mention it, Pete. I’ll see to that—seeing that I’m irresistible.”

Her husband threw up his hands helplessly. “And to think I keep her in the office to help me!”

His manner changed; his expression was grave. “Just the same, Pete, watch out. That gang of Bruiser’s isn’t going to let things rest there.”

“I didn’ hurt Bruiser none,” protested Blue Pete.

“You did worse. You spoiled a reputation that’s kept them cocks of the walk in this town. They’ll never forgive that.”

“The stranger, he done it—licked Bruiser good an’ plenty.”

“But for their own pride they insist it was you did it. You’re up against a mean lot there. They’ll stop at nothing.”

Blue Pete shrugged. “Some’s bin talkin’ that way. Don’t worry me none.” His face split into a grin. “Sorta suthin’ to look forrard to, ef my ridin’-boots ain’t finished yit. Ain’t had no fun fer a long time now.”

Claver eyed him for a moment. “I’d like to be round when you have that fun.”

“I’ll tell yuh ’bout it,” Blue Pete promised. “S’long!”

He dropped down to the street and made his way back to Main Street. At the corner he crossed to the City Hall and started up the street. As he passed the City Hall door, a local policeman emerged, glanced hastily about, then called:

“Pete!”

The half-breed stopped.

The policeman strolled up to him, still glancing about beneath his brows. “Say, Pete,” he said, in a low voice, “everybody’s talking about that fight yesterday, and the part you played in it. I want to warn you. Bruiser himself is out of it for a few weeks, but his friends have sworn vengeance. They’ll be laying for you. Don’t let them catch you napping.” He spoke quickly and passed on.

Blue Pete grinned after him. “Never had so many folks thinkin’ o’ me,” he thought. But what was it all about? Were they trying to frighten him? Why in the world was everyone so frightened of Bruiser and his gang—yes, even the local police?

He shrugged and continued his way.

At the corner of Seventh Avenue, where the cutbank commenced to climb, he stopped. He had turned back, when his eye caught a small figure hurrying along towards him. It was Kid Longman, and the little fellow was signalling him to wait.

He waited, wondering what the Kid wanted with him, for they had never spoken before.

Kid Longman, an Englishman, was one of the latest arrivals to settle in the town. He was very small. But what distinguished him even more than his size was a daintiness, a striking delicacy of line and movement and manner, that in no way made him appear effeminate. Even his small figure spoke of well-developed muscles, a well-trained body.

As he came nearer, Blue Pete smiled down on him. "Hello, Kid! Sober to-day, ainchu? Good fer you!"

The forehead of the small man lined with a suggestion of anger and shame. "It's good, yes . . . for you, too, Pete."

"Wot's it gotta do 'th me?"

"I want to warn you. I've been looking for you all morning."

The half-breed chuckled. "I ain't hard to see. Yuh goin' to kick my teeth in fer suthin' I done?" He chuckled again. "An' I thought yuh was sober!"

"I am. I'm not the one who'll kick your teeth in. That's what I want to warn you about. You were in that fight yesterday, Pete, and— —"

"I wasn' fightin' nobody. 'Twasn' my fight."

"That's right—it wasn't. But you made it yours. Or the Bruiser gang says you did. You're in grave danger."

Blue Pete laughed. "Me? Yuh don' say! Anyways yuh was too drunk to know wot happened."

"I wasn't drunk enough to miss it. I saw it from the veranda. . . . Bruiser's in the hospital."

"Ain't makin' me cry none. Durn lucky he ain't in the graveyard."

"Yes, and his friends blame you for the whole thing. They can't afford to let a beating like that go."

Blue Pete laughed. "Wotchu think they kin do? Layin' fer me, I s'pose." The expression on his face darkened, and he frowned down on the Kid. "Say, that's wot everybody's tellin' me. Wot's got into everybody?" He tapped the Kid on the shoulder. "Say, Kid, suthin' I'm goin' to warn you: cut out the booze. Ef yuh don't yuh're in fer a heap o' trouble. Yuh ain't now wot yuh was when yuh come."

The Kid turned away and let his eyes drop. “You don’t know, Pete, that’s all.”

“I know yuh gotta go easy on the stuff. Tell yuh wot: come on outa the ranch. Yuh won’t git no booze out thar. Guzzlin’ ain’ goin’ to make yuh a real Westerner. ’Tain’t whisky made us wot we are. You come on out.”

The Kid looked up into the dark face in silence for several moments. “I don’t know why you ask me. I’ve never even spoken to you before.”

“Oh, I’ve seen yuh lots o’ times, an’ I seen yuh was hurtin’ yerself. Yuh warned me. Now I’m warnin’ you. Sorta payin’ yuh back,” he added, with a laugh.

“I have a reason,” declared the Kid almost sullenly.

“Yuh ain’ got no sense.” The half-breed stopped, grinned in an embarrassed way, and pushed his sombrero back on his black hair. “Gor-swizzle, don’ know wot made me talk that way. Never done it before. Suthin’ musta got into me. Reckon ’twas them warnin’s. Le’s call it even, Kid. . . . But you come on out to the ranch an’ git ’way from it.”

He chuckled again. “Gor-swizzle, ef Mira cud hear me talk!”

CHAPTER VI

THE COWARDLY BLOW

THE repeated warnings only annoyed him. What fools some people were! Did they think he would be frightened, perhaps that he would hurry his departure to escape a gang of young skunks who had contrived to terrify the town because of a weak-spined police? Imagine the West, the West, as he knew it—had helped, though unconsciously, to make it what it was—imagine the West cowed by a group of young fellows!

If the town was cowed, why didn't it apply to the Mounted Police, to Inspector Barker? He'd make short work of ending such a state of affairs. He even found himself critical of the Inspector for not having intervened before conditions went so far. And then he was annoyed with himself for thinking such a thing. Unless appealed to, or in emergency, the Inspector kept strictly out of local enforcement.

He was in a mood to be easily annoyed. The shoemaker had not given him much satisfaction as to when the repairs on the riding-boots would be finished. It all added up to a burning hatred of the town.

All his life he had spent in the open, mostly without so much as a roof over his head. There had been the early days in his mother's tepee, over in the Montana Badlands. Later, when he could fend for himself, he had taken to rustling. The danger and excitement attracted him. That was still in Montana, and he had made many enemies for himself there, both among the ranchers and the other rustlers, for he had taken most pleasure from rustling stock that had been rustled in the first place. It brought every gun in the Badlands against him, and that was good. It kept every instinct, every faculty, alive.

A few years before, he had come on Whiskers, his little pinto. Since then life had had a new interest. He needed it now, when he had settled down as a law-abiding rancher in the Canadian West. He had married Mira, a white woman, sister of two men who had shot themselves rather than the Mounted Police who were after them for rustling.

If it were not for the Mounted Police life would have lost much of its glamour. Inspector Barker had found his experience valuable and had utilized it until a foolish judge had refused to accept his evidence in a rustling case, because, as Blue Pete readily admitted, he had once been a

rustler himself. It had driven him in one last rash outbreak back to rustling, unhappy about it, and anxious because Mira had joined him.

Then he had won himself forgiveness by assisting the Mounted Police in an emergency. Since then the Inspector had used him often, always without the public being aware of it; and the occasions were of a nature to make the half-breed forget the excitement of rustling.

Now, as joint owner of the 3-Bar-Y, Mira's original ranch, he had settled down to catching rustlers—and, undercover, helping the Inspector in cases he found almost impossible for his own men. It made life a thrill once more.

Much as he disliked visits to the town, he was forced frequently to make them. He had no definite tasks about the ranch and was therefore available for the long trips for shopping and repairs that must be attended to in Medicine Hat. Often his visits were punctuated by a call on Inspector Barker. It was a part of the public conviction that even the Mounted Police did not trust him long out of their sight. The fact was—and Blue Pete had no delusions about it—that the Inspector *did* want just that, since he never felt quite safe about the strange half-breed character. In part it arose from the unorthodox methods Blue Pete used to accomplish what the Inspector gave him to do, methods that the Mounted Police dare not use, but which were necessary for a successful end to the task assigned him.

It was while he waited for his boots to be repaired that he had gone to the Alberta Hotel and, since the veranda was empty, had seated himself in one of the chairs. He knew those chairs well, chairs usually reserved for a group of ranchers. Although a rancher himself, his only real friend among them was Cooney Featherston. That was because he was a half-breed, and because the ranchers never felt quite sure of him.

On the day after the fight he found it difficult to fill the time. Part of the day he spent aimlessly wandering about the town—until the attention he attracted drove him back to the Royal and to his room.

Next day it was the same—and the next. The shoemaker would set no definite time for the work to be finished, pointing to the long lines of shoes awaiting attention before Blue Pete had brought his. He did say finally that it would be "some time this week". Blue Pete had heard him add, under his breath, "I hope."

That night he prowled about the streets in a bad temper that wrapped him in his own thoughts.

It cost him dearly.

He had followed Toronto and Main Streets to their ends where the cutbank rose, had returned to Fourth Avenue and had wandered out on the

long bridge over the South Saskatchewan. For a time he stood staring down over the railing on the rushing current, seeing nothing of it. Restlessly he turned back and lounged up the Esplanade, the street that ran parallel and closest to the river. It was favoured by the wealthier ranchers for their town residences.

It was almost dark; in a few minutes the swift Western twilight would merge into the Western night of dazzling stars and a gentle breeze. He drew a long breath, longing to be out on the prairie. The streets were almost empty; the stores had long since closed, for it was almost ten o'clock.

Here and there lights showed through windows of the ranchers' houses, as he strolled along. Somewhere across the river a dog barked, and far away to the south-west a pack of coyotes sent their quavering howls in reply. Someone ahead of him entered a gate, a door opened, letting a flood of light through before closing.

Far ahead of him a group of young men dropped down the cutbank from the open prairie, where they had been playing baseball. They carried bats.

Blue Pete did not even see them. He was thinking about the shoemaker's "I hope", and making up his mind to buy new boots, rather than wait much longer.

The group came nearer. He failed to notice that their shouting ceased suddenly, that they formed into a long line to pass him.

Automatically he crowded over to his own side of the sidewalk and continued his way.

But just as he came level with the leader of the group the strange extra sense that had served him so well and so often struck him into involuntary action. Swiftly he stepped off the sidewalk.

That was why the first bat missed him. But even as he raised his arm, the second bat swung viciously out. It caught him on the back of the head, and he dropped.

It was instinct that sent his hand reaching for his gun, for he was scarcely conscious. But something held his hand. It was not a gun that had knocked him down; it was no time to use a gun. He couldn't think past that.

Stunned but still not completely unconscious, he lay. And, helpless and still, a boot near his head drew back and struck him. Then another.

He knew nothing more.

CHAPTER VII

INSPECTOR BARKER INTERVENES

FROM down towards Fourth Avenue a small figure appeared through the gloom. One of the attacking group saw it. "Beat it, boys!" he warned.

They scattered along Eighth Avenue towards Toronto Street, running on both sides of the street in complete silence.

Kid Longman was on his way to his room and had seen something of the attack, though he was too distant to recognize either attackers or victim. He saw the gang running and hurried forward. He reached the still figure of the half-breed and bent over it; and with a muttered curse he straightened and looked about. A light in a nearby house caught his eye, and he ran through the gate and rang the door-bell.

A man in shirtsleeves and slippers opened the door and squinted into the darkness. With an exclamation of protest he stumbled aside as the Kid dashed past him and grabbed the telephone that hung on the wall of the hall.

"I want the police," he gasped, "and quick." He was talking to Central, while the owner of the house stood gaping at him.

Chief Dolan himself happened to be in his office in the City Hall, and in three minutes, with one of his men, he arrived on the scene. In the meantime the rancher whose house had been so summarily invaded had grasped the situation and lighted a lantern. In its light the Chief frowned down on the unconscious half-breed.

"Humph!" he grunted. "And they say he never drinks! Bad place to fall, this. Struck his face on those stones. Nasty mess."

The Kid snorted indignantly. "He's not drunk. It was that Bruiser gang. They knocked him down. I saw it."

The Chief turned a scowling face on him. "Where were you that you could see so much?"

"Down near the City Hall. I saw the crowd. When they saw me, they bolted."

The Chief turned slowly to look along the street towards the City Hall, and his laugh was short. "Great eyes you must have to see so far in this darkness. If I put out this lantern, you wouldn't recognize me, right here beside you—scarcely."

"Oh, yes, I would," replied the Kid, and there was venom in the tone. "I'd know it was you without seeing you. Some people spread an aura like that."

"Don't get saucy, young man," threatened the Chief, "or I'll run you in as a suspect. How do I know you didn't do it yourself?"

"You wouldn't. It was the Bruiser gang. But you flatter me. Of course nothing will be done to the Bruiser toughs."

"Well," growled the Chief weakly. "I'm not taking the word of anyone so far away." He turned to his subordinate. "Call up Jack and tell him to bring the stretcher, right away. We'll get him off to the jail until he sobers up."

The Kid planted himself firmly before the Chief. "Do you mean to tell me you're running him in as a drunk, with all that blood, and that smashed face?"

The Chief was uneasy. He cleared his throat. "Don't try to tell me my business, young fellow. Of course—of course a doctor will see him—in my time and at the jail."

For a moment or two the Kid stood glaring at him. Then he swung about and raced away into the darkness. He ran along Eighth Avenue and turned into Main Street. At a gate he hurried through and rang a bell.

Inspector Barker himself opened the door. "Why, hello, Kid, what's brought you——"

"Inspector, Blue Pete has been attacked by the Bruiser gang and left unconscious, and all smashed up, over on the Esplanade; and the Chief is running him in as a drunk." It poured from him.

Even before he had finished, the Inspector had swung about and grabbed a tunic from the wall. He put on his official cap, and in a few seconds they were running together towards the City Hall. Neither spoke. What the Inspector would have said had he spoken was not for another to hear.

They reached the City Hall as the stretcher came down the street. In the light before the door the Inspector saw the cruelly smashed face, and he drew a long breath to steady himself. He pointed.

"What are you thinking of doing with him, Chief?"

Something in the tone made the Chief plainly uncomfortable. "He's drunk—and he fell. I'm taking him inside till I get the doctor. I don't imagine he's hurt much."

"You're not taking him into jail," declared the Inspector.

Chief Dolan, with two subordinates at his side, stiffened. “I’m calling a doctor, I told you.”

Inspector Barker stepped nearer, his hands placed firmly on his hips. “You’re taking him straight to the hospital—or you’ll be responsible for anything that happens. I myself will hold you responsible.”

“But I can’t do that to every drunk who tumbles down and scratches himself,” protested the Chief weakly, already beaten.

The Inspector pointed again. “ ‘Scratches himself?’ You know he doesn’t drink—or you should, if you know your business. You’re—taking him—straight—to the hospital. Understand?”

The Chief flushed and bit his lip. “It’s—it’s my business to attend to things like this.”

“And,” declared the Inspector, thrusting himself forward until their faces almost touched, “it’s my business to see you do it properly. If you don’t, I’ll arrest you, right here and now. Don’t forget, Chief, my authority tops yours, even here in the city.”

He turned away and stepped back, pointing down Main Street in the direction of the hospital.

For just a moment or two the two subordinate policemen who had carried the stretcher hesitated, looked uneasily at their superior, then picked up the stretcher and started away.

“Now,” said the Inspector, “I’ll telephone the doctor myself.” He stepped inside the City Hall, passed along the hallway to the Chief’s office, and called Doctor Grange.

He hurried then after the stretcher, overtaking it at the hospital door.

The half-breed was coming to his senses. He raised himself on his elbow and looked inquiringly about. Then he spat out two teeth, wiped the blood from his mouth with his hand, lowering the hand to stare incredulously on the stain. He saw the policemen and the Inspector.

The Kid had kept close to the stretcher. Now he pushed forward, “Who struck you, Pete? I saw it.”

A scowl gathered on Blue Pete’s dark face, and for a moment he made no answer. Then: “Wasn’ nobody struck me.”

“But I saw them running away.”

Blue Pete tried to smile. “Musta bin the booze ag’in, Kid. Bes’ go a bit easy on the stuff, boy. Yuh’re seein’ things.”

Chief Dolan laughed a sneering laugh. “What did I tell you, Kid? And you put up that same story to me. I knew you couldn’t see anything that far

away."

The Inspector stepped to the side of the stretcher and bent over it. "Pete, I'm asking you. Who was it attacked you?"

The half-breed frowned. He shook his head stubbornly. "Nobody. I musta fell. I don't 'member. I was jes' walkin' along, not noticin' whar I was steppin' in the dark er nothin'. Musta fell."

The Inspector turned away with a sigh. He knew better than any of them how useless it was to persist. "Take him in," he ordered. "The doctor will be here in a few minutes."

They bore the blood-stained victim into a room with a dozen beds, all but two of them occupied. A nurse led to one of the empty ones and turned back the sheets.

As the stretcher passed one of the beds, the patient there raised himself carefully on one arm. The other shoulder was encased in a cast. He leaned forward to look down into the half-breed's bloody face.

He laughed. "Well, well, well! They all get it, don't they, when they don't mind their own business? That'll teach him a thing or two."

The doctor, hurrying along among the beds, turned on him. "Shut that mean mouth of yours, Bruiser. You certainly got what was coming to *you*, didn't you?"

The examination over, Doctor Grange looked down on the new patient. "Two teeth gone," he listed, "a smashed cheekbone and lip, and a slight concussion at the back of the head."

"That all, Doc?" asked Blue Pete.

"All? My God, man, anyone else would be at the undertaker's. How much do you want?"

Blue Pete grinned through the bandages. "All I wants to git outa this place an'—an'——" His eyes slid away to where Bruiser lay watching, and he did not complete the sentence.

Doctor Grange shook his head. "Man alive, Pete, you should be dead."

"Mebbe. Mira says I never do wot I shud. Yuh don' need to keep me here. I kin git around."

"You're not getting around for ten days or two weeks at least. And," he added grimly, "by that time you may have come to your senses and be willing to tell the police what happened."

The eyes showing above the bandage dropped away. “I do’ need no p’lice. Reckon I jes’ fell, like I said.”

“Then you sure fall damned hard. If everyone fell like that, we doctors would have little time to sleep. But it’s none of my business how it happened. That’s for the police. My job is to get you fixed up.”

But when he reached his home he telephoned to Inspector Barker. “Better get Mira in right away,” he advised.

“You don’t mean, Doc, that—that he’s that bad?” questioned the anxious voice at the other end of the line.

“Oh, no, not that. But I want him moved out of that room. Bruiser Salmon is there, and I wouldn’t put it past Blue Pete to get out of bed and break Bruiser’s neck. Mira can do things with him that we can’t.”

CHAPTER VIII

BLUE PETE'S STORY

SERGEANT MAHON, seated in his small office at the rear of the Mounted Police barracks, started as the bell on the wall above his desk tinkled. He rose immediately, stood for a moment before a mirror to straighten his tunic and hair, and set off along the hall to Inspector Barker's office. At his knock the Inspector's voice invited him to enter.

The Inspector swung about precariously in the decrepit chair and pointed to the empty one beside the desk.

"Langley's been down to the hospital, Mahon," he said. "Blue Pete wouldn't see him—for some reason. You'll have to try. He won't refuse an old friend like you . . . I hope. We must know something more about this attack. He might easily have been killed; it's a wonder he wasn't."

Mahon smiled weakly and shook his head. "I've been there, sir. The nurse came out to tell me he wouldn't see anyone."

"But—but we must do something." The Inspector scowled down on the blotter on his desk. "If he'd been killed—or permanently injured! Good Lord, man, we can't leave things hanging in the air like this. He's got a cat's lives. Even bullets seem to hit only unvital spots. Or," he added grimly, "spots that in him aren't vital."

He thought for a moment. "Man alive, the hospital can't keep us out, if we need to talk to him." He shook his head and frowned. "But we mustn't make an issue of it or we'd get nowhere with him . . . I'll tell you what to do: don't ask anyone to see him. Just walk in—right into his room. He'll have to say something once you're there."

"Perhaps, sir," Mahon laughed. "But if he isn't willing to talk, I'm afraid there isn't much anyone can do about it. But I'm willing to try."

"It's the only thing that offers any hope," grumbled the Inspector. . . . "What puzzles me—frightens me a little, I must admit—is that he is so determined not to be frank. Why? We know he was attacked. We even know pretty well who did it. But why won't he tell? There's a story in this, and we want to get to the bottom of it—or something we don't want is going to happen, I fear, something that'll mean real trouble. I don't want that trouble to be Blue Pete's.

"The Kid is so certain when he blames it on the Bruiser gang. But we can't act on that. He admits that he couldn't recognize anyone in the darkness at such a distance. We must go a little carefully, too, because Chief Dolan is keeping an eye on us. He has to support his actions at the time of the attack."

He shuffled a pile of papers on his desk. "By the way, that stranger who was in the fight with Bruiser came in to see me to-day. It was difficult to keep from telling him how sorry I am that he failed to beat Bruiser's brains out."

Sergeant Mahon looked surprised. "He didn't come in about the fight, sir, did he?"

"He never so much as mentioned it." The Inspector laughed. "Even when I did, he dismissed it, as if he had almost forgotten. What brought him to me—to the West—he's trying to find an heir to a fortune someone died and left him over in England. They haven't been able to find the lucky chap. The last anyone knows of him he was somewhere in the West."

"What's the name, sir?"

"Mason, Norman Mason. I never heard the name out here. Did you?"

Mahon shook his head. "The West, sir, is a pretty big place for a search like that."

"That's what I told him. I'll see if any of the other boys know the name. . . . But, Blue Pete—I want you to get over there and try your luck. By the way, Mira had him moved to a private room. She got here in a hurry. I sent Jenkinson after her from Turner's Crossing. She was in here the very next day, after riding all night." He chuckled. "I didn't tell you Doctor Grange advised me to have him moved from the ward where Bruiser is; he was afraid there'd be murder. Bruiser made a nasty remark when Blue Pete was being carried to his bed that day."

He shook his head gloomily. "I want to get this thing settled. I want to find Pete's attackers and have them punished. . . . In reality it's not so much to punish them but to get to them first, before Blue Pete does. If we don't, there's going to be trouble. Now go to it. Drag it out of him."

Mahon went. He entered the hospital without stopping at the office, and climbed the stairs to the private rooms. One by one he softly opened the doors and looked in. Finally he came to Blue Pete. A nurse was in the room, bending over the bed. She was talking soothingly, as to a child.

"Now, now, Pete," she was saying, "the doctor says you're to stay in bed a little longer. You must do as he says, you know. We all must. I'm

responsible for you, and if I let you out before he says, I'll get into trouble. Now, now, now!"

Mahon could hear the bed creak as the half-breed squirmed.

"Gor-swizzle," grunted the voice from the bed, "I don' need no doc. Never did. This ain't nothin' to wot I bin through. An' Mira didn' need to tuck me away in this room all alone. I wanted to stay in that other big room. I'd 'a' got up quicker thar."

Mahon wasn't quite sure, but he imagined a chuckle at the end.

"Yuh ain' goin' to pay nothin' fer me, nurse," the half-breed continued. He signed heavily. "Reckon the hospital, an' the doc, they gotta make suthin' outa them they git in this room, so I'll do my share fer a while. But 'tain't goin' to be long. Yuh kin tell the doc that."

"This is such a nice room," said the nurse. "There's the river out there."

Blue Pete snorted. "Gor-swizzle, it looks a dang sight nicer out in the open. I bin lookin' at it thar fer years, not through a glass window neither. 'Tain't nothin' anyways but a lot o' water nobody's got no use fer—'ceptin' tryin' to keep it off the flats down thar. An' tryin' don't git 'em nowhars."

They had failed to hear the door open behind the nurse. Now the Sergeant stepped forward.

The bandaged face on the bed jerked up, to stare belligerently past the nurse, who stepped back, recognized the Sergeant, bowed, smiled, and started towards the door.

"Good morning, Sergeant!" In a low voice she continued, as she passed him. "A difficult patient. If you can do anything to make him more reasonable it'll help us. The doctor says he must remain in bed for a few more days. It's been a real task keeping him there from the first day." She laughed. "I think he'd have to lose both legs before he'd consider himself a bed-patient."

The keen ears of the man on the bed had heard most of it. "They didn' needta keep me here neither," he complained. "I kin walk, can't I? I got both my legs. They didn' do nothin' to them." He caught himself sharply there and hurriedly altered the wording: "Nothing happened my legs when I fell, I mean. Jes' my head, an' thar ain't nothin' much thar to hurt. I kin still chew. Them two teeth don' matter none. I shud be up an' out."

Mahon moved towards the bed, smiling but shaking his head reprovingly. "The doctor knows best, Pete. That's what they're for. You'll be all right in a few days. In fact, Mira says the same thing, and you usually take her word for things."

The eyes visible above the bandages twinkled. “Times I do. Times I don’t—an’ things they allus work out awright. This ain’t one o’ the times she knows as well as me. I’m doin’ the feelin’, ain’t I?”

The door closed behind the nurse with a scarcely audible click, but Blue Pete heard it, and an almost frightened look showed in his eyes.

Mahon drew a chair to the side of the bed. “I came to see you more than once, Pete,” he said. “They wouldn’t let me in.”

“I didn’ wanta see nobody,” the half-breed growled.

“That’s what I gathered. But the Inspector wanted to talk to you.”

“Wot ’bout?”

Mahon cleared his throat. “You were in a pretty bad mess, you know, when you were brought here.”

“ ’Twas the Chief brung me, wasn’t it?”

“He’d have taken you to jail as a drunk, if the Inspector hadn’t ordered him to bring you here.”

Blue Pete chuckled. “Me drunk! Gor-swizzle, that’s a good un. He knows I don’t drink nothin’ but water—an’ not a nawful lot o’ that.”

“Yes. That’s why we know it wasn’t a fall that injured you. The Inspector has a right to know more, Pete. You have him to thank for having you brought here.”

The figure on the bed twisted unhappily. “I fell,” he muttered. “ ’Tain’t no use tryin’ to make nothin’ else outa it, Sergeant. That’s a dark street— —”

“Yes, that’s what you told the Chief.” He laughed. “Good Lord, you must fall hard.”

“Mira says I allus do things the hard way.” He turned to stare through the window. “Yuh bes’ mebbe tell th’ Inspector I was drunk, ef that’ll fix things up.”

“It won’t. The Inspector wants only the truth. . . . And we all know that isn’t the truth. You were struck down by someone.”

“Ef I was, then that’s my business. Th’ Inspector ain’t got no need to worry ’bout me.”

“But it’s his business, too. It was that Bruiser gang, wasn’t it?”

Blue Pete did not reply.

“You know it, Pete, and we know it.”

“Then wotchu comin’ to me fer? I said I fell. That’s all. I don’ want no p’lice to butt in an’ make me say things.”

Mahon sighed. He knew it was useless to continue. He rose. "It's too bad, Pete, much too bad."

A slow smile showed in the half-breed's eyes. "Reckon we'll both git over it, Sergeant. Things'll come out awright."

Mahon's forehead wrinkled with a sudden worry, as he stared down on the bed. Then, without another word, he left the room. Discouraged, worried, unhappy, he walked blindly down the stairs and along the lower hall to the front door. As he opened the door, a bulky figure blocked the way.

"Oh, Cooney. I'm glad we met. I'm worried about Blue Pete. Will you see him and have a talk? Perhaps you can get him to tell what happened him."

"That's just where I was going, Sergeant," said Featherston. "But what's the trouble? I'll bet they're having a time keeping him in bed."

"Something of that. But that isn't what worries me. We want to know what happened him."

Cooney was puzzled. "Doesn't he know? Doesn't he remember?"

"He remembers much too well, we fear," replied the Sergeant dryly. "But he continues to insist that he fell."

Featherston chuckled. "What's the big idea of it? Everyone knows he was knocked down in the dark, and everyone knows who did it."

"Of course. But if he refuses to talk, if he continues to say he fell, there's nothing we can do about it."

The rancher shook his head gloomily. "If he says that to you, I don't see what I can do about it. Unless—unless—the Mounted Police frighten him. He knows you keep an eye on him. I can try." He looked down into Mahon's eyes. "But, Sergeant, if he talks to me, and doesn't wish me to tell, you don't think I'd break a promise, I hope."

Mahon felt helpless. "What we're afraid of, Cooney, is the reason for this persistent silence. Is he thinking to collect himself for that attack?"

Featherston whistled. "If he does, I'd sure hate to be one of that Bruiser gang."

Blue Pete was alone when Featherston entered and cautiously let his huge bulk down in the solitary chair.

The half-breed watched every movement in silence until the chair ceased to creak. Then: "So they sent *you* to try, eh, Cooney?"

Featherston flung out his hands. "No one sent me. I met the Sergeant, of course, on his way out, but I was on my way then to see you. It's the first chance I had to come to town."

Blue Pete nodded. “Shure. I knowed yuh’d come. I ain’t got many frien’s care a cuss wot happened me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Pete. Everyone knows the part you took in the fight, and they’re all for you, against that bunch of rowdies.” He leaned forward, the chair creaking ominously. “I understand you try to make everyone believe you fell. We know different. Who was it, Pete?”

“I ain’t talkin’,” growled the half-breed. “ ’Tain’t no use, Cooney. I don’ want the p’lice buttin’ in.”

The rancher sighed. “All right. I promise that I won’t tell anything you don’t wish me to tell. But I want to know. It was the Bruiser gang, wasn’t it?”

Blue Pete hesitated. “Shure was them.”

“Then why not tell the police and make them pay for it? They’d get a term in jail.”

Blue Pete snorted. “Jail—fer them skunks? That wudn’ hurt ’nuff fer me. That ain’t wot I want. I’m makin’ them pay—right to me. An’ it’ll shure hurt—jes’ like they tried to hurt me. Mebbe some smart lawyer’d git ’em off, too. I cudn’ swear who hit me. No, sir-ee, I’m workin’ on them skunks myself, Cooney.”

“Just what did happen?”

The half-breed told as much as he knew. “Musta bin a bat they carried,” he explained at the end. “That’s all I ’member seein’. I know they kicked me when I was down. That’s wot these bandages are fer.”

“Kicked you in the face, when you were lying on the sidewalk?” Cooney bristled with indignation.

“Ain’t that jes’ wot yuh’d think them skunks ’ud do?”

“But you had your gun.”

Blue Pete nodded. “I ’member I reached fer it. But they didn’ hev no guns.”

The rancher stared at him. “My God! *You* didn’t have a bat either.”

The half-breed appeared to puzzle over that. “But I got boots, same’s they had. An’ I got fists. I ain’t wastin’ no lead ag’in’ skunks. Jes’ wait.”

Featherston shook his head warningly. “Be careful, Pete. Remember what you’re up against with a bunch like that.”

“I bin up ag’in guns, an’ tha’re wuss. They won’t ketch me sleepin’ ag’in.”

“But they won’t stop at anything.”

"Shure. That's the way I like it. Then I don' needta stop neither. They didn' hurt me much. I cud git outa here right now."

"But there's the Mounties, Pete. They don't like rough work. And don't forget what they think of you."

Blue Pete shrugged. "Shure, I know. . . . But, Cooney, I got a job to do. Sorta lookin' forrard to it, too. Things 'a' bin sorta dull fer a long time, an' I'm gittin' lazy. Anyways," with a grin, "the Hat needs a kick in the pants to wake it up. . . . Say, Steve Claver'll hev some news fer the *Times* 'fore I'm through."

The rancher rose. "I can't help hoping it works, Pete," he admitted, "but I'm afraid—for you. We need you around to keep the rustlers away."

Blue Pete reached out and touched his arm. "Keep yer shirt on, Cooney. I'll be here fer the rustlers. I bin in wuss places lots o' times—an' I like 'em. And," he called after the retiring rancher, "yuh said yuh wudn' tell nothin'."

CHAPTER IX

BLUE PETE WAITS

THE shoes had been repaired long since and, since they were not called for, had been shoved to the back of a shelf and forgotten. They had been forgotten by their owner as well. Blue Pete was still in town. So was Whiskers, the little pinto.

The half-breed had left the hospital. Rather, he had escaped from it, without awaiting the doctor's orders. His own clothes had been taken from him, but he knew where they were stored. The nurse had told him, cleverly led on by an interested patient.

That night he had crawled from the bed in his hospital garb, had removed the bandages, leaving only some adhesive over his rapidly healing cheek, and had crept to the room where his clothes were stored.

In ten minutes he was out on the street.

As the fresh air cooled his face, he drew a long breath, puffed out his chest, flexed his muscles, and felt that life was resuming its normal course once more. He grinned, with the delight of a small child evading its guardian. They weren't going to keep him in bed, just for a couple of missing teeth, a gash in the lip, a mashed-up cheek, and a tender spot in the back of his head. No, sir-ee! Many a time he had gone through worse without missing a turn.

It was late, and no one was in sight away down lower Main Street, but he moved silently and cautiously towards the railway tracks with the furtiveness of a criminal. He approached the Mounted Police barracks in some trepidation. He knew the Inspector had long since gone home, but there was always someone on duty, and even the blank wall about the back yard made him nervous.

Over the top of the fence he could see the upper few inches of a lighted window. That was Sergeant Mahon's office, and the half-breed crept close to the fence and hurried past. The mere thought of the Sergeant worried him. He was sorry that he had been so short with his friend, but there was nothing else to do. Not with the plans he had in mind.

He hurried across the railway tracks and turned to the right along the short spur of South Railway Street that led past the Royal Hotel, to end at the river bank. The front door of the hotel was unlocked, and he entered. The

office was empty, though he could hear water running somewhere beyond the dining-room. On tip-toes he climbed the stairs and made for the room he usually occupied. He listened at the door, could hear nothing from beyond, and entered. The room was empty and, only partly undressing, he threw himself on the bed.

In the morning he waited until he thought the dining-room would be empty.

In the office, however, he encountered Red. The bar-tender stared at him, glanced down at the register, and frowned.

"Where in the world did you drop from, Pete?" he asked. "You haven't registered. I mean, your name isn't here." Red himself always registered for him, since writing was such an operation for the half-breed.

"Shure. 'Tain't my fault. Nobody here when I come in."

"But I thought you'd be in the hospital for another week or two."

Blue Pete grinned. "So'd the doc. I fooled 'em all. I snook out."

Red laughed. "Well, I'm glad to see you're able to."

"Pooh! I cuda come out long ago, but them docs gotta hev a job, I reckon. They bin trained down East; they ain't usedta nobody but a tenderfoot. Breakfast still on?"

"O' course—for you. Go right in. Glad to see you lookin' so fit after the maulin' you got."

The half-breed's face clouded. "I fell. Nobody won't take my word fer it, an' who knows better'n me wot done it? Nobody kin maul me. Jes' put that in yer pipe an' smoke it, Red." He started towards the dining-room door.

"O' course, o' course," Red agreed eagerly. He watched the door close. "And," he muttered, "they'll wish they hadn't or I'm a coyote."

Breakfast over, Blue Pete's first thought was for Whiskers, and he hurried to the stable. The pinto welcomed him with a whimper that brought a lump to his throat, and for a few moments their heads rested together, the pinto carefully avoiding the patch of adhesive on the marked cheek.

Later the half-breed emerged to the street.

He did not forget the Inspector there across the railway tracks, behind his office window, but with the memory was a certain amount of defiance. Inspector Barker was certain to know that he had left the hospital without permission, but no one could force him back now. This was one time when even the Mounties couldn't interfere.

A few minutes later, however, all his composure and defiance vanished. Every eye along the street was on him, and many tried to stop to talk. He

nodded back to them, and that was all. He knew what they wanted—the whole story that only he could tell.

Along Main Street to Fourth Avenue, across to Toronto Street, and down Toronto Street towards the railway tracks. Not a movement on the street failed to catch his eye, not a face, though he appeared to notice no one. Once or twice his gaze lingered on a young man, and at his sides his fists clenched.

One young man, far down the street, cut across to the other side, and the half-breed smiled inwardly—a smile that was more a snarl.

As he neared the Alberta Hotel, someone dropped down the front steps and started up the street towards him. It was Pierson, and he recognized the half-breed and hurried to meet him, his hand outstretched.

"Glad to see you around again, Pete," he said. "I heard of your injury. Bill Corwyn told me." He frowned and looked uncomfortable. "I hope he was wrong—that it wasn't connected with what happened that day when you helped me."

"Bill don' know nothin' 'bout it," growled the half-breed. "I fell."

Pierson did not press the point. "I haven't had a chance to thank you for what you did that day. I left town almost right afterwards. Just returned yesterday. I was going down to the hospital to see you; they told me you were there."

"Yuh awright now?" Blue Pete inquired.

"Oh, yes, thanks to you." He laughed. "I'm almost glad it happened; I was getting out of practice for a rough-and-tumble."

"They ain't tried to do nothin' to yuh sence?"

"Who? That gang? No, I haven't even seen them; I wouldn't recognize them now, I suppose." He shook his head. "With a gang like that it would be you they'd——" He stopped and cleared his throat. "No, I haven't had any trouble. I've been running around through the West. Say, you might be able to help me. You know this part of the country pretty well, I suppose. I'm looking for a young Englishman by the name of Norman Mason. There's a lot of money waiting for him over in England, left by his father. I can't find him—not yet. It seems he once sent a letter from Medicine Hat, and that's all we have to go by. Do you know anyone by that name?"

Blue Pete shook his head. "Bes' ast Inspector Barker, over at the Mounted Police barracks. He has to keep track o' everybody."

"I did ask him. He couldn't help. I thought the lad may be working at one of the horse ranches. He always liked horses, they tell me from England.

A great rider, too. Once rode in a big steeplechase over there, I understand. It shouldn't be difficult to trace the name."

The half-breed shook his head again. "Bes' not gamble on that. Lots o' them change thur names when they come here. Mebbe had to skip out, er they were shipped out, an' tha're 'shamed of it. They don' wanta be found."

"Yes, I suppose that's so. But I've had no information that would lead me to think he had reason to change his name. Well, I'm glad you're around again. I'll never forget what you did for me."

He passed on up the street but turned back. "Don't forget the name, Norman Mason. If you hear of him, let Bill Corwyn know, please. I'll keep in touch with him."

Blue Pete continued towards the railway tracks. As he glanced back across the street, he saw the Kid hurrying up the other side, to disappear into Fourth Avenue.

The half-breed turned and thoughtfully retraced his steps, still watching every face from beneath his brows.

All day he wandered the streets. Apparently he saw no one, but now and then his eyes would light up as they focused on a young man's face; then they would half-close, and he would turn away.

Later, as the stores closed, he was on the street again. He turned from Main Street towards the Esplanade, and started to follow it towards the south. Far ahead of him a crowd of young men spilled into sight from the higher level of the prairie. They were returning from a game of baseball, most of them carrying bats.

It was growing dark too quickly for him to recognize them, but he knew their voices, and he turned back to Fourth Avenue and along towards the river. In the shadow of the metal supports of the bridge he slunk against the railing and waited.

He heard the group reach the corner, heard their "so long's!" and then the footsteps of someone hurrying towards him.

He smiled. It was a smile without mirth, as he raised his arms and gripped his fists tightly.

CHAPTER X

THE FIRST COLLECTION

THE young man came on through the night, whistling tunelessly through his teeth and striking the bat he carried against the curb at the edge of the sidewalk. From far along Fourth Avenue came the loud clatter and laughter of his friends, growing less audible.

He stepped into the shadows of the arches of the bridge.

Blue Pete moved suddenly out to bar his way, and with a kick he sent the bat flying over the railing.

The young man stepped back, gasping with fright.

The half-breed sneered. "Yuh skeer easy when yuh're alone, donchu? Yuh're one o' the young skunks wot batted me that night, an' then kicked me in the face, ainchu?"

The young fellow crowded up against the iron railing, one arm raised to defend himself. "I don't know—what—what you're talking about," he stammered.

"Reckon yuh do. I 'member yuh all. Got 'n eyeful that day o' the fight, an' I don't fergit nothin' like that. 'Member every dang one o' yuh. . . . An' yuh know I do, 'cause yuh dodged across the street this mornin' when yuh seen me. You an' yer pals, yuh got 'n idee yuh kin do wot yuh like in this town, eh? Yuh even got the p'lice up thar at the City Hall sorta skeered, too, so they purty near letchu git 'way 'th murder."

With the attack delayed so long, the young man recovered some of his courage. One swift glance he threw back towards Main Street, but no one was in sight, and even his friends were beyond hearing.

"Sure I was at the fight," he said. "But I had nothing to do with it; I just looked on. It was Bruiser's fight, not mine."

"But yuh wudn' leave it that way, wud yuh? Anyways, Bruiser got a lickin'. Yuh all tried to help, didn' yuh? But yuh was too skeered 'th them ranchers ready to pitch in. One o' yuh tried to trip the stranger. That's the kind o' skunks yuh all are, the hull caboodle o' yuh. Then yuh got it in fer me, 'cause I butted in some; an' yuh tried to kill me that night up thar, didn' yuh? Wal-l, I bin waitin' fer this. I'm a good waiter; I never git tired waitin'."

"If you don't let me pass," wailed the young fellow, "I'll call the police."

Blue Pete laughed through his teeth. "They'd be tickled to death if I killed yuh. They ain' got no more use fer yuh 'n the rest o' the town. 'Sides, thar ain't no cop to hear yuh ef yuh called yer head off—an' they'd be too late, anyways. When I'm through 'th yuh, yuh kin tell yer frien's I ain't fergittin' them, not one o' them. I'm layin' fer 'em, like they done fer me. I'll git the lot o' yuh. Le's see, thar'll be 'bout two—er mebbe three—fer each tooth yuh kicked out, an' I know every one o' yuh. Yuh happen to be the fust to pay. I'm collectin'."

His victim cowered before him, breathing heavily. "I'll call the police," he repeated, almost weeping now.

The half-breed's sneer was devastating. "Shure, yuh'd do jes' that when it's man fer man. Yuh gotta hev four er five ag'in' one. That's yer kind, ain't it? Yuh kin call the p'lice. I'll be through 'th yuh 'fore they cud git here. An' ef yuh git 'em, they'll hev to try to git yuh outa some nice deep water down thar, 'cause that's whar I'll drop yuh. Yuh cudn' swim in that current. All the p'lice in town cudn' save yuh neither."

The young fellow acted swiftly. He shot out from the shadows and raced away towards the City Hall. But the half-breed was looking for it. His foot shot out, sending the other headlong.

Like a cat Blue Pete was on him. He picked him up and swung him about, so that one hand closed over his lips, smothering his cries. Fiercely he kicked, his heels crashing into the half-breed's shins. The blows were not felt. Gasping for breath, he fought, the only sound the shuffle of his captor's feet as he worked back towards the bridge railing.

Up and up the helpless body was raised, then a heave. Down below, a drop of thirty feet, was a rocky shelf, sloping to the water.

The half-breed looked over into the darkness. "An' I clean fergot to kick him," he muttered. "Like it down thar?" he called. "I didn' drop yuh in the water, 'cause I wantchu to tell yer friends wot I got fer 'em. S'long!"

A groan lifted back in reply, and nothing more.

Blue Pete stepped back. He wiped his hands together, then on his chaps.

He strolled back towards the City Hall, that groan ringing in his ears. At the corner of Main Street he commenced to hurry, as if to escape the groan, now far too distant to be audible.

A small figure came down the street and stopped before him. "Hello, Pete!"

The half-breed pulled up and stared down on the small man. "That you, Kid?"

The Kid caught hold of his arm and peered into his face. "What's the matter, Pete? I heard you'd left the hospital. But—but what's happened? They haven't—they haven't——"

The half-breed chuckled. "No, they ain' done nothin' more." He leaned nearer and whispered: "I done it this time. Say, I'm glad yuh ain't drunk."

"No, I took your warning—better than you did mine. But what do you mean? What is it you've done?"

Blue Pete laughed. "I bin hevin' lots o' fun. Le's see, thar was five o' them I 'member plain. Reckon I'd 'a' fergot ef they hadn' used that bat on me, an' them boots. I didn' see 'em right that night. . . . An' yit . . . an' yit, I kin see 'em as plain as ef they was standin' right whar you are now." He rubbed his hands together. "Lots o' fun yit, too, comin' to me."

He saw the look of bewilderment on the Kid's face, and he clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm jes' tellin' yuh I've started to collect; I'm payin' 'em back. Thar's one o' them back thar now under the bridge, groanin' his head off. Mebbe yuh kin hear him. I jes' dropped him over. Didn' 'member to kick him. He dropped hard, though—kerchuck! Them rocks is mighty hard down thar, I bet. Yuh bes' go an' see wot's happened to him."

The Kid whistled. "You mean you—you——"

"Shure. Yuh heerd right. Dropped him over. He ain't dead. He's groanin' fit to kill. Sorta sorry fer himself, I reckon." He stopped and listened. "Seem to hear him right here. Jes' take a walk that way. Mebbe he might roll into the water an' drown. Bes' call the p'lice, ef yuh hear him, like yuh done fer me. On'y yuh don' know who done it, 'member."

"Well, I'll be damned!" exploded the Kid. "I should have known you'd get even with them. . . . So should they." He set off towards the bridge but returned. "But, Pete, look out. They'll be madder than ever now. They may lay low until Bruiser's out of the hospital, but they won't forget."

"Do' make me laugh, Kid," returned the half-breed.

The Kid hurried away. At the end of the bridge he stopped and listened. Yes, there it was, the groan, almost drowned by the rush of the current. He ran back to the City Hall and told a policeman just emerging for night duty.

With difficulty they got the broken young man up the bank. He was unconscious. One arm was broken; and his face had struck a rock—and two teeth were broken.

CHAPTER XI

SERGEANT MAHON GIVES UP

INSPECTOR BARKER and Sergeant Mahon were together behind the closed door of the Inspector's office. Varying emotions appeared to struggle over the Inspector's face, now ponderously grave, now labouring to suppress a smile. Even the grim look on the Sergeant's face was too exaggerated to be genuine.

"I'm not butting in," declared the senior officer. "This is another occasion when I'm delighted to leave it to Chief Dolan. He doesn't appear to know what happened. But even he isn't quite fool enough to believe what young Truman tells him, yet he doesn't seem to wish to make too close inquiries. The fact is he doesn't want to get entangled in anything that concerns that gang of Bruiser's."

"What *is* the Truman story, sir?" Mahon asked.

The Inspector's eyes twinkled. "It isn't credible. From what I gather he appears to claim that he must have had a fainting spell—they'd been playing a strenuous game of baseball up on the prairie, and he says he was tired—and slipped through the railing as he crossed the bridge on the way home. It's just possible to squeeze through—that is, if someone pushes from behind."

A smile struggled to break loose, and he winked. "I'm doing a bit of guessing."

The smile was reflected on the younger officer's face. "But where and when and how is this to end, sir? It alarms me. Of course we might have known that the gang wouldn't get away with what they did to Blue Pete. But Truman might have been killed. Then we would have been forced into it."

The Inspector looked worried. "I'm not trying to picture what might have happened. No, I'm trying *not* to picture it. And since it didn't happen, we've nothing to worry about at the moment. Only a broken arm and a couple of teeth. . . . A couple of teeth," he repeated, suddenly raising his eyes directly to his companion's. "Wasn't it two teeth Blue Pete lost?"

Mahon nodded.

The Inspector became official. "But we've no right, no right whatever, to connect Blue Pete with it. I dropped in at the hospital—just dropped in. Of

course when I was there I made it a point to talk with Truman. The young tough just wouldn't talk. But I think he knew that I knew.

"You know, Mahon, one curious feature of it is that the Kid found them both. It may be no more than a coincidence, but it's worth bearing in mind—if we're called on to investigate. . . . Of course Chief Dolan will never appeal to us . . . unless he should arrest the Kid for being connected with both attacks. I wouldn't put even that past Dolan."

"But if it was Blue Pete, sir, why wouldn't Truman tell, even be eager to tell?"

"I've thought of that." The Inspector shrugged. "I'm trying to think of it no more. I don't want to dwell on it, because, don't you see, it means that the gang is laying low for revenge, and when it comes it'll be terrible. . . . That's a warning you might pass along to Blue Pete. He's still in town, and there's nothing to keep him here. Nothing, that is, but his own reasons. We can guess what they are—and I don't like guessing. It alarms me—the picture it paints."

Sergeant Mahon shook his head gloomily. "And so soon after he left the hospital, sir."

"He wouldn't delay, we can be certain of that. I'll bet he's just lived with that in his mind since he was attacked. . . . It worries me that's he's still here, and that there are still others of that gang to answer to him. . . . And others of the gang to make him answer to them. It's a mess."

"I don't think, sir," said Mahon, "that there's much need to worry about anything they can do to Blue Pete. He isn't going to be caught off guard again. They'd have to be a lot smarter than I think they are to get him a second time. But—but it's what he might do to them! What I'm afraid of is that we'll be forced to intervene then, and it'll be too late."

Inspector Barker scowled at the blotter on the desk before him, and for more than a minute neither spoke. Abruptly the Inspector straightened in his chair. He cleared his throat. "We must do something, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir?"

"We must get him out of town, get him back to the ranch where he'll be out of the way of trouble, out of the way for getting himself into trouble."

He leaned back and drummed nervously on the blotter with the end of a paper-knife made from a deer's horn. "That's another job for you, Mahon. He'll listen to you, if to anyone. Back on the ranch he's safe—even from himself. If he stays he's apt to kill some of those young toughs before he's satisfied. Then what would the law have to do to him?

"Damn that breed!" he exploded. "Once more I have to close my eyes to a breach of the law it's my business to enforce. He's ruining my sleep. Unfortunately even after all these years in the West I've a conscience that now and then gnaws at me. It's just luck that so far we've managed to keep out of this mess, but we can't count on it much longer. You must get him out of town, Sergeant, get him away. Not another night here, if we can prevent it. It's at night he must do his drastic work."

Sergeant Mahon wandered over to the Royal Hotel. The office was empty when he entered, and he seated himself in a chair to wait. From down the hall voices reached him from the bar-room. There was the usual group of cowboys trying to get drunk, and Red and JC the two bar-tenders, kept them in good humour. A glass slammed on the counter, and Red protested. Then a filled glass slithered along the counter top. That would be one of Red's expert deliveries to a distant customer.

Red's voice rose above the din: "We ain't seen you in town for a long time, Jerry. What's the matter? Get married or somethin'?"

Several laughed.

"Naw," returned Jerry. "The only skirt out my way's the boss's wife, an' one boss is enough for me. This skirtless country makes me tired—sometimes. There was fences to build round the haystacks, someone had to do it. We're layin' up hay for this winter, after the winter we had last year. We lost a lot o' cows. Then when I finished the fence, I got a week's holiday. That's how I'm here. I only hope I got enough spondulics to see me through."

"Well, you've come to the right place in town for that," Red assured him.

"Place all right," agreed the cowboy, "but this town—it makes me sick, too. 'Tain't what it useta be in the good old days. Nothin' doin', like there useta be. No shootin' ner nothin'. Even the drunks are nice little boys."

"You should have been here a few weeks ago, Jerry," Red told him. "There sure was excitement that day—a fight. Over in front of the Alberta. Then th'other night——"

"I heard o' that fight. Like to 'a' seen it. They say Bruiser Salmon got his."

"He sure did. Tenderfoot, too—stoppin' over at the Alberta at the time. Looked like an easy sucker to Bruiser. He found out different—the hard way. Tried some dirty tricks. Near got away with it, too, only Blue Pete stopped him."

"Yep, I heard Blue Pete butted in—with his gun." He laughed. "I bet that straightened things out pronto."

"Sure did. Blue Pete kept Bruiser from kickin' the tenderfoot in the head. Then he wouldn't let him go till the tenderfoot was ready to fight again. Real fight then. Bruiser landed in the hospital. Nobody wept."

"I'll bet it was the lickin' that hurt Bruiser more than the broken bones. He'd never get over that."

"No . . . mebbe not. Seems like none o' them won't—I mean the Bruiser gang. They laid for the breed. Knocked him cold with a baseball bat an' kicked him in the face. Slight concussion, too. Didn't seem to hurt him much, 'cause they moved him to a private room. They musta been afraid he'd do some battin' on Bruiser. He was in the same ward.

"Bruiser came out of the hospital yesterday. They say he's fit as a fiddle—almost; just his arm in a cast. But he's fit to eat nails, he's so mad." He laughed loudly. "Everybody stops him on the street to ask if he's going to live through it—or words to that effect. Damn hard to take, I bet. He's almost all right, they say."

"That tenderfoot better look out," said Jerry.

"I don't know. It's Blue Pete they want more. You can bet yer last dollar they ain't through with him yet."

For several moments no one spoke, the silence broken only by the shuffle of bottles and the clinking of glass.

"Funny thing," said Red. "Something happened coupla days ago. Jack Truman—he's one o' the Bruiser gang—he was picked up under the bridge, pretty badly smashed up on the rocks. Says he fell through the railing. Nobody believes it. Musta did some squeezin' to get through."

"Whatchu mean?"

"Oh, I dunno. . . . Only someone mighta did the squeezin'. . . . I'd hate to get that half-breed on my neck."

Someone whistled, and a different voice broke in: "Me, too. If they beat him up, he'll get even, if it takes the rest of his life. You can count on that. But why don't the police get into it?"

Red laughed. "The police? You mean Chief Dolan? Oh, no, not him. He values his skin too much to take a chance. . . . Funny thing is Blue Pete fell, too, or so he says. Dizzy sorta town. Must be somebody's sellin' rotten booze. Only the breed doesn't drink."

"Where is he now?" someone asked.

"You can ask that again," Red replied. "He's right here in town. Prowlin' around the streets night and day. . . . He was prowlin' the night Jack Truman dropped over the bridge. He's out every night, the half-breed is. I can't go to sleep till I hear him come in and go up to bed. I'm always expectin' somethin' to happen.

"Another thing is, it was Kid Longman found them both, the breed and Truman. If the Kid was bigger the police might think he did it. . . . I've been wonderin'."

"Wonderin' what, Red?"

"Wonderin' what story Blue Pete could tell, if he'd talk."

The back door at the end of the hall opened, and the voices in the bar were silenced as someone came heavily along the hall past the bar-room door.

"Oh, hello, Pete!" It was Red's voice. "Come on in and tell the boys about yer fall."

The half-breed stopped for a moment, letting his eyes run over the group before the bar. "Thar ain't nothin' to tell yuh don' know awready. I fell; that's all." He continued along the hall.

At the entrance to the office he pulled up sharply at sight of Sergeant Mahon and frowned, even dropping back a step as if to flee.

Mahon gave no sign of noticing it. "Hello, Pete! I was waiting for you."

The half-breed remained where he was, a questioning look in his eyes. "Wotchu want?"

"How's the face? I see you still have a piece of adhesive there."

"'T's awright."

"You certainly do heal quickly. How are the teeth?"

"Coupla them ain't thar. I don' need 'em none."

"Well, glad you feel so well. The Inspector thought you'd be in the hospital for another week at least."

Blue Pete grinned. "So'd the doc. I fooled 'em both. Nobody's goin' to keep me in bed these nice days."

"I suppose you'll be striking out for the ranch right away then?"

The questioning look returned to the half-breed's eyes. "Mebbe—soon."

"I know how you dislike it here," said the Sergeant. "I'll be riding out that way again before long. I'll try to get around to the 3-Bar-Y to see you and Mira."

"She'll be thar, Mira will."

"The ranch must miss you—all this time away. You aren' often away like that. Unless, of course," in a low voice, "you're on a job for us."

"Ranch don' need me none. Ner th' Inspector."

"The town did—for that fight. But you must hate it here now more than ever, after what you've been through."

"Do' mind sticking around a bit longer," replied Blue Pete shortly.

Mahon came directly to the point. "Is there any reason for staying like this, Pete?"

A cunning look appeared on the half-breed's face. "D' th' Inspector send yuh to ast that? I ain' gotta tell everythin' I know, hev I? I kin stay long's I want, can't I?"

"Of course, of course. Only we're interested." He was silent for a few moments, but he kept his eyes on the half-breed. "Things happen in town, Pete. They *have* happened, and they may happen again. We don't want anyone to get into further trouble." He laughed. "You might fall again, you know."

The half-breed looked away. "Nothin's goin' to happen me, nothin' more. I'll be gittin' out—some time. Yuh kin tell th' Inspector that."

It was useless to continue, and the Sergeant made a final effort: "The Inspector thinks you'd better leave town before anything more happens. We're thinking of Jack Truman," he added pointedly.

Blue Pete ignored it. "Ef th' Inspector's got suthin' fer me to do, I'll be ready—soon."

"I don't think he has; he hasn't mentioned it."

"Then I'm stayin' till I wanta go."

Mahon rose. He sighed. "I've been speaking for the Inspector. Now I speak for myself: Go back to the ranch. I'm your friend, Pete."

Blue Pete eyed him for a moment, then moved towards him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Ef yuh was my friend, Sergeant, yuh'd want me to stay jes' 's much 's I do—till I'm through."

Mahon had nothing more to say. He turned and left the hotel.

CHAPTER XII

STILL WAITING

LATER, as it was growing dark, Blue Pete left the hotel once more by the back door. Dark as it was, never had he been so aware of that office window of Inspector Barker's, across the railway tracks, though by that time the Inspector was probably at his home for the evening.

As he passed through the back yard gate of the hotel, he was stopped by the Kid.

"I knew you would come this way," said the little Englishman. "I wanted to tell you something: Bruiser has left the hospital."

"Reckoned he might, some time soon," returned the half-breed. This night of all nights he had no wish for company. "Too bad he ever cud. Wot's it gotta do 'th me?"

"They'll be looking for you now more than ever. For heaven's sake be careful. You shouldn't take a chance on these dark streets."

A contemptuous grin twisted the dark face. "'Tain't worryin' me none. Reckon I ain't too skeered to take a walk."

The Kid peered up at the small piece of adhesive on the cheek above him. "Isn't it healed yet?"

"Shure, shure."

"But—but there's the plaster."

The half-breed turned away. "It'll be thar till—till 'tain't needed. Don't hurt nobody thar, an' it means I can't fergit." He started away up Main Street.

The Kid fell in beside him. He was distressed. "I'd hate anything more to happen to you, Pete," he said. "A lot of people in town don't want you to get the worst of it now. And, don't forget, these toughs will stop at nothing to get even with you."

"Wot they got ag'in' me? I got the wust—so far. Ain't they satisfied?"

"No chance. They won't be satisfied until they've . . . put you where you'll think you were foolish to interfere that day."

"That 'ud be plain murder," said Blue Pete, with a laugh. "Wal-l, they ain't murderin' me. So they ain't satisfied, eh? Then we're even thar. I ain't neither."

The Kid crowded closer and whispered, as they passed beneath a street light: “It’s known all over town that it was you threw Jack Truman over the bridge.”

“Truman say so?”

“Oh, no, and that makes it more dangerous for you.”

“D’ju tell?”

“Of course not.”

Blue Pete pulled up suddenly and stared down into his companion’s face. “Say, Kid, how’d you know wot them skunks plan to do? How’d yuh know so much ’bout ’em?” His big hand gripped the Kid’s shoulder.

“Everyone knows what I’m telling you, Pete. I’m only trying to warn you. All you need do is get out of town, out to the ranch. How do I know so much? Well, I was over to the hospital yesterday.”

“To see yer frien’ Bruiser, eh?”

The Kid shrugged himself free from the heavy hand on his shoulder. “Yes, to see Bruiser . . . I went because he sent for me.”

“Wal-l, all I gotta say is yuh pick some mighty funny frien’s in this town, Kid, an’ yer apt to git yer wires crossed, mixin’ ’em like that.”

“But I’m not Bruiser’s friend.”

“Then why’d yuh go to see him in the hospital?”

The Kid hesitated. “I thought it wise—when he sent for me.” He raised his eyes then, and the half-breed saw trouble in his face. “There’s a story, Pete. I can’t tell it. I don’t wish anyone to know it—here.”

“Bruiser Salmon knows it, eh?”

“Part of it, and I don’t want him to tell. I want to live my own life here, just as I am.”

They walked along to the corner of Fourth Avenue in silence. Then the Kid said: “It’s better that I keep in touch with Bruiser—for you. In that way I can find out what their plans are. I don’t want them to get away with what they have in mind.”

Blue Pete grinned. “Don’ do nothin’ like that, jes’ fer me. I ain’t skeered . . . I shure hope they don’ change thur plans neither, ’cause—’cause I ain’t changin’ mine.”

He stopped beyond the lights on the corner. “Look here, Kid, come on outa the ranch. ’Tain’t no place fer the likes o’ you mebbe, but yuh wudn’ hev no chancet to drink, an’ yuh’d git ’way from Bruiser. Yuh cudn’ git into no trouble out thar.”

"I know horses," said the Kid eagerly. "There'd be something I could do, surely. I was raised to a large stable of horses. I can ride."

"All the ridin' yuh done over in England ain't goin' to help yuh much on a bronc, let alone a mustang."

"Aren't they the same?"

"Naw. A mustang's never bin rode—a wild hoss. . . . I'll look yuh up when I'm leavin' mebbe. An' don' worry none 'bout me. Now I'm goin' on alone, Kid. That's your way."

He pointed up Main Street and turned along Fourth Avenue towards Toronto Street. The Kid made no attempt to follow.

At Toronto Street Blue Pete turned down towards the railway tracks. Something had to happen that night, though he had nothing definite in his mind. He was restless, unhappy. More than ever he hated the town. But there was something else he hated more, and that kept him. He had turned down towards the railway tracks, because the other direction would presently lead him to the upper prairie, where he would be able to see the distant Cypress Hills against the sky; and he knew how strongly they would beckon him. He must stay until he had done what was in his mind.

Before him Toronto Street was for the moment deserted, except down in front of the Alberta Hotel. There several men were grouped at the foot of the steps. Then a pair came hurriedly around the corner of South Railway Street, turned up Toronto Street past the hotel, and into a lane between the hotel and the opera house.

As he moved down the street, two young men came in sight. The half-breed's eyes widened as he followed their every step with his eyes. And they, like the previous pair, disappeared into the lane.

With long strides he hurried down the street, a new excitement in his eyes; his jaws were clamped together.

But as he neared the entrance to the lane, his pace slowed down, his legs seemed to drag. He snuffled with embarrassment. At the dark entrance to the lane he stopped, staring down it into the darkness. Automatically a hand went to the gun hanging on his left hip. Slowly, furtively, he drew it and shoved it into a trouser pocket.

Down the lane he could see nothing. More men passed him and entered, one of them laughing back at him before disappearing. Their footsteps faded away.

He knew where that lane led. Everyone in town knew it, yet it was seldom mentioned in conversation.

It was Medicine Hat's solitary gambling den. Illegal, of course, yet no one so much as suggested interfering with it. Sooner or later almost every man in town appeared in the large, stuffy room. In fact, it was said that one of the local clergy had made inquiries as to whether he would be permitted to attend—just to look on, of course. It would be, he argued, an experience every would-be reformer should have. In his profession experience was necessary, as in any other. It is the same argument clergy use to justify a visit to the Folies Bergères when visiting Paris.

In that unhealthy, smoke-filled room thousands were made and lost, and more whisky was consumed in the evening hours than in all the legal bars of the town put together. There was also less visible drunkenness left it, for the simple reason that no drunk was permitted to leave the room until he had sobered enough to navigate. Even the town police, though never in uniform, were patrons at times.

The only exceptions, in addition to the clergy, were the Mounted Police. Only once had a Mounted Policeman visited the room, and he had already been given notice of his discharge. Of course Inspector Barker knew of the room, just as he knew of everything that happened in the district, sooner or later; but it was the one spot he left entirely to the local police. As yet nothing to justify interference had occurred there, but he would not countenance any of his men appearing in it, whether in uniform or not.

The half-breed's eyes bored into the darkness of the lane. More patrons passed him, and his ears followed every footstep until it was inaudible. Once he drew a long breath and took a single step forward, but his courage failed, and he drew back, perspiring and squirming.

A fierce fight raged within him. He wanted to follow, but his feet refused to obey. He remembered those two young men, but he saw, too, the danger. He had little idea what might happen if he followed.

The group still stood at the foot of the hotel steps only a few yards away, but he had forgotten them.

One of the group broke away and came slowly towards him. "That you, Pete?" A large hand fell on his shoulder.

Blue Pete shrank away from it. "Shure, shure, Cooney. I was jes'—jes' wonderin' wot it's like down thar."

Cooney Featherston laughed. "You're the only one in town who doesn't know, I'll wager. Why don't you come with me and have a look? I'm just going in."

Blue Pete squirmed and fidgeted. "Reckon I cud?"

"Of course you could. Why not? Come along." But as they turned into the darkness, the rancher stopped. "But, look here, Pete, you may know nothing of the games they play. If you don't, better not get into them. You can look on. They'd fleece the gold out of the teeth of a newcomer before they'd let him go." He chuckled. "My teeth are the pottery kind. It's a room full of sharks, Pete. The moment you pass the door you're legal prey. I'd rob myself in that room, just to fit into the general atmosphere. In there everyone is everyone's enemy, his prey. You have to feel that way or lose your shirt. You never know till you play in that room that this town is full of Dr. Jekylls and Mr. Hydes—if you know what I mean. I'll wager that the best known Sunday School Superintendent in town is there right now—milking his leading class-teacher. Or vice versa. They're preparing themselves for a lecture on gambling next Sunday."

As they conversed, two more men passed and vanished into the darkness.

"I'm goin' in," Blue Pete declared grimly.

Cooney hesitated. Then he sighed and shook his head. "Really, you know, I shouldn't have suggested it. There are some in this town who don't like you, and they're sure to be there. Is it worth the risk?"

Blue Pete pushed the restraining hand away. "Wot we waitin' fer? Like to see 'em. Reckon I kin look after myself, Cooney. . . . But I won't play."

Cooney set off in the lead. "Sure you can look after yourself," he grunted. "What's worrying me is can the other fellow? There's been no real trouble in there to date. But if it ever starts, there's the mood there for something awful to happen, and I don't want to be mixed up in it. By the way, better keep your gun out of sight."

"I got it stowed in my pants," the half-breed told him. He felt the gun, shifted the butt to a more convenient position. "Don't calc'late to hev to use it, Cooney."

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIGHT IN THE GAMBLING DEN

AS they reached the back corner of the opera house, someone passed hurriedly and, before their eyes, knocked on a door they could not see, and vanished. They heard the door close softly, but there had been no emerging light.

Cooney led to a small platform and knocked, took two or three audible steps about the platform, and knocked again.

The door opened so quietly that they heard only the slightest sound. Beyond nothing was visible. The rancher caught Blue Pete's arm and led him through into complete darkness, and for a moment they stood. Then, beyond them, a second door opened. Beyond it was a room filled with boxes and crates that were visible under a single jet of natural gas.

A man stood inside the room. He nodded, and they moved along to another man who easily slid aside a large box that partly concealed a door that opened immediately.

It admitted them into a large room, the basement of the opera house.

It was low-ceilinged, with rough plaster walls. The air was thick with smoke and the fumes of liquor. A row of gas jets lined the walls, dulled by the smoke. A score of tables were arranged about the room, many already filled. Several had only one or a pair, evidently waiting for friends to start a game. Glasses, some filled, some partly empty, stood on every table, as sloppily dressed waiters flitted back and forth through a door at the side of the room.

Blue Pete gasped in the stale, odorous air, and for a moment looked behind as if to flee. Then he stepped forward behind the rancher.

One table was filled with Chinese, already deep in some game of their own, their throaty voices punctuating the general din. One Chinese voice rose in violent protest, or surprise, or elation. The Chinese never quarrelled.

In the far corner Bill Corwyn was seated alone at a small table that was raised above the general level on a small platform. From it he could keep an eye on everything throughout the room.

Corwyn had purchased the room from the previous owner, the Italian proprietor of a barber's shop upstairs. No one else could make it as profitable as Corwyn.

Indeed, there were some who maintained that he had purchased the room in order to give it a greater atmosphere of respectability. Its reputation had been declining before the Italian sold the business and returned to his native land, to live like a king on his takings, most of it from that room. To support such a claim by Corwyn's friends, it was known that Bill had restricted its services to certain patrons who were inclined to over-indulgence. Surprisingly there had been no protest. Few protested to Bill Corwyn; everyone knew that he made up his own mind.

As the door closed behind the rancher and the half-breed an abrupt silence dropped over the room. Every eye was on them and Blue Pete shuffled nervously and tried to conceal himself behind the bulk of his companion.

The silence was broken by a cry from a distant table: "Hey there, Cooney! Got a place for you here. Bring Blue Pete along. He can get into the game. If he doesn't want to, he can look on. We play square." The speaker, Rex Middleton, a rancher, winked towards Corwyn, and everyone laughed.

Featherston hesitated. Not until that moment had he fully realized the situation into which he had walked. This was certainly no place for a half-breed, particularly Blue Pete, whom everyone suspected of merely filling in the time before another outburst into rustling. The half-breed sensed the feeling in the room; not a face had escaped his wandering eyes.

There was nothing to do, however, but to continue, and Cooney stepped out towards the inviting voice of his rancher friend.

Would Blue Pete dare to play? Cooney hoped not. He knew the half-breed would be no match for the hungry ghouls whose lips slavered already for the kill. In time he would notice it—and he still had his gun in his pocket!

Nevertheless the rancher managed a smile and advanced through the tables.

Ever since the fight there was apparent some change in public opinion concerning the half-breed. Several smiled at him now, a few greeted him, welcomed him. To all of which Blue Pete returned an embarrassed grin as he wound through the tables, almost tramping on his companion's heels. Never in all his life had he felt so much out of place.

And yet—and yet—— In one swift glance he had seen what he sought, what had made him accept his rancher friend's invitation. At a table at one side of the room, not far from where Bill Corwyn sat enthroned, two young

men were seated. They faced the door, and his eyes flickered over them and passed on as if nothing had registered.

The light in the room became almost blinding then, and he blinked his eyes and crowded after Featherston. From the corner of his eye he saw the young men lean their heads together and laugh. Everyone in the room heard that laugh.

Glints of reflected light rose to him from spilled liquor on the tables, from smooth-surfaced cards. Even the fog of smoke seemed to take on a luminousness. He hurried.

He was conscious of Bill Corwyn, though he did not look at him, and it puzzled him vaguely to understand why. He thought he heard even a shuffle of surprised feet from that elevated table, as he crossed the room, and he glanced then towards the proprietor in time to see him look away towards the two young men who had laughed; and his forehead lined.

Middleton welcomed them with a laugh, pointing to the two empty chairs. Jim Allen, too, was there.

"Like to join in, Pete?" he inquired.

The half-breed shook his head and snuffled. "Do' know nothin' 'bout it. Ain' got no money on me neither. I'll jes' watch."

The outer door opened.

Middleton rose and waved. "Oh, here's Slim. That'll make the four. Come along, Slim. We need you. Pete, grab that chair from the table there, and sit down."

Blue Pete did as he was told and placed a chair against the wall before seating himself. The game commenced.

The outer door opened once more. Blue Pete did not look. He did not need to. He felt who it was—Bruiser Salmon! He knew it by the sudden, tense silence that followed. He felt it in every nerve and with difficulty held himself stiffly motionless. But he could not prevent the new look in his eyes.

Cooney Featherston noticed it and trembled, but he said nothing.

Shouts of welcome then arose through the room. It was Bruiser's first visit since leaving the hospital, and they welcomed him, not as a friend but as a familiar who had been absent a few weeks. Bruiser's arm was still in a sling.

From the corner of his eye Blue Pete saw it all. He saw Bruiser hesitate for a few moments, letting his eyes roam over the room. Then he made straight for the table where the two young men were seated, his friends. And

their heads went together, and three pairs of venomous eyes were turned across the room on the half-breed.

Then the tables resumed their games. But they were more silent now, with much whispering. An atmosphere had entered the room. Everyone waited. Now and then someone laughed, but in the sound flamed a touch of excitement. Curses were less violent. Triumph was more noisy, almost hysterical.

The smoke thickened, likewise some of the voices.

Blue Pete wriggled and squirmed. The heat, the stifling air, the smoke, the odour of liquor, made him almost sick at his stomach. His head spun dizzily at moments, and he knew that his temper was growing short. He was frightened, and he did not know why. He cursed himself for coming.

Then he remembered the table across the room, and his teeth came together. For he could see the trio glancing at him and laughing, with a sneer in the laugh that made the blood rush to his cheeks.

He tried to concentrate on the ranchers' game beside him.

Then he heard someone crossing the room, felt it as well; but he would not look. Without turning his head he could see Bill Corwyn; and Bill's eyes were fixed on something on the half-breed's side of the room. His feet shuffled beneath his chair, as if he would rise, and he was plainly uneasy.

Suddenly Blue Pete was conscious of voices close behind him. He remembered that he had not recognized the players at that table, had not so much as glanced at them.

Abruptly then he heard a laugh, a short, mirthless, sneering laugh. It was Bruiser.

Bruiser was speaking, not ten feet behind him:

"Things are getting pretty bad around here since Bill took over. It's a different crowd—less—class, shall we say. Caligni was more particular; he never allowed breeds in the room. This was one place where you were sure to meet a decent crowd."

Cooney Featherston, as sensitive as Blue Pete to the mood of the room, heard it. With a flash of anger he turned. But second thoughts closed his lips against what was in his mind to say. He must prevent trouble, not start it. Perhaps there would be no more. He returned determinedly to the cards he held. But his face remained red, and the fist of the hand beneath the table clenched tightly. His temper, too, had shortened with the bad air and the liquor fumes—and the tension.

He remembered that Bruiser's arm was still in a sling. There was nothing violent that he could do.

Blue Pete had heard every word, as if it had been shouted in his ear; and his feet drew in sharply beneath his chair. Then he, too, remembered that sling. Bruiser, he knew, counted on that.

In spite of himself he glanced across the room, to be greeted by an insulting laugh, aimed straight at him.

He held himself.

Bruiser, with his remark unresented, laughed with his friends. He continued: "It's the first we've had in here. I wonder Bill stands for it. It's going to ruin the place. For my part, it's too bad the whole breed tribe wasn't cleared out with Riel."

A third young man had entered and joined the pair across the room, and their laughter became louder and more pointed. One even pointed directly at him and made an insulting sound with his lips.

Blue Pete moved then. He was leisurely about it, as if it was merely routine. He drew his feet solidly beneath him and rose.

He did not see the outer door open at that moment, and two men enter. They were Martin Pierson and Tom White, a local lawyer. In the excitement of the room no one appeared to notice them. All eyes were on the half-breed. He was on his feet now, jaw set, aware at last exactly what he had to do and rather enjoying the prospect.

One swift, contemptuous glance he threw at Bruiser, a glance that slid away to the helpless arm; then he directed his attention and his feet towards the other side of the room.

But he addressed himself to Bruiser: "Yuh know durn well I can't knock yer head off, Bruiser, cause yuh got on'y one arm. But thare ain't no reason why I can't take it out on yer frien's. But yuh bes' keep outa it, case I fergit yer arm. I ain't in no mood to 'member fer long."

He crossed the room, not hurriedly, rather lazily winding through the tables.

Bill Corwyn had half risen, then he dropped back in his chair, a cold smile on his face. But his eyes remained fixed on the half-breed, and he leaned forward over the table.

Bruiser's three friends saw the leisurely approach of the half-breed. It was like doom, and the smiles left their faces. Nervously they glanced at one another, then up at Bill Corwyn.

Corwyn pretended not to notice, but the smile on his face broadened and hardened.

Blue Pete reached the table. He did not speak, did not stop. In the very midst of his final stride one powerful arm shot forward. It picked the nearest one of the trio from his chair as if he were a mere doll. He was swung about and thrown across the table into the faces of his two friends.

The trio crashed to the floor, and over them Blue Pete pushed the table.

For a few moments they tossed about in a tangled heap. Then the one on top rolled away, leaving the remaining pair to find their feet behind the table.

The one free started forward. Blue Pete saw him and struck out.

"I heard yuh," he said. "I seen yuh. Now you kin see an' feel."

The open hand slashed across the fellow's lips, bringing a gush of blood over his chin as he tried to duck the blow.

The other two were on their feet. One slid back towards Bill Corwyn, temporarily out of the fight. The other picked up a chair. Recklessly he flung it towards the half-breed who, intent on the one he had struck, did not see it. He took it on the hip without flinching—but it had reached a nerve that for the moment made him helpless.

Recovered, he turned. The one who had thrown the chair had moved back against the wall. He pushed the table forward.

Across the room Cooney Featherston was on his feet. His first impulse was to pile in, but when he saw that for the moment his friend required no help, he restrained himself. Blue Pete, he knew, would not thank him for interfering.

Suddenly he stepped forward. "Look out, Pete! Behind you!"

The half-breed did not seem to hear; his fury was so gripping that he had room in his mind only for the one behind the table.

But the young fellow whose lips had been smashed had circled away and was watching his chance.

Across the room Bruiser had watched the attack and come nearer. He met the friend watching for a chance to attack from behind and, pushing someone from a chair, handed it to his friend. It was a heavy hardwood chair. It whirled upward. Blue Pete had his back to it.

At that moment someone leaped across the floor from the door. It was Martin Pierson. Charging forward, he lunged Bruiser staggering away. His fist shot out. It caught the young man with the threatening chair on the chin, knocking him to the floor where he lay without moving.

It was then that Bill Corwyn acted. He rose.

"Sit down!" he snapped.

It bellowed through the room. Everyone heard it and obeyed. All except Blue Pete. He was past hearing anything.

"I heerd yuh, yuh dang dirty skunks, every one o' yuh. Now I'm glad I come. But yuh ain' got 'nuff yit, not by a dang sight. I'm not through 'th yuh yit."

He turned to where Bruiser leaned against a table, watching Pierson with frightened eyes.

"I got four o' yuh here, but yuh ain't yit paid fer them two teeth, an' this patch on my face." He touched the adhesive. "An' you got a few kicks to pay fer, an' that bat on the head. I ain't like to hev a chancet like this ag'in to clean things up, so I'm doin' it right now."

He was not through, as he said. The one who had taken refuge behind the table, from where he had thrown the chair, eased himself into the open. Then he leaped. He landed on Blue Pete's back.

Too swiftly to be anything but automatic, the half-breed flung his arms out and up, so that they could not be caught to his sides. But his attacker's arm fastened about his neck and squeezed. It tightened, and one hand came up to help it—tighter and tighter. One of his friends entered the attack then, and Blue Pete was too busy fending him off to try to unwind that choking hold on his throat. His breath was cut short.

Desperate, feeling his strength failing, he crashed backward against the table with all the weight of his body. The edge of the table caught the fellow on the back above the waist, and with a broken groan he dropped away.

Pierson had held himself from further action. Like Featherston, he saw that so long as interference was unnecessary to save his half-breed friend, it would be resented. But he held himself ready.

The third man picked himself up. He glanced at Pierson, saw him inactive, and again picked up a chair.

"Look out, Pete, look out!" That was Bill Corwyn.

Suddenly the lights went out. Bill had remembered. He remembered the purpose of that table on that elevated platform. Beside the chair was the main switch that could cut off the gas.

There was a moment's silence, then a rush for the door. Tables and chairs upset in the scramble.

Over it rose Corwyn's laugh. Then: "Are you all right, Pete?"

The sudden darkness had brought the half-breed to his senses. "Shure, shure, Bill! On'y I wasn' through yit. Turn 'em on an' let me at 'em ag'in."

Corwyn chuckled into the darkness. “Think you can take off that adhesive now?”

CHAPTER XIV

THE THIRD COLLECTION

IT was the only night on which Bill Corwyn neglected to deduct his rake-off for the games, and later it was talked about, even after the details of the fight grew stale. Bill himself laughed about it. He laughed louder when they spoke of what Blue Pete had done to that group of young toughs.

When Bill encountered Blue Pete next day on the street, he could not refrain from expressing himself.

"Aren't you through with the town yet, Pete?" There was worry in his eyes. "It's a big gang, Pete, and they'll have more now than ever to hold against you. They can't afford to forget. They're sorer than ever."

The half-breed grinned. "Hope them three is sore. They'd 'a' bin sorer ef yuh'd lef' them lights on, I wasn' through, not near."

"The way you felt, Pete, you'd have killed someone before you were satisfied. I couldn't afford to have that happen in there. Neither could you. The Mounties would have broken into things then, and that would be serious for us both. I'm afraid something really nasty is going to happen—either to you or to them. Don't take a chance on that, Pete. There'll be fireworks if the Mounties get into it. You're sure to get burned."

"I cud burn when I collect wot them skunks owe me," returned Blue Pete, and walked away.

He did not leave town. He appeared little on the streets by day, but at night he continued his wanderings. He avoided the police. He spoke to no one.

It was on the third night that things altered. He became more cautious. Before leaving the back yard of the hotel he peered across the tracks towards the Mounted Police barracks. But the windows of Inspector Barker's office were dark, and with a sigh of relief he went out into the street.

Only a handful of pedestrians were on Main Street, and he walked purposefully up towards the City Hall. Someone entering the Men's Club across the corner called to him, but he made no response. Past Fifth Avenue and Sixth he continued. At Seventh he turned to the left. It was darker in that part of the town, and he advanced more slowly, eyeing the houses on his left. Some showed no light. Not a movement appeared on the street.

Before a gate that hung on a single hinge he stopped and looked carefully along the street in both directions. Then he eased the gate open and passed into the front yard, avoiding the board walk that led to the front door.

A narrow gleam of light escaped through the lower edge of a front window, beneath a drawn blind. He moved towards it, his feet making no sound on the grass. Footsteps sounded along the sidewalk, and he dropped to the grass and lay flat until they had passed. Rising then, he stooped to the line of light and looked into the lighted room beyond.

Beside a table in the centre of the room sat two young men, their arms lounging across it as they talked and smoked. On the table was an almost empty bottle, and before each young man was a glass.

As the half-breed's eyes focused on them, they lit up with a blaze of excitement. Then into every corner of the room he peered, listening intently at the same time.

In both hard faces beside the table there was laughter at the moment, and one raised his glass, looked through it against the light, and laughed again. A moment later the laughter ceased, to be replaced by a frown.

Blue Pete could see their lips moving as they conversed, but he could hear nothing.

One of the pair laid a hand across his left arm and winced. The other held a hand against his lips, then against his back. Both scowled and shook their heads.

The half-breed grinned. No need to hear what they were saying. Jack Truman's arm had been broken in exactly that place when he tumbled over the bridge railing, and his teeth had suffered. And Jason Fletcher's back must still be mighty sore after that crash against the edge of the table in the gambling room.

For a time he stood listening, before dropping back from the light as someone hurried along the opposite side of the street. Slowly then, hesitantly, he removed his .45 from his belt and laid it on the window-sill.

Turning, he stepped back across the grass to the front gate, pulled it noisily open, and tramped along the board walk to the steps leading to the front door. He rang the bell.

He could hear chairs pushed back within the house, and no other sound. With a breath of relief he waited. Steps sounded within, coming from the room where the two men had been. The door opened.

Abruptly Blue Pete thrust it wide, entered, and slammed it behind him.

The man before him gasped and stepped awkwardly back, an arm raised, as if expecting a blow.

Blue Pete glared at him. “Reckon yuh figured we ain’t through yit, Bill Fraser. Wal-l, yuh was right thar. Leastwise, I ain’t through. I come now to fix things up some. Yuh shud ’a’ bin at Bill’s place t’other night, so I cud clean things up an’ git back to the ranch.”

He stepped swiftly forward and struck.

Fraser, automatically dodging, failed to escape all the blow. The fist caught him on the forehead, snapped his head back, and sent him reeling backwards against the stairs, cursing as he fell.

The other man had come into the hall as the blow landed. He was a short, stocky, powerful-looking fellow who had once been a cowboy but had found easier money in town for several months, most of it outside the law. A swift glance at his fallen friend, then he swung into action.

The half-breed, more intent for the moment on the one now regaining his feet near the stairs, took the blow on the side of the head and stumbled sideways against a radiator before the opposite wall.

The radiator was hard—harder than the flesh that crashed into it, and it hurt. It was all he needed. Ruthless now, he turned in time to raise his knee into the stocky man’s face as he dived for the half-breed’s legs. The knee landed with a sickening crunch, and blood gushed over the floor and over Blue Pete’s pants.

At sight of it he laughed. “Yah, yuh owe me lots o’ blood, boys. I didn’t think I’d collec’ so soon an’ so much.” He was enjoying himself.

Fraser was on his feet now. Unnoticed by the half-breed, he had drawn from his pocket a spring-knife that flashed in his hand. With a savage curse he jumped forward and struck.

Blue Pete heard him. He wheeled, saw the knife sweeping towards him, stepped swiftly back, and kicked. His foot reached the wrist that held the knife, and with a cry of pain and anger, the fingers opened, and the knife dropped to the floor. Blue Pete kicked it back against the stairs.

The short man, spitting blood and almost blind with fury, had renewed the attack. His fist had reached the target once, but it seemed to have no effect. Then the half-breed had him in his arms, and as Fraser circled to attack from the rear, his friend was flung against him, and together they tumbled back into the living-room. A chair upset as they fell, and toppled over on them.

It was then that things looked really dangerous for the half-breed. The short man’s hand went to a pocket, and a gun came into view.

Blue Pete saw it in time, and again his boot flew out, and the gun was sent with a clatter against the wall.

The sight of the gun seemed to increase Blue Pete's fury. He had purposely left his own gun outside. He remembered the two teeth he had lost, the gash in the cheek—the small piece of adhesive still on his cheek.

He dropped on the struggling pair, wound an arm about the short man's neck, and pressed him back on his companion. Then, with a heave, he brought their heads together with a force that momentarily stunned them.

Leaving them limp on the floor, he rose. He was laughing, and he stood looking down on them, his closed fists on his hips.

When they had recovered their wits, the short man struck out at him with his feet, cursing. Blood covered his chin and splattered on the carpet. His companion was stained with it.

Blue Pete stepped over them and picked up the gun. And as the short man came to his feet, the gun smashed into his forehead and sent him back to the floor, with another wound to bleed.

Fraser had rolled free, but he did not attempt to rise. He had had enough.

With a snarl of contempt, the half-breed stood over him. "Get up, yuh yeller skunk. Yuh got lots o' chancet to fight back, ainchu? 'Tain't like when I got Jack Truman an' dropped him over the bridge. Thar's two o' yuh—an' yuh had a knife an' a gun. Two o' yuh, so I don' need to hold nothin' back." He pushed the prostrate Fraser contemptuously with his foot.

The fellow clambered to his knees, then to his feet.

The gun landed then once more. It reached an ear, and another spurt of blood stained the carpet.

With a laugh Blue Pete tossed the gun into a far corner of the room and wiped his hands together. He started for the hall, still laughing.

"Nice mess fer the p'lice, ef yuh dast tell 'em. Ef yuh do, I got suthin' to tell 'em too, an' yuh won't like it. Bes' think it over fust." He stopped and faced the pair, now on their feet, but crowding away from him. "Thar's two-three more o' yuh. I ain't fergittin'. S'long!"

He turned his back on them and passed into the front hall, opened the outer door, stepped outside, and closed the door softly behind him. Standing on the front steps, he became conscious of a strange warmth on his leg, and he looked down. Blood was seeping through his pants above the ankle, and for the first time he was conscious of pain. When he kicked the knife away, it must have cut through his pant leg to his ankle.

In a blaze of fresh anger at the discovery he hesitated, glaring back at the closed door.

Suddenly the door was flung open, and inside the lighted hall stood the short man. A gun was in his hand, and his lips parted in a snarl.

"Yu ain't gittin' 'way with that, yu damned breed. Take——"

From the darkness in the front yard a shot broke the threat off, and a bullet whistled past Blue Pete's ears. It smashed the hall light, and everything was dark. The door slammed shut.

With the shot Blue Pete dived to the grass. There was no second shot, and he picked himself up, bewildered but cautious.

In the darkness a small figure stood close beside him.

"I followed you," said the Kid. "I knew you were up to some mischief. Won't you ever learn, Pete, that you aren't the kind to be prepared for the kind of fight those young toughs put up? I found your gun on the window-sill, and I knew why you'd taken it off. That was foolish. But, say, we can't wait here. Someone may have heard the shot and be telephoning the police. Let's get out of here."

They hurried out and along to Toronto Street. At the corner, beneath the light, Blue Pete looked down on his companion. "Kid," he warned, "yuh shure got yerself into a pack o' trouble jes' now. They'll be after *you* now, an' yuh can't fight 'em like I kin. Yuh ain' got no show. I'm gettin' even fer wot they done to me. *You* can't. Gor-swizzle, why'd yuh hev to butt in?" He heaved a heavy sigh. "Now I gotta look after *you*."

The Kid's face went white. "Do you—do you think they—they recognized me?"

"Reckon that skunk mighta seed yuh. Mebbe not."

"Oh, I hope not." In his voice was a wail of fear.

"Say, ef yuh're skeered like that, why'd yuh do it?"

"I couldn't let them do a thing like that. . . . But if—if he saw me, he'd tell."

"Tell who?"

The Kid caught his lip between his teeth. "Never mind, Pete. It's—part of the story. I don't want to fall out with him."

The half-breed was puzzled. "Yuh mean Bruiser. Wot's it all about?"

The Kid took hold of his arm. "Come on. We'd better get farther away."

They started down Toronto Street.

"Reckon yuh bes' come outa the ranch, Kid, like I said. Yuh'll git 'way from all this. But ef yuh're so easy skeered——"

"Pete, I'm not afraid of what you think. Please don't ask me any more. It's no one's business but mine."

"Awright, awright. Reckon Mira'll do suthin' fer yuh. She does things fer everybody. . . . Mebbe find yuh handy to run errands."

The Kid hesitated. Then: "I'll go, Pete. And thanks. I'll be ready any time. Can we go right away?"

The half-breed shook his head. "Naw, I'm not through yit. Thar's more o' them, an' I ain't lettin' them skunks git 'way 'th nothin'. I'll let yuh know in lots o' time when I'm goin'." He laughed quietly. "Yuh'll know awright. Reckon most o' the town'll know when I'm finished. Yuh're stayin' at the Alberta. Bill Corwyn'll look after yuh. S'long!"

As he started away, the Kid ran after him.

"Pete, you're hurt; you're bleeding. That's blood on your pants and your boots."

The half-breed stared down at it. "Reckon that knife musta caught me when I kicked it away. 'Tain't nothin'." He raised his foot, and with the movement was aware of pain. Angrily he started along. "'Tain't nothin', I tell yuh. Don't hurt none. Them skunks can't hurt me none, not them."

"But you'll have to have it attended to—see a doctor."

"I ain't seein' no doctor. I seen too much o' them awready. I bin wuss'n this a hunderd times. 'Sides, a doc 'ud tell the p'lice."

The Kid stepped along beside him. "Then I'm going to your room and look at the wound myself. I know a little about such things. I was in the war. We may be able to get to your room without being seen."

CHAPTER XV

THE KID'S STORY

TWO more days passed. During the daytime Blue Pete kept to his hotel room; during the night he prowled the streets. Now and then he stopped to peer into lighted windows. The pair he had fought, to such a gory climax, apparently had not told the police. None but themselves knew that Bruiser had given orders against it.

"Let it rest just now," he advised. "I'll be all right in a week or so; then we can start to even things up. If we told the police, there'd be things come out we don't want them to know. And if anything happens to the breed——" He stopped and smiled. "When it happens they won't be able to fasten it on us. The law couldn't give us what we want, and it might get us into trouble. Leave it to me. I'm working something out." He rose and stretched. "I can tell you this much: Something is going to happen to him. Trust me."

They had learned to do as he ordered, had learned to trust him, and they said nothing. Bruiser had never let them down.

They told no one—but the town could add two and two together, and the Bruiser gang had many uncomfortable moments before the wordless smiles that greeted them on the streets. It only added to their determination to get even.

The Inspector had not been idle. Mahon had been sent directly to the 3-Bar-Y; and Mira had mounted Whitey within the hour and had set off for town.

It was daylight when she arrived, and she made straight for the Mounted Police barracks. The Inspector had not yet come down, but Langley telephoned, and in a short time he hurried through the front door. He led the way into his office.

"Mira," he urged, "you must get him out of town, and without delay. I suppose the Sergeant has given you some idea why, but even at that we don't know everything, and we can only guess where it may lead. That's what we can't face. Things are getting more serious every hour, and the end may be—murder. I only hope the victim won't be your husband."

He sighed and shook his head gloomily. "If it isn't—if it's one of that gang, we can only hold it against Blue Pete, and then there'll be real trouble for him. I'm trying so desperately to keep out of it."

Mira, the small white woman who had married the half-breed in less prosperous days, when both were rustling over in Montana, sat forward anxiously in her chair. "The Sergeant told me so little. What has Pete been doing? I—I was afraid of this. I knew someone had to pay."

A smile flitted across Inspector Barker's face and was gone. "They've been paying all right, almost half a dozen of them. Of course we were never on hand to see, but we've had the stories. There was a row in that place under the Opera House the other day, and some of Bruiser's friends were pretty badly mauled. Then a couple of nights ago something happened in a house on Seventh Avenue. We can't find out much about it, but the evidence is plain enough. A couple more of Bruiser's friends had to be patched up. There are still two or three of the gang . . . and your husband remains in town—for no reason.

"These—accidents can't continue without disaster. In every instance someone might have been killed. In fact, the circumstances tended in that direction. It's just luck they ended without—death. One young fellow"—he chuckled—"he says he fell over the bridge. The pair the other night try to dismiss queries by speaking vaguely about an accident.

"The worst of it is that the local police don't want to get into it, any more than I do, but for a different reason. They seem to be afraid of Bruiser and his gang. They'll stay out of it as long as they can, and that is where the danger is. Blue Pete is not satisfied yet. You can be sure the gang is further from it than ever. That, I imagine, is why they refuse to talk.

"You know your husband better than I do, so I don't need to picture what may happen if we don't get him out of here. That was why he refused to wait in the hospital for the doctor's orders: he couldn't wait to get even. And here he is, sticking about the town when we know how he hates it. You can imagine why."

Mira's expression became grim. She rose, decision in every move. "He's coming out with me, Inspector, and right away, if I have to hog-tie him. I sure do know him." A swift smile crossed her face. "If the Bruiser gang knew him as well as I do, it would be they who left town. They've tasted a little. But I suppose they can't afford to give up now. I know they're capable of anything. Well, if they get dirty——"

She shrugged and spread her hands. "I have to admit, Inspector, that I'd like to see them pay, and pay well, for what they did to him. But we can't afford to let it go on until he's satisfied. . . . . I can imagine that he'd never be satisfied until things went so far you'd have to interfere officially. Under

certain circumstances killing would not come hard to him, and these brutes deserve nothing less."

She leaned her hands on the table. "Don't worry, Inspector. He's going out with me. I promise."

Mira took him out with her. It was less simple than she foresaw, but in the end he had to surrender, for she never left his side.

She presented herself to him while he was dressing in his hotel room, and he stared at her, a flush slowly colouring his dark face.

"You—Mira! Wotchu doin' here?" But he knew.

"I've come for you," she announced; and she dropped into the one free chair and planted her feet firmly before her.

He grinned helplessly. "But—but I ain't ready yit."

"You're ready," she told him, "when you get your hat on. I'll pack your things."

"But—but——"

"There ain't any 'but's'. You're coming. If you don't, I'm camping on your trail every minute."

"But thar's things I gotta do."

"There ain't a thing to keep you in town, not really." Her eyes flashed. "I'm saving you from the things that's keeping you."

He tried to think of something to change her mind, to delay her for at least a day or two. He had plans. "But—but I promised to take the Kid with me. He'll need a few days to——"

"Kid or no Kid—whoever he is—you're not waiting. If he can't come now he can come later. Who is he?"

"A little remittance man, an' he wants to git 'way from things in town."

"Well, learn a lesson from him and get yourself away—from worse things. What can he do around a ranch?"

Her husband grinned. "I figured *you* might find suthin' fer him to do."

"I will. If he can't ride, he can peel potatoes for me and Wing."

"Shure. He wudn' mind doin' anythin'. Great little chap. I'll git 'long an' look him up."

She rose with him. "I'm going with you."

He looked at her helplessly, then turned away, his head shaking.

They got the Kid. Mira liked him from the moment she saw him. His gentle manners, his cleanliness, his soft voice, his attention to her, touched something in her that had been dormant too long. She asked no questions.

"We're leaving at six this afternoon," she told him—and did not trouble even to look at Blue Pete.

"I'll be ready," he agreed.

She knew there must be some reason for the promised visit, but at the moment she was not inclined to make inquiries. She had been told the Kid was the one who had found her husband after the attack on the Esplanade, but that something more had brought them closer she did not doubt. She had to see the Inspector before she left, and she wanted to be able to say that she knew nothing, should he question her. In due time Blue Pete would tell her everything.

Promptly at six they set out. The day had seen the usual mid-summer heat of the prairie, but by the time they climbed the cutbank to the south of the town it was tempered. Nevertheless before them heat waves still rose from the long dead grass, and the worn trail was dusty; so that they kept along the grass at the side.

For hours they rode in silence.

At the end of two hours Whiskers reminded her rider that it was time for the customary rest, by nodding her head and wriggling her ears; and Blue Pete laughed and dismounted.

The half-breed had had something to do with the selection of the Kid's horse, though the latter had had the last say; and Blue Pete, with a new respect, had agreed. The Kid had said that he knew horses, and here was the first proof. All the necessary points he examined on the half-dozen for sale in one of the livery stables. The half-breed could have done no better himself.

Few were on the trail. One buckboard passed on the way to town, kicking up the light brown dust from the two ruts that formed the trail. A trio of cowboys, too, loped past in the same direction.

And Mira noticed that every one of them stared hard at the Kid, with wonder in their eyes. He was so small, and he sat so erect, yet easy, in the saddle, and he held his rein-hand so stiffly before him. The cowboys laughed. Nobody could ride all day like that. Besides, what use could a little fellow like that be on a ranch?

It was growing dark when they passed the Mounted Police hut at Turner's Crossing. Constable Simmons had heard them coming and he stood in the doorway to wave. He expected Blue Pete to turn in, as he always did;

but the trio rode past without stopping, merely waving back at him. He wondered what had happened.

It was midnight when they stopped for the third rest. They threw themselves on the grass, and the darkness seemed to bring them closer together. The Kid lay on his back, his hands locked beneath his head, staring at the stars.

Into the silence the tingling howl of a timber-wolf rang over the prairie from the Cypress Hills.

The Kid raised himself abruptly on his elbow. "What the blazes is that?" he whispered. "It doesn't sound like a coyote."

"'Tain't no c'yote," Blue Pete told him. "Timber-wolf, up thar in the Hills." He jerked his hand towards the dark line that rose against the sky towards the south.

The Kid laughed a little nervously and lay back. "You know, I rather like it. It's—different. . . . I like things different," he added in a low voice, almost as if talking to himself. "It's—the West. I never knew what I wanted until I struck Medicine Hat. I feel as if I've just commenced to live."

"You're English?" Mira inquired.

"Yes. . . . And I never thought I'd be anywhere else until . . . until . . ." He sat up, clasping his hands about his bent knees. "It's only fair that you should know more about me. If I'm to be your guest, you should know. I know I can trust you.

"My home was in Liverpool. My dad was one of the big men there. Shipbuilding. He won a title in the war. . . . He also won a fortune; he's many times a millionaire, I think. . . . Mother died when I was young. There were two brothers. One went into business with dad, the other into the army. I was to go into the Church."

A low laugh broke from him. "That's the rule, you know—if the family is large enough to arrange that way: The City, the Army, the Church. Spreading out, covering the ground, fulfilling every need of the country. . . . Both brothers were killed in the war."

He was silent for a few moments, then broke into a low laugh once more. "The Church! Imagine me in the Church! I couldn't. No one understood . . . I protested. But dad is a hard man in things like that. It's ritual that the father should decide, and he would brook no opposition. He was prepared to buy me a living when I was ready.

"You know, the Church is different over there from what it is here. It's a profession, not a calling. Dad had everything arranged; I had nothing to say about it. Or that's what he thought. . . .

"I couldn't face it. I had to get out of it somehow. I knew I was unfitted for the Church, or"—he paused to laugh—"the Church was unfitted for me. And so I tried to think of some way to escape. It wasn't easy. You won't be able to understand, I know, but it called for something drastic."

For a long time he was silent. The wolf howled again, and they all listened, as if it was part of the story. The Kid had thrown himself back on the grass once more, and he rolled to his side to face the Hills and listened.

"I've often looked at the Hills from the top of the cutbank back in the Hat," he said. "Once I even climbed to the top of the standtank to take a look. I've wondered so often what it must be like in there among the trees. They seemed little more than a mile away, so that sometimes I ached to start to walk to them. . . . I suppose I was too lazy to hire a horse and ride. Perhaps I'll have a chance to see them now."

"We don't think much of them around here," Mira told him. "Not much that is good, I mean. It's from there that we have all our trouble with rustlers. And strays get in there and sometimes we never see them again. The cowboys hate to go in after them."

"Thar ain't no place like the Hills," Blue Pete broke in firmly.

Mira laughed. "Pete likes them; that's so," she said. "I think he likes them more than he does the ranch. He spends more time there, anyway."

The half-breed snuffled sheepishly. " 'Tain't so, Mira. But yuh don' need me none 'bout the ranch, an' I like ridin' in thar all alone. In the Hills it's—it's diffurnt." He stopped and snuffled again. "I like 'em. But 'tain't no place fer the likes o' you. Kid. Like Mira said, the rustlers work from thar. They come over from the Montana Badlan's, an'—an' tha're a mighty nasty lot to meet up with. 'Sides, yuh'd git yerself lost. 'Tain't safe in thar fer nobody."

"It isn't safe even in town for some people," laughed the Kid. Mira broke in hurriedly: "You said you had to think of some way to keep out of the Church."

"Yes . . . yes. I had to convince dad that the Church was no place for me. And so . . . and so . . . I stole. I stole a lot of money. It was dad's money, and I knew no one would suffer." He laughed bitterly. "Strange reasoning, wasn't it? I see it all now when it's too late. It's the man with the most money who suffers most when he loses any part of it. To dad it would be worse than if I'd stolen from someone poor. I stole . . . and I ran away."

Blue Pete shifted restlessly where he lay. "So that's wot yuh've lived on all this time." There was scorn in his tone. "Jes' drinkin' it away."

It brought the Kid up with a jerk. "Would you think that of me, Pete? Then why did you bring me out here? My God, I tell you I haven't spent a

penny of that money. It's all in a bank in Toronto, every penny of it, drawing interest . . . I didn't need it. Mother had left me enough. If I can't live on that, I'll starve."

Mira reached out in the darkness and rapped disapprovingly on her husband's knee. Aloud she said, "That isn't all."

"No. Though I wouldn't touch a penny of the money, I couldn't forget that I'd stolen it. I started to drink, to try to forget. I had thought to come out here and send the money back. Perhaps it would leave me free. . . . It didn't work that way."

"You mean you didn't send it back?" asked Mira. "Why?"

"I did. Dad wouldn't keep it. He sent it right back to the bank from which I'd sent it. It was rubbing it in. It meant that he was through with me, that he didn't wish to have anything more to do with me—with a son who would shame the name as I did. It—it hurt."

Mira protested. "No, no! Your father thought only that you might need the money in a new land. That's why he sent it back."

The Kid raised himself and tried to look into her face in the darkness. "Do you—do you—think that was it? I—I never thought of that. . . . No, it couldn't be." His tone had flattened out. "I didn't deserve that. No, he surely would have written me then."

"But you'd hurt him so, you know. If he's such a hard man, it would be difficult for him to soften so much all of a sudden. You'd left him, you see. He couldn't beg you to return, not your dad. And so he did the next best thing, the one he could bring himself to do at that time. Perhaps he'll write later."

"But," the Kid said, "he hasn't my address. Even the bank doesn't know that. I didn't wish to be followed, didn't wish to run the risk of being recognized." He sighed. "I wish . . . I knew."

There was a long silence before he spoke again. "Longman isn't my name. I took a new name when I came West. I couldn't bear to disgrace dad's name. Out here my right name doesn't matter. I'll go on being Philip Longman to the end now. I—I haven't done much to make it a name worth having, but perhaps I can forget my right name out here. I won't need to keep on drinking."

"You won't have the chance," Mira told him.

"Well, that's the story. You're the only ones who've heard it, the only ones who ever will."

Blue Pete grunted. "'Tain't the hull story neither. Whar does Bruiser Salmon come in?"

"That," said the Kid, "is where it looks so hopeless. One time when I was drunk I must have let him know my right name. I found then that he came from Liverpool too, and I was lonesome and homesick. . . . Strange that I told him, too, because back in Liverpool we never would have met, never would have spoken to each other. He was—from another class. It's different over there, you see.

"Just lately he's made such a lot of me; I can scarcely get away from him, and I don't dare ignore him or he might tell. . . . He has even borrowed money from me, and I'm always paying for the drinks. . . . If he sent back word about how I've been acting out here, drinking until I've seldom been sober, it would break dad's heart. Not for me, just for the name. I've hurt him enough already. That's why I can't afford to make an enemy of Bruiser."

The half-breed grunted. "I ain't got no feelin' like that. When him an' me crosses——" He struggled suddenly to his feet. "Le's git goin'."

CHAPTER XVI

GRAMPA ARRIVES

THEY reached the ranch late in the afternoon of the following day, a long ride but taken at a more leisurely pace than usual. All the way they had been within sight of the Cypress Hills, at one point, near the north end of Elk Lake, not half a dozen miles from the long slope that led upward to the wooded heights.

The Kid could scarcely take his eyes from them. In all Medicine Hat were only a few struggling growths of green, scattered without order along a very few streets, as well as some cottonwoods near the Indian encampment at the eastern end of the hollow in which the town was built.

"I must get up there some time," the Kid said. "I haven't been among real trees since I came West. We owned a park back home, and I used to spend much time in it. I've missed the trees."

Blue Pete grunted. "Yuh'd bes' miss these too. They ain't wot yuh think they are. Yuh'd find that out."

"That sounds funny from you, Pete," Mira laughed, "when I can scarcely keep you away from them." She turned to the Kid. "Whenever I can't find him I know he's up there somewhere."

"The Kid ain't me," her husband protested. "I like the Hills, 'cause it's the on'y place I know I'll be alone. The Kid don' wanta be alone."

"How do you know?" asked the Kid. "Anyway you can't frighten me. I'm going to get up there the very first chance I have . . . wolves or no wolves."

"'Tain't the wolves," Blue Pete told him. "'Tain't them yuh needta be skeered of. Oh, wal-l, ef yuh wanta take a chance, thar won't be nothin' at the ranch to keep yuh from doin' it."

Mira saw the hurt look on their guest's face. "Don't worry, Kid, there'll be lots for you to do."

"Thanks, Mira." The Kid's face lit up. "I hope I'll be of some service, find something to do. I don't want to do nothing but loaf. I've had as much of that as I can stand."

They had reached the top of the slope leading downward into the hollow where were located the ranch buildings. Directly below them was the ranch

house, the bunkhouse, two stables, and three corrals, a cluster of buildings that were, to the Kid, a pleasant break after the bare prairie.

Blue Pete pulled in sharply. "Whose c'yuse is that?" He pointed to a broncho tied to a post of one of the corrals.

Mira looked, shading her eyes with her hand. "It isn't ours. I don't recognize it. Someone must be paying us a visit—and there isn't much in the house to eat—not that's cooked. I wonder where he is."

They saw their visitor then. He came rolling around the corner of the ranch house, a ragged, clumsy, bow-legged old man, short, grey, discoloured whiskers blowing in the wind. From his lips hung several long straws. He had heard them, and he stood for a moment, shading his eyes as he stared up at them. Then he came running, stumbling, chuckling to himself, his mouth split in a wide grin.

"Hello, Pete, ye ole geezer!"

"Grampa!"

Blue Pete jerked the reins, and Whiskers set off swiftly down the slope.

The old man kept his arms extended. "Ye ole rustler, ye! Where'd ye rustle that gal behind ye?"

The half-breed's grin was no less wide, as he reached down and caught the old man's hand and, without effort, lifted him to the pinto behind him. "Yuh sawed-off, broken-toothed, bow-legged ole sucker, yuh! Yuh no-account pint o' misery! Whar the blazes d'you come from?"

Grampa wrapped his arms about the half-breed and chuckled. "Where'd ye think, ye old thief ye?"

"They kick yuh out at last, like yuh desarved?" Blue Pete asked, still grinning. "I knowed they wud some time."

The old man swung a leg over the pinto and slid to the ground. He assumed a pugilistic pose. "Thur ain't no son-of-a-geezer cud do that, Pete, an' ye know it." He winked. "An' I ain't got the hull o' Montana ag'in me neither, like a damned half-breed I know of. An' if they was, ole grampa wouldn' run, like you done. I'd stand my ground an' shoot it out. Ye know that, ye ole rowdy."

He remembered Mira then and turned to her, sombrero in hand, and bowed. "Ye don't desarve it, Pete, but I won't tell on ye."

Mira had dismounted. She approached slowly, plainly puzzled, but with hand extended.

"This the gal ye was alwuz talkin' 'bout las' time ye was in the Badlan's, Pete—on'y that one was a blonde." He whispered to Mira then behind his

hand. “He’ll owe me somethin’ fer that. All he ever talked about was that pint-sized pinto, an’ the crooks we got over thur. Don’t tell him I said so, but he’s a heart-breaker too.”

Blue Pete dropped from the saddle. He caught the old man up in his arms, threw him over his shoulder, and opened the door to the ranch house, to drop him inside. “Stay thar, yuh low-down liar. Yuh know I don’ know wot ’nother gal looks like even, not sence my mother died. Shure, this is Mira.”

Mira understood at last, and her face was wreathed in a smile. She liked the old man, liked even his ragged clothing and unkempt hair and straggly beard and lined face. So obviously an old cowboy, with those bowed legs.

“You come from the Badlands,” she said, “and you’re Grampa. Blue Pete has often spoken of you. I seem to remember that you did a few good turns for him when he needed them most. I know the Badlands. I’ve been there, though I never met you.” Her face twisted to a wry smile. “We weren’t visitin’ acquaintances when we were there. It was during our rustling days—which is water under the bridge now.”

The old man licked his lips noisily. “But dang good tastin’ water, I bet. Thur ain’t no fun like it, speshully the way Blue Pete done it.”

He looked away at the half-breed and frowned. “Can’t see what he finds to do here. Things must be dull fer the likes o’ him. We got the idee over in the Badlan’s that the Mounties don’ stand fer no rustlin’ this side the line. Then what’s the fun fer a geezer that can draw quicker an’ shoot straighter’n any man I ever met; an’ over thur we bin raised on guns, cut our teeth on ’em.”

He turned to look the Kid over. “Raisin’ a family?” he inquired of Mira, in a whisper. “He sure ain’t no puncher, not in them clothes, not the way he sets a bronc.” He smiled suddenly and held out his hand to the Kid. “Ye know, I sorta like ye. Ye don’ fit into no ranch I ever seen, but that don’ needta be nothin’ ag’in’ ye. I bet my ole hat ye’ll try er bust.”

The Kid laughed and took the offered hand. “I certainly will, Grampa.”

The old man held him off and looked him over. “Son,” he said, “jus’ keep yer eye on Grampa. That’s the quickest way to larn all thur is to know ’bout cows an’ hosses. And,” he added, with a wink, “the nasty men what work ’em. I was born in a corral, I’m told; an’ I’m no colt at that. I’ve lived thur ever since. I know I’m no advertisement fer ’em, but that’s my fault. I larned to chew when I was four, an’—an’ this growth o’ hair on my chin sorta took to it from the fust. It sure can’t get grey now. An’ it don’ need no dye neither. I can spit with the best o’ them. I can hit the left eye of a

horsefly at ten feet an' drown it. An' that helps a lot on any ranch. An' I can shoot with both hands at once, two diffurnt ways. An' I can draw quicker'n any man—'ceptin' Blue Pete here.

"I'll bet, son, ye don' know how to cuss neither. That's sad, sad, an' it's gotta be 'tended to pronto. I can see yer mouth ain't shaped fer it. Sorta sideways is best; sounds fiercer that way." He glanced at Mira. "Can't give ye a sample now 'fore comp'ny, an' ye'll never larn nothin' like that from Blue Pete. Can't understand how he handles cows an' hosses without it. I'll say ye ain't like to notice it mebbe, 'cause he uses that .45 instead. Wears it on the left hip, too, whur nobody else does, 'ceptin' a few." He shook his head. "But I s'pose ye cud get useta drawin' from yer ear—in time."

Everyone but Grampa wore a broad smile. They let him talk.

He appeared to be hurt by their levity, for he sighed. "That's alwuz the way: I never git credit fer nothin'. That's why I'm here. Sorta got sick o' bein' everybody's football back in the Badlan's, an' I 'membered Blue Pete. If he could stand it over here, I might git useta it. So I come."

He started to swear but stopped in the middle. "They took my guns from me er I wudn' be here." He grinned then suddenly. "Mebbe be pushin' up the daisies instead, me er a lot o' others. If they hadn't took my six-shooters I'd 'a' shot it out with 'em. Tobacco juice don' carry fur enough ag'in' guns. Always keep yer hand on yer guns, son," he advised solemnly, "even if ye keep 'em outa sight."

A cunning look appeared on his withered face, and he dug a hand into a pant-pocket and drew a gun. He winked. "They thought they had me stripped. I fooled 'em." He seemed to notice something inconsistent about it. "Ye see, I didn' draw, 'cause the joke was on them. I tell ye, ef I'd drawed!" He shook his head.

Mira stepped through the doorway. "Well, I suppose we're all hungry, and I have to do some cooking before we can eat. But come in, Grampa, and make yourself comfy."

"Thank ye, ma'am. I figured I might. Lucky I didn' come on ye when Blue Pete wasn't here. I sorta skeer folks mostly. Habit I got." He shook his head. "No, it's a knack." He turned to the Kid. "Thur's lesson one, son: Make a big show. Us little fellows gotta. Look dangerous. But I'll go on now an' look after my cayuse."

They reached the corral where the broncho was tied. Blue Pete looked it over with the eye of an expert.

"Purty fine c'yuse yuh got thar, Grampa," he said.

"Should otta be. Picked it from a mighty fine lot, an' ye know I know hosses."

Blue Pete nodded. "Helped yerself, eh?"

"Sure. Ye didn't think, with my trainin' an' experience, I'd *buy* a bronc, didju? Ye know nobody does that over in the Badlan's, no more now 'n when you was thur. It's still give an' take."

"Mostly take," said Blue Pete. "But whose was it?"

The old man scowled and shook his head. "Ye forgot how to read bran's, yu ole rustler?"

The half-breed walked round the broncho, looked, and suddenly laughed. "Circle K, eh? Rance Hewitt's!"

The toothless old face grinned more widely. "I knowed ye'd like that. Ole friend o' yours, ain't he? I lef' the brand jus' as 'twas, fer ye to see. You an' Rance, ye never was what ye'd call chums. 'Course *you* ain' got no reason not to be, not now. Ye got more'n even with him fer what he done, an' more. That arm ye smashed never got back the same's 'twas.[A] Durn good saddle, too. Rance's fav'rit."

[A] Blue Pete and the Pinto.

He grasped his whiskers with one hand and drew them through it. "Rance'll be real peeved."

He untied the animal and they stabled it. As they moved towards the ranch house, Grampa nodded towards the bunkhouse. "Say, that Chink in thur ain't what ye'd call chummy with strangers, is he?"

"Oh, Wing's all right. He jes' plays safe," Blue Pete told him.

"He didn' this time. Not much he didn't. Near got a bit o' lead in the place he sits on, 'cause he wudn' even let me inside the bunkhouse. If I gotta eat his cookin' now fer a while, he bes' look out. I'm apt to spit in his eye."

" 'Twud'n hurt much—not like when he spit in yer soup."

Grampa scowled and turned to the Kid. "Take that fer another lesson, boy: Never let even the cook git sassy. Start early to rough 'em up." He grinned and winked at Blue Pete. "That is if ye don't intend to eat nothin', er ye like kerosene in yer porridge, or spit in yer soup, or a fryin' pan on the coco. But, say, I gotta go easy on larnin' ye, er thur won't be nothin' left."

He touched his forehead. “Thur ain’t space here in yer brain fer what I can larn ye. But, durn it, I like ye.”

The Kid bowed. “Thanks, Grampa!”

“Don’ thank me, boy, not yet, not till I do somethin’ wuth while. Some day I will fer sure.”

He turned to the half-breed. “Say, ye old outlaw, what kind a ranch ye got here anyways? I seen a coupla guys up thur on the slope behind the stables couple hours ago. I didn’ see no broncs. They was jus’ lyin’ in the grass, lookin’ down this way. All I seen was a coupla heads. When they seen me lookin’, they scooted. That the way ye treat visitors?”

Blue Pete frowned. “Coupla fellers, yuh said? An’ lyin’ in the grass? . . . I dunno.” As they reached the house, he spoke again: “Wisht yuh’d follered ’em to see what they wanted.”

“Sorta thought of it,” Grampa replied, “ ’cause over in the Badlan’s I’d ’a’ bin shootin’. But here ’twasn’ none o’ my business—new country an’ all. I didn’ wanta be shootin’ nobody so soon. Anyways I alwuz ast fust—that is, if they ain’t drawed already.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE STAMPEDE

FROM the beginning a close friendship existed between Grampa and the Kid. It may have had its origin on the old man's side in the opportunity it offered to make him useful. Here was someone to train, an inexperienced ranch hand who was willing to learn and bright enough to retain what he learned. The Kid welcomed him in the role of teacher; and Grampa's conversation was amusing and unrestrained.

There was the fact, too, that they were both new hands about the ranch.

There was some argument as to where the Kid would sleep. Blue Pete and Mira insisted at first on his using the extra bedroom in the ranch house. Mira saw that it would be difficult for him to fit into the rough ways of the cowboys in the bunkhouse; and she saw that he could be useful to her. Blue Pete backed her, firmly at first.

It was Grampa settled it. How, he asked, could he bring the fellow up in the way he should go, if he was exposed all the time to the low-down habits of the ranch house.

The Kid supported him. While he liked Mira, he wanted to learn to be a cowboy.

So that he and Grampa were assigned the tier of bunks in a corner of the bunkhouse near the entrance to the passage that led to the kitchen. The other cowboys accepted them without question and without anything approaching hazing. Grampa they recognized as an old cowhand who could give them all pointers, and the old man's fondness for the Kid established a place for the latter among them. Although not built for a cowboy and not brought up to the life, he assumed no airs of superiority, such as they were accustomed to face from too many new arrivals from England who called them "Colonials". He was plainly anxious to learn, and they lent themselves to what share in the teaching Grampa was willing to accord them.

Right from the first they saw that the Kid could ride, though he was thrown from many a broncho. They saw also that he knew quite a bit about horseflesh, though the qualifications of a cow pony differed from those of the saddle horses to which he had been accustomed. They put him on a bucker at first, not to ridicule him but to test him. He was thrown, but he persisted. The broncho surrendered first. Thereafter they protected him from the worst buckers until he had more experience.

With Grampa he was assigned to night duty at first, since there was nothing much to do but remain awake. Movements of the herd were made by day. The herd they attended fed at the time close to Elk Lake, not far from the Hills, and was easy to handle, since the lake controlled them on one side, and water and grass were at hand.

The first two nights were quiet, and the Kid was perhaps getting a wrong idea of the work about the ranch. On the third night he had his first lesson in that respect.

It was a moonless night, but the sky was clear, the stars seeming to reach down with a friendliness and interest he had never before noticed in them. Even Grampa yawned when they met on their rides along the western, exposed side of the sleeping herd. The tension that sometimes falls over a herd on the prairie before a storm, or when water is scarce, was lacking.

Blue Pete had ridden out to take a look at things. He could not have accounted for it, but back at the ranch house a thought had come to him, an urge, and he yielded to it and saddled Whiskers.

He found the herd quiet, most of them lying down for the night half-way down the slope to the water a few hundred yards to the east. Grampa had placed the Kid at the northern end; he himself took the south. He heard the half-breed while he was still far away, and he rode out cautiously to check the new arrival.

"Reckoned mebbe ye was one o' them peekin' chaps I seen on the hill behind the stables that day I come, an' I ain't takin' no chances with them boys." He grunted, as if disappointed, and thrust his gun back into his belt.

Blue Pete had not forgotten that story, and it worried him. No herds were feeding near the ranch that day, and the fact that they disappeared when they saw Grampa looking at them had a meaning he felt he should know. Rustlers? But rustlers would scarcely show themselves like that in broad daylight near ranch buildings they planned to raid. Besides, it was the herds that were in danger from rustlers.

"Yuh ain't seed 'em sence, hev yuh, Grampa?" he inquired. "Yuh ain't heerd nothin'."

"Naw, it's so durn quiet I purty near go to sleep in the saddle. But I ain't fergittin' a thing like that. I bin livin' all my life whur we'd foller up if we seen anythin' like that. We'd keep our six-shooters handy. Ye seen I had mine out fer ye right now. But I dunno. Mebbe things is diffurnt over here, but I ain' takin' no chances, ye betcher life."

"Shure, Grampa. That's the way. Whar's the Kid?"

"Up t'other end. Bin thinkin' o' tellin' him to git off an' have a sleep. The cows is down for the night. I'd do it, only 'tain't no way to start the larnin' I'm givin' him. Thur never was things so peaceful that the cows mightn't jus' take a sudden fancy to go stampedin'. Ridin' herd ain't no time to sleep, ner to git thinkin' o' yer bes' gal, or the shirt ye lost gamblin' las' night. Gotta keep yer mind on the cows, I says to the Kid. Things can happen in such a gol-durn hurry ye can't do nothin' but ride—an' pray."

They rode slowly back towards the herd, Grampa humming so that the cattle might not be alarmed by the creaking of the leather in their saddles. It was a familiar lullaby.

"I'll git back to my place," he said, after a few moments. "Ye'll find the Kid up that way."

He set off. Blue Pete turned towards the north, humming himself, yet unconsciously listening for the old man's voice as it grew fainter and fainter.

Suddenly he could hear it no longer. The abruptness of it sent a tingle through the listening half-breed, and he turned in the saddle to look back through the darkness. He could see nothing wrong. The cattle were out of sight on the other side of the ridge along which he rode.

Then he heard them. He felt it in the air almost before he heard the tell-tale rustle, then a terrified snorting far back in the direction where the old man was. Almost before he realized what it meant, it spread to a roar of sound. The cattle were all on their feet at the south end—rising swiftly all along the line towards the north.

At that moment Grampa shouted a warning.

Had there been no movement among the cattle, that shout would have been enough to start them; and Grampa, old hand that he was, knew it. He knew that the stampede had started. Now all they could do was ride—ride—ride, and shoot and shout and thresh out with their quirts at the leaders. That shout of his was to warn Blue Pete and the Kid.

Bawling, snorting, pounding the earth, the herd was away in the mad rush of terrified, panicky cattle that so often ends in disaster. Unless it can be stopped in the one way cowboys know.

And it had to be stopped before the north end of the lake, since they would pile over a sharp drop there to their death.

Blue Pete's first thought was to rush back to Grampa, to see what had started the herd. Then he remembered the Kid, and what must be done to stop the stampede.

Grampa, too, had remembered the Kid and was screaming: "The Kid! The Kid! He'll be run down!" To Grampa that was more important than the

fate of the herd.

Whiskers needed no urging, no directing. She knew what was happening, knew what was expected of her, and she lay low and struck diagonally down towards the rushing herd.

She was gaining ground. But there was still far to go before the Kid and the head of the herd were reached. Blue Pete rose in the stirrups and shouted against the din: "Git outa the way, Kid, git outa the way. Ride fer yer life! We're comin'."

He could hear the thunder of Grampa's broncho higher up on the ridge. The old man knew that the only place where he could be of use was at the head of the herd.

The half-breed remembered the lake then. It lay a couple of hundred yards beyond the racing herd. He remembered, too, that dangerous drop ahead. But the Kid! The Kid must have heard him; he would do what he was told in a situation he could not understand.

Whiskers kept tearing along. She seemed to sense the danger as keenly as her master, and she angled in towards the herd in the darkness.

A stampede is dangerous for cowboys. A stumble as they ride beside the leaders, and the cattle are over the fallen rider, trampling him to death before he can move. And the rider cannot see where he is riding, for stampedes always occur at night.

Blue Pete automatically appraised time and space. The drop could not be more than a half-mile ahead now. Before then the cattle must be turned, and he was the one who must do it. Would he be in time? He scarcely thought so.

The Kid? Where was he? There had come no reply to his warning shout. If only Grampa had been at that end of the herd!

He thought of the lake. Even if he succeeded in turning the herd, it must be rounded back before it reached the lake. He would never be in time for that, and the cattle would plunge into the water and drown!

Through it all another thought kept nagging at him. What had started the stampede on such a quiet night? Not even a wolf had howled from the Hills. It had started at the southern end, where Grampa had left only a few minutes before. There had been no sign of nervousness then, or Grampa would have felt it.

Whiskers, he noticed then, had turned more sharply down the slope towards the mad herd.

Over the bawling and snorting he heard another sound. It was the Kid! And the Kid was shouting. Now he was firing his gun. Right up there at the head of the racing cattle!

And the herd was swinging down towards the lake, swinging more and more—just as he would have turned them had he been there.

They were turning in on themselves. And the Kid was doing it!

Turning—turning.

But would they turn in time? The lake must be very near now. The cattle would plunge blindly into the water. The Kid was there!

Grampa was shouting excited warning all the time as he rode.

The cattle hit the water. Blue Pete heard the splash.

"Git away, Kid, git away! Let 'em go! Yuh can't make it. Git out!"

But the Kid did not get out. He kept his place at the head of the herd. His broncho plunged into the water. As it hit the first shallows, it leaped forward. The Kid, realizing where they were, tried to pull up. It was too late. The broncho plunged, but the depth of the water now threw it forward on its chest, and the Kid fell sideways from the saddle.

His head struck a horn of the nearest steer, and he fell limply into the water.

Grampa had cut down sharply into the leaders of the herd, shouting and cursing. He ignored the cattle. Some extra keenness of his hearing had picked out the noise of the Kid's plunging broncho, the splash as the Kid hit the water.

The old man threw himself from the saddle into the water, plunging forward. The cattle had turned more tightly, with Blue Pete crowding them together. Grampa's broncho, trained to the work, continued to drive the circle tighter, helping Blue Pete.

Half swimming, half ploughing forward, as the water deepened, Grampa dipped his arms down, all the time cursing and whimpering. His pawing hands touched clothing and closed on it; and he came to his feet, carrying the Kid high.

On the shore he laid him down. He was blubbering now unrestrainedly, cursing at the same time, wringing his hands. He had no idea what to do. He had never been in anything like this before.

The Kid himself cut the blubbering short by giving a great sigh and raising himself to his hands.

"Are they—all right?" he asked.

Grampa dropped to his knees and took the Kid's head in his arms, still sobbing.

Then he seemed to realize. Suddenly his arms opened, and he rose and stood over the Kid, to let loose a flow of curses, the most sulphurous of an

accomplishment it had taken a lifetime to master. The West surely had never heard anything like it.

For a moment the Kid listened, almost admiring. Then he laughed. He rose and stood listening for a moment. The noise of the stampede had almost ceased. The herd had been rounded back into itself, stopping itself.

"Go on, Grampa, go on," the Kid urged. "Help Blue Pete. I'm all right. Where's my horse?"

Grampa started another flow of curses. He did not stop to finish it but ran off into the darkness towards the diminishing sound of the labouring cattle as they crowded themselves to a halt.

Blue Pete, with Whiskers and Grampa's broncho, had succeeded in rolling the cattle into a milling mass that smothered itself to helplessness. He held them there, singing softly to quiet them. And into the song he worked a call to Grampa to know what had happened to Kid.

The old man came puffing up. "Oh, he's all right. Gol-durn little fool he is. Dunno if I'll ever larn him anythin'."

"Then who larned him to turn them cows in?" asked the half-breed. "We'd never hev got 'em stopped in time, you 'n' me."

"Yep." Grampa chuckled proudly. "He larns durn quick, he does, the gol-durn little cuss. Ye jus' can't beat him when it comes to a pinch. He knew what I'd do if I'd bin thur, an' he done it. I knowed he was smart the moment I set eyes on him, the gol-durn little shaver. Whur's Sport?"

That was his broncho, and he found him standing guard on the other side of the herd.

With the cattle quiet at last and lying down, glad of the chance to rest, Blue Pete rode slowly back to the lake. He knew a steer or two must have drowned, but the water had helped to stop the rush. Another danger had been that, in the act of swimming, they would tear themselves to pieces.

The Kid was there, ashamed and apologetic, and Grampa slouched up, his breath returned, pouring forth a few choice expletives against life in general.

The half-breed turned on him. "Shut up! Yuh know we'd hev lost the hull herd ef it hadn' bin fer him, yuh dang ole rooster."

Grampa continued to mutter. "Seems like he don' even know water when he sees it. Got to fall in an' drownd 'fore he knows it. Have I gotta larn him that too, the blasted tenderfoot. Didn' yer mother larn ye nothin', Kid?"

Blue Pete was not listening. "Grampa, what started it? Suthin' happened back thar at t'other end."

The old man had forgotten that. Now he burst into a fresh flow of curses. "Gol-blast, that stampede didn' start from nothin'. 'Tain't the night fer that." He came nearer and whispered: "I seen what done it. I did."

"Wot ju see?"

"Thur was somethin' back thar—two er three somethin's . . . er somebodies. I seen things wavin' ag'in' the sky, right thur at the back end o' the bunch; an' I heard a quirt flick, er my ears ain't no good. Then they was off."

Blue Pete drew a long breath. "Didju see anybody—fer shure?"

" 'Tain't coyotes wave blankets, is it?" The old man spat noisily. " 'Tain't badgers use a quirt, is it? An' wolves they howl when thur huntin', don't they? No, sir, 'twas men—punchers . . . rustlers. I know, 'cause I done it manys a time myself over in the Badlan's."

"But rustlers, Grampa—'twudn' do them no good to start a stampede jes thar, an' runnin' north, away from the Border."

Grampa grunted angrily. "I got eyes, ain't I? They don' see things what ain't thur." He came closer and laid a hand on Whiskers' rump. " 'Member them fellers I seen squintin' over the hills behind the stables the day I come? Somebody don't like ye, Pete. If 'twasn' so fur away I'd say it was Rance Hewitt; but he wudn' come this fur. Might send someun, like he done when they got Whiskers that time.[B] Reckon mebbe someun else's got it in fur ye."

The half-breed said nothing. In the morning he did not mention it even to Mira.

[B] Blue Pete and the Pinto.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SHOTS IN THE DARK

OTHER disturbing things occurred thereafter. Two 3-Bar-Y steers were found shot. They had been part of a small herd that fed several miles from the Hills. The night-herders said they had heard strange sounds during the night, a couple of sharp hisses for which they could not account; but in the morning they found the two steers dead.

The Kid explained: "Someone is using a silencer," he told Blue Pete. "I've heard of them."

The half-breed's jaws were clamped together for several moments. "I won't," he snapped. He thought for a time, staring away towards the Hills over the foreman's head. "We gotta keep a nextra puncher on at nights near the Hills. They'll carry rifles. I'll do a bit o' searchin' myself."

He rode away to where the herd still grazed. It was a section of deeper coulee and rougher ground, with several ragged cottonwoods in the depths. He found tracks where the punchers claimed to have heard the sounds, but they told him nothing of value. His own cowboys had been there, and the dead grass was too long to reveal a defined shape of hoofs.

He issued no definite orders to shoot to kill. Texas, the foreman, warned him against it. But every cowboy knew what a rifle was for and was not reluctant to use it when the occasion seemed to call for it. A rustler, too, was always a legitimate target.

"Yuh know wot rifles is fer," he told them nevertheless. "Ef yuh don't, Grampa'll larn yuh."

Grampa rubbed his gnarled old hands together, and it sounded almost like sandpaper. "Never took on a job I liked better, Pete. I was gittin' outa practice over here. Bin thinkin' I might have to take a run back to the Badlan's now an' then an' knock off a few rustlers, jes' to keep my hand in. This sounds like good ole times."

He turned to the Kid—they were seldom apart now—and with a look of mock solemnity said: "Bes' stick close to Grampa, boy, an' let me do the shootin'. Ye ain' got the taste yet in yer mouth. Nothin' to beat it, I says, when ye got it."

Behind the banter the Kid read how serious things were. The look on Blue Pete's face left no doubt of that. Suddenly facing the killing of a human

being, he was startled. “Don’t forget the Mounted Police, Pete,” he warned. “You know what they’d think of that.”

The half-breed smiled. “I know wot they think o’ rustlers. I bin lettin’ daylight into ’em ever sence I come from the Badlan’s. An’ right ’longside me thar was offen a ’ountie. The Sergeant an’ me we done a lot o’ huntin’ ’em right thar in the Hills.”

He drew his .45 and looked fondly down on it. “Thar’s nicks thar to prove it.”

“But that’s different,” the Kid pointed out. “One can do things like that when helping the police.”

“Yuh gittin’ cold feet?” demanded the half-breed. “Yuh come out here to larn punchin’, didn’ yuh? Wal-l, that’s all part o’ the game—shootin’ to perteck the cows. Yuh gotta git that into yer head fust thing.”

They were seated in the bunkhouse at the time. Wing, the Chinese cook, puttered about the room, running back and forward from the kitchen on silent feet. Suddenly he raised his arms, as if pointing a rifle.

“Bang!” he exploded. “One gone! Bang! Two gone! Bang——”

Texas laughed. “Hold on, Wing, hold on. Leave some for us.”

Wing regarded the Kid contemplatively for a few moments. “Mebbe Mistah Kid”—for some reason he had called him that from the first—“mebbe he cook. Wing take his gun and shoot. All day cook an’ bake an’ clean up, an’ cook an’ bake an’ clean up some more. No chance to kill nobody.” He shook his head sadly. “No fun, no fun.”

Texas had been thinking. “Better not bring the Kid into this, Pete. He’d have no chance ag’in’ rustlers. Anyway he’ll never be out alone. We’ll do the shootin’.”

The Kid stiffened. “I never thought of killing a man, but if that’s part of ranch life, I’m willing to learn.”

Grampa shook his head. He pointed to a gaudy calendar on the wall, depicting a girl in skimpy bathing suit gingerly testing the water with a bare toe. “Ye’re like that, son—mighty nice to look at on a ranch, but till ye git yer clothes on, so to speak, ye ain’t zactly part o’ the business, not zactly.”

Excitement lighted up his old eyes. “Lissen to me, th’ ole fool I am. Clean fergot the stampede, I cudn’ a did it better myself. Saved the hull bunch, he did. That’s how quick he larns when he’s taught right.” He grinned. “Didn’ know I cud do it so dandy.”

He looked fondly on his new friend. “Jus’ the same, son, Tex is right. Ye’ll never be fur from me, an’ I can’t think o’ nothin’ I’d like better’n

knockin' the heads off o' them cusses. Over in the Badlan's I useta go out 'fore breakfast an' pop off a few, jus' to git a nappetite. Starts the day right, I says." His face widened, and he grated his hands together once more. "Things is lookin' up, Pete. Got any purtickler spot in them snakes ye want me to perf'rate?"

For some reason Blue Pete was restless that night, and after dark he saddled Whiskers and set out. He had no destination in mind; he wanted to get away alone to think things out. He had as yet little idea what was happening, except that someone, or more than one, threatened the life about the ranch. At any other time he would have concentrated on rustlers. But that failed to fit into all that had happened. A stampede was not infrequently caused by rustlers, but mostly to occupy the attention of the attendant herders while a few choice steers were separated from the herd and driven away.

The stampede at Elk Lake was not like that; the only cattle that had been lost were drowned. And to drive them north offered no chance to steal.

The shooting of the two steers added to the confusion. The slight noise made by the silencers had not caused a stampede. It looked like spite work.

It was there that his thoughts swung sharply to the events during the time he had spent in Medicine Hat. To be sure he had thought of that before, but only casually. Now Bruiser Salmon rose before him, as he had seen him last in the gambling room.

But Bruiser and his pals were so far removed from anything connected with the ranch that he shied away from the thought, though he could not entirely dismiss it.

He had neglected to bring his rifle, thinking only of taking a ride. Unconsciously, however, he set off towards the Cypress Hills. They lay far before him, but he could see the dark line of the trees against the night sky, and he commenced to wonder. One of the herds, he recalled, would be somewhere in that direction, and he continued his way.

It was unwise, however, to approach a herd in the dark without some announcement, and he commenced to hum. The tiny hoofs of the pinto would not be heard for any distance, but the humming would carry for half a mile through the still night air.

He was still some distance from the herd when he was challenged. That was Jake, one of his most trusted punchers.

"Anythin' happened?" he inquired. It was the natural question at the time, but somehow it seemed to add to the tension.

"Nothin', nothin' at all."

It was too eager, excited, and the half-breed was disturbed.

"Chuck an' Mo around?"

"Sure. Seen 'em both last round. I keep ridin'."

"Whar's Chuck?"

Jake pointed to the south. Blue Pete decided that it was well arranged, for Chuck could be depended on. From that direction everything happened.

He rode on through the darkness, still humming. And Chuck was even more relieved at the meeting than Jake had been.

It meant something to the half-breed, and a nagging uneasiness made him wonder what he should do about it. There was something, he felt, that should be done, some place that he should be.

Suddenly from far away to the north-west came the dull thud of running hoofs. Two riders were approaching, and at a fast pace, making no effort at concealment.

Blue Pete rode back to meet them, his .45 in his hand. In a deep coulee the riders must cross through he waited beneath a cottonwood tree.

Then he heard Grampa chuckle, and a few moments later the old man and the Kid rode down to him.

Grampa was aware of him first, and his gun whirled out. In the same movement he sent his broncho before the Kid.

Blue Pete laughed. "Ef yuh'd needed it, Grampa, yuh'd 'a' bin too late."

The old man cussed. "What the tarnation ye doin' here this time o' night?"

"I'm askin' the same," replied the half-breed. "I come fer a ride. You two shud be in bed; I got work fer yuh to-morrow."

The Kid explained: "It's my fault, Pete. I was restless—couldn't sleep, so I got Grampa to saddle up with me. We're going right back."

"Yuh better. I got real work fer yuh. That's why I took yuh off night work. We gotta put up some hay fer the cows this year. 'Nother bad winter like last un an' we'd lose a lot more. We'll feed 'em. You lads kin do that: the punchers don't like that sorta work. . . . I'll git you a new mower, soon's I kin git to town."

Grampa swore under his breath. Then he sighed. "All right. Someun's gotta do it. It'll be somethin' else to larn the Kid. I run a mower once er twice before—if ye got broncs broke fer it."

"I'll git yuh the broncs. An' anyways yuh shudn' be out here like this in the dark. I bet yuh ain' got yer rifles ner nothin'."

"I got a six-shooter," Grampa told him. "Couldn' ride without one on me somewheres, no more'n 'thout my pants."

Blue Pete smiled. He had not brought his own rifle, but they would not be able to see that.

"Now git back an'——"

A shout cut through the night stillness. It was Mo's voice, and he was plainly frightened. A moment later a rifle-shot snapped viciously into the stillness.

Like a shot, without direction, Whiskers was off at full speed towards it. Blue Pete bent low over the horn, talking to her, urging her on. "Go it, ole gal. We'll git 'em this time."

Then, with a shock, he remembered that he had no rifle.

It failed to stop him. Whiskers, he knew, could outrun any broncho in the district, and he would use her speed to find out what it was all about. With his .45 he was willing to take a chance against any rifle, especially in the darkness.

Then behind him he heard the racing hoofs of Grampa's broncho—and the Kid's!

He shouted back angrily to them to leave it to him; and he urged the pinto on in the hope of outdistancing them before it was too late. They paid no attention.

He remembered the cattle. They were, he hoped, too distant to be sent into a stampede, and he shifted direction in order to keep well away from them.

Behind him clung the pair he had ordered to stop. By the sound he knew it was Kid's broncho now that was in the lead. He could hear him talking to his mount.

Suddenly a bullet from well before him whistled close to the half-breed. A second came from a slightly different direction. So this was no solitary rustler, but a pair at least, trying to pick them off in the darkness.

And both of those bullets must have passed close to the Kid!

With a snort of anger, a broken oath, the half-breed turned aside into a coulee and stopped. For himself he had no anxiety, though he was not blind to the danger. But the Kid! And Grampa! He could not lead them into danger like that, neither of them armed.

The Kid raced up to him and pulled in. "Where—what—why——" He gulped with excitement without finishing the questions.

Grampa wheeled in beside them, snorting indignantly. “Hell an’ tarnation blazes! What ye stoppin’ here fur? Who’s got a rifle? I’ll go on an’ git them snakes alone, if ye’re scared.”

“I ain’t got no rifle,” Blue Pete growled. “An’ you ain’t, neither o’ yuh. An’, gor-swizzle, ef yuh hadn’ butted in I’d be out thar after them skunks. Why didn’ yuh le’ me alone, like I tol’ ju? Yuh durn ole fool. Yuh spiled it all.”

It cooled down the indignant old man. “Yah, an’ ye’d ’a’ run into a bushel o’ lead in the dark, to save a coupla durn cows. Them c’yutes was jus’ waitin’ fer ye. They wanted ye to chase ’em. They knowed ye was durn fool enough to try it. An’ then ye go cussin’ us fur savin’ yer life. ’Tain’t reasonable nohow.”

He broke into a sudden chuckle. “Sure I know ye don’ give a tarnation cuss fur yerself ner me. It’s the Kid. So ye gotta thank him fur savin’ yer life, gol-blast ye.”

CHAPTER XIX

BLUE PETE HELPS HIMSELF

NO one was hurt, and the purpose of the shooting was not apparent. The one thing certain was the effect it would have on the nerves of the night-herders to have bullets whistling about them from the darkness. Even at that, however, Blue Pete knew he could depend on them not to desert their herds.

Again he failed to speak of it to Mira when he returned to the ranch house.

But he could not deceive her. She read it in his manner, in his sombre face, and later she had it all from Wing, who had received it, much coloured, from one of the punchers involved. And in the telling of it to Mira it lost none of its colouring.

She worried. She worried more because her husband's silence showed how seriously he was taking it. So that it was with a feeling of relief that she listened as he told her that he was going to town right away to purchase the new mower.

The previous winter had been unusually severe, so that all the ranches had lost money, particularly if there were no horses loose. With their tender ankles the cattle could not break through an icy surface on the snow to the grass underneath. If they could, they fell in behind feeding bronchos who easily pawed through to the grass.

Hundreds of cattle, unable to find feed, had frozen to death when weak with hunger. Others, too weak to resist, had driven before the storms, to pile up beneath the steep banks of coulees, or against the wire fence that bordered the sides of the railway.

Accordingly Blue Pete had decided to improve the situation by cutting hay for feed and piling it near the stables. Into that scheme the two new ranch hands, Grampa and the Kid, fitted perfectly.

For the trip to the Hat with the buckboard Blue Pete used two well-broken bronchos, leaving Whiskers behind. A night and a day later he dropped down the cutbank to Toronto Street, turned across to Main Street, and drove in behind the Royal Hotel.

Red happened to be standing in the back doorway when he turned in. The bar-tender shaded his eyes elaborately, rubbed them, blinked several

times, and whistled.

"I think I've seen everything now," he declared, as Blue Pete climbed sheepishly from the buckboard and handed the bronchos over to a hostler. "What a come-down for an honest-to-goodness rancher! Never before have I seen you without that little pinto. What's the matter with her—or have you boils or something?"

Blue Pete grinned. "Takin' a mower out. Ain't room on the saddle fer it, not even 'th Whiskers. Gotta put up some hay fer the cows this winter."

"Hm-m! Ain't yu got no punchers to do that job? Scared to ask 'em?"

The half-breed glowered at him. "Ef I thought yuh meant it, Red, I'd lambast yuh right on the snoot. They kin do 'thout me back at the ranch. We need all the boys. An' I kin ride in my own buckboard ef I wanta, can't I? So run along an' make yer silly punchers sillier 'th yer rotten booze."

He passed the bar-tender and set off along the hall.

After a few steps he stopped. "Anythin' happened sence I lef' town, Red?"

Red flung out his arms. "Too damn peaceful for anythin'. We had such a nice rowdy time when you were here, you an' that Bruiser—an' the new chap. His name's Pierson, I'm told. He's in town right now. I seen him today. But Bruiser's gone for a time. He was in Finlay's store several days ago when I was there. Loading up with supplies. When he was gone I ast Finlay where he was going. Bruiser an' them tough friends of his have gone away up north to a railway construction job. They were cuttin' right straight away up north, through all that empty country, it seems."

He stopped and winked. "This town'd be tickled to death if they starved on the way or got lost for good. You didn't break them bones of his bad enough."

"I didn' break no bones of Bruiser's," protested the half-breed. "That was th' other chap, the new one." He started on towards the stairs. "'Tain't sayin' I won't when I git the chance," he muttered to himself, as he climbed to his room.

He seated himself there, to stare blankly through the window. A disturbing thought had come to him. Bruiser and his friends—they had left town. Something of the same thought had been knocking about in his mind for days, but he had refused to open to it. Now it was in, and he knew it was there to stay.

He rose abruptly and set off down the stairs. He was in a hurry; he did not want to leave the ranch alone. Whatever had happened, whoever it was, it was not the end. He knew it more surely now, with Bruiser in his mind,

Bruiser was not satisfied. A few murdered steers were a mere taste to a man like that. Where would it end?

The local agent for farm machinery was out of town, and no one seemed to know where he was. He was often absent, since there was little demand for his wares in a ranching country that did everything it could to discourage farming. Medicine Hat, too, was in what was called "the dry belt", a reputation capitalized and expanded by the ranchers, who did not wish to see their open ranges contained in fences and seeded fields.

Blue Pete groaned when he saw the locked door of the agency. Through the glass in the door he could see the very mower he wanted, and the idle hours of waiting were too difficult to endure.

Pierson encountered him on the street and appeared glad to see him. "I've returned," he said. "This seems to be the place I must search more carefully. I'm going out among the ranchers to make inquiries. I'll be out your way some of these days, I suppose. I've received word that some mail did come from Medicine Hat, but, of course, the chap may have left long ago. I'm going to take a look anyway."

"Thar ain't nobody like you want out my way," Blue Pete told him. "I know all the punchers anywhars near. But yuh kin come. The door's allus open."

Inspector Barker had seen him drive into the hotel yard, and he sighed with relief. With Bruiser Salmon and his friends off north on the construction job there was nothing in that line in town to justify worry. Nevertheless he did worry, and later he called Sergeant Mahon in with some hope of discovering an antidote.

"If Bruiser was in town, Mahon," he said, "I'd have you out shadowing Blue Pete. I can't help a disturbing feeling that the next time they meet there'll be fireworks, and whoever pays the penalty of that meeting, Blue Pete will suffer. I know the half-breed is in a mood not to stop till Bruiser—is out of the way. Then what?

"I've seen Blue Pete wandering around like a lost soul. He's restless. I hope it doesn't mean he came in, looking for Bruiser. It would be like him, because he'd brood until that debt is collected. I see he still has that adhesive on his face. Mira got him away before, but that doesn't mean he's content to let things lie. . . . The worst of it is that I don't think Bruiser is any more content. I certainly am glad that his crowd have gone away north."

Mahon frowned, but said nothing.

The Inspector noticed it. "What's on your mind, Mahon? You should be more delighted than I am. He's *your* special friend."

"I was just thinking, sir, that we've no proof where Bruiser has gone. I can't imagine them taking on a job like that; and Bruiser went to a lot of trouble to advertise it. They took horses, too."

"But they were striking straight north," said the Inspector. "They had to have horses."

"It's an awfully long way to ride, sir, and they're not too fond of work or hardship. . . . They *did* take a lot of supplies with them."

Inspector Barker nodded thoughtfully. "I never thought of that. It certainly doesn't appear to fit into the picture. But if they aren't there, where are they?"

Mahon could only shrug. "We must remember that a couple of them have been cowboys. Perhaps we should warn the ranchers against rustling."

"I'd like to talk to Blue Pete," declared the Inspector, after a long silence. "Go out and find him. Send him in. . . . Of course if he won't come —— But I'm wondering what he has in mind."

Mahon failed to find him. He failed because the half-breed was already on his way back to the ranch—and the gaudy red mower was in the buckboard behind him.

He had not waited for the agent to return. The night before Mahon set out to find him he had broken into the building in which he could see the mower awaiting a purchaser. With Red to help him he had loaded the mower into the buckboard and had repaired the damage to the door as best he could. He had left with Red money to cover the purchase and the damaged door, and had immediately set off for the ranch.

It was all so simple. So simple that he upbraided himself for having wasted two days before thinking of it.

CHAPTER XX

FIRE

IT was just before daylight when he left town. Within the hour the sun was up, blazing down with the promise of a blistering day. The mower was anchored as best he and Red could manage it, but at the best it was unsteady in the skeleton wagon.

He glanced sourly at the sun as something that was going to play him a nasty trick. He wanted to hurry, wanted it with an eagerness that increased with the passing hours. And the sun would discourage haste, even if the unsteadiness of the mower at every bump failed to do so.

Grimly he refused to observe his custom of a rest every two hours. He didn't need it himself. He passed the hut at Turner's Crossing without stopping. Corporal Simmons was now in charge. Hearing the approaching buckboard and the rattle of the mower while it was still a mile away, he stood in the doorway waiting to see who or what it was.

He gaped in astonishment when Blue Pete failed even to glance at him.

On and on and on, the buckboard rattling more and more as the ropes that bound it loosened. Presently the Hills dropped away to the left. The seat was springless, and Blue Pete sat well forward, not so much to ease himself as to urge the bronchos to a faster pace. Growing more tense and excited, he was angry with himself for it.

He found himself arguing that the rest every two hours was unnecessary, that it had just become a habit; that the bronchos were well rested anyway, and they were eager to keep going.

Then, just at dark, a hame strap broke on one of the collars, and for a few moments he had difficulty in bringing the bronchos to a stop. Then he discovered that he had not so much as a string to make repairs. He tried weaving blades of dead grass together, but they were too brittle.

In the end he used his neckerchief. But he had little faith in it, and he drove more slowly, even getting off to walk down the hills.

It meant that with daylight of the second day he was still twenty miles from the ranch.

The sun rose, hot as ever—too hot to drive fast, even had the bronchos not been tiring, and the unsteadiness of the loosening mower dangerous. Time and again he was forced to stop and readjust the ropes and the mower.

In his impatience he thought to cut across the prairie, instead of sticking to the longer trail; but the shaking of the mower soon sent him back to the two ruts that formed the trail. If the mower were dislodged, he would not be able to reload it without assistance—even if it did not break.

Darkness overtook him.

He noticed then that a change had come over the bronchos. Their heads were raised, their noses thrust forward, their ears too. They whinnied. That, he knew, meant that they had heard other bronchos not far away in the darkness, though he could hear nothing himself. Vaguely he wondered who they could be.

Later, as he neared the hollow in which the ranch buildings were located, the bronchos became excited. He could hear them sniffing.

He sniffed himself. Smoke! Surely he would not be able to smell smoke from the ranch house chimney at that distance. He had never smelled it before. But there it was. In a panic he lashed the bronchos ahead.

At the top of the slope he pulled in so sharply that the bronchos skidded on their hind legs. He blinked into the hollow. Though it was dark, he could make out every detail.

He could see—sudden flashes of fire, live coals! One of the stables had been there! But the other buildings were intact, and a breath of relief burst from him.

Then he remembered: in the stable that was now only ashes and coals Whiskers was always kept!

With a curse that was half whimper he raced the bronchos down the slope.

He did not stop at the ranch house, though vaguely it surprised him that Mira was not at the door to greet him with her "H'lo, Pete!" On two wheels he swept round the corner and tore on to the bunkhouse.

The cowboys heard him and, still in their night attire, they rushed out. Each carried a rifle, and they spread apart as they left the buildings. But when they recognized him, they came running.

Wing reached him first, panting with excitement and pointing wordlessly to the spots of live coals where the stable had been.

Words stuck in Blue Pete's throat. He could not ask.

Wing must have understood. He straightened, and a grin spread proudly across his yellow face. "Whiskuh's aw wight. Wing done it, Wing!" He struck himself on the chest with his clenched fist. "Wing done it!"

Only then did the half-breed notice that Wing's left arm was bound up and hanging in a sling.

Texas hurried forward. "Come inside," he said, and his voice was low and grave.

Blue Pete gave the bronchos over to one of the cowboys and followed the foreman into the bunkhouse. He was bewildered. It was like the opening of a dream that had nagged at him ever since he left the Hat. He dropped into a chair.

Texas remained standing, his eyes fixed on the half-breed's face, and in them was something tragic.

Blue Pete spoke first—through his teeth. "Who done it?"

Texas told the story in as few words as he could. Almost everyone had been out on night duty with the herds. Only Grampa and the Kid had been left at the bunkhouse. Texas himself was away, moving about through the night from herd to herd. In a way, therefore, he held himself partly to blame for not having been home when it occurred.

Near midnight he knew from the actions of his mount that other horses were round. He stopped and listened, but he could hear nothing. And still the broncho's ears were stiffly pointed in one direction.

It happened, however, that it was the hour when the cattle rise and change their position, to lie on the other side. He imagined the broncho had heard it.

Back at the ranch everyone was in bed. All except Wing, whose sleeping and resting hours were too indefinite to anticipate. Grampa, from his lower bunk in the corner, snored with even more unrestraint than usual, and once the Kid had reached down and partially wakened him.

The Kid had almost become accustomed to the snoring, and he might have slept had he not been strangely restless. Though every window and door was open, the air seemed stifling.

Up at the ranch house Mira had fallen asleep tardily. She was worried. Though her husband had told her nothing of the strange things that had happened, she had learned more from Wing, who, though he appeared to notice nothing in the bunkhouse, missed not a word of the conversation of the cowboys he fed.

She knew that something worried her husband, something he did not wish to have her know; and beneath his cold exterior she felt a burning anger. It concerned her, for she knew he would never rest until he had satisfied his anger. She had struggled to break through his silence, but he had held her off, and that made it more serious. It had been her experience that

sooner or later he would speak, but now he repelled her so coldly that there seemed little promise that he would tell her what worried him.

At first she greeted his departure for the Hat with a breath of relief; but quickly it only added to her worry, for she had no way now of keeping in touch with him, of knowing what he was doing. Gradually she got the idea that something dreadful was about to happen, and she kept moving about, talking to Wing and to Texas, climbing the hill to look along the trail he would follow on his return.

Texas followed her once on the climb, and side by side they looked away towards the Hills.

"He should be along any time now," he said, understanding her worry.

She turned to him, and in her eyes was a suggestion of tears. "Yes, I know but—but I wish he was here now. I've such a funny feeling—as if we need him more than we ever did before . . . as if something is going to happen. I know something of what has been happening, Tex, and it terrifies me, because he won't speak of it."

She eyed him appealingly. "Don't you think we should call in the Mounties now . . . even without his word?"

The foreman frowned and shook his head. "I wouldn't dare. Yes, it's work for them all right, but Blue Pete doesn't think so . . . not yet."

"Not yet!" She flung out her hands impatiently. "If it isn't the time now, it might come too late. Where will it end?" They stood in silence for a time. "You know him almost as well as I do, Tex. I'm afraid of what he will do. . . . And he'll do it all alone—he'll insist on that—and he'll get into trouble. If he does . . . there'll be deaths, Tex." She shivered. "Then the Mounties will have to step in.

"Did none of you suggest calling in the Mounties? You all know more about what has happened than I do, how serious it is—the stampede, the shot steers, those shots in the dark. Are you just goin' to let things run until someone is killed?"

Texas shook his head miserably. "I suppose we all thought of the Mounties, but it's the boss's job to call them, not ours. 'Sides, I reckon we saw how he felt about it. Things like that he always wants to handle himself. . . . If he called in the Mounties it 'ud look to him like he was scared. An' he ain't got any patience with the slowness of the law."

She sighed heavily. "I know, I know, but we can't leave things like this."

He tried to calm her. "He's got a way o' clearing things up, an' he always comes outa it right. You know that. 'Sides, we're on the watch now, an' we're shootin' to kill. Maybe nothin' more can happen."

It failed in its purpose, and that night she fretted and tossed, listening for any unusual sounds, imagining many—longing for the patter of broncho's hoofs swinging down the trail.

When at last, however, she fell asleep, she slept heavily, weary in body and mind.

Wing alone was awake and about when it happened. He was tidying the kitchen before going to bed when he smelled smoke. For a few moments it conveyed no alarm to his brain; then, suddenly, he dashed to the back door and looked through the screen.

Even before he saw the rosy flame curling up from the back corner of the nearer stable, he heard Whiskers screaming and kicking.

With a shriek he pattered back into the kitchen and commenced to collect his precious pans and pots, all the time shouting the alarm at the top of his shrill voice.

It was the Kid heard him first. He tumbled from his bunk, smelled smoke, and jerked on his pants. Calling to Grampa, he rushed back through the passage way to the kitchen, the smoke growing stronger and stronger. Then he heard the crackle of flames.

The kitchen was empty.

In the midst of the clatter of pots and pans Wing had remembered that pounding and screaming from the stable, and he dropped everything in the middle of the floor and rushed out. He did not wait even to open the screen door but crashed through it, tearing it from its hinges.

It was Whiskers—Whiskers!

Whimpering now, too terrified even to shout, he dashed across to the stable door. The kicking inside had ceased. Whiskers must have heard rescue on the way. Wing's fingers fumbled with the catch, but finally he got the door open.

A gush of searing heat and a surge of flame met him, but he did not hesitate. Closing his eyes, his left arm held before his face, he stumbled back along the wall and pushed open the half-door of the box stall where Whiskers was kept.

Then he lost consciousness.

The Kid saw them emerging through the flames. And Whiskers had the unconscious Chinese by the seat of the pants, dragging him with her into the open. She dropped him gently before the Kid.

Grampa came rushing out then. He had not even stopped to put on his pants, and his shirt waved wildly about his skinny legs as he ran.

Wing's senses returned quickly. He got to his feet. His shirt was half burned from his back, his hair was singed, and blisters were already forming on the arm he had held before his face. He looked dazedly about, blinking at the now brightly burning stable, then away into the Kid's face.

The latter stood patting Whiskers' neck. "She brought you out, Wing. She had your pants in her teeth when I saw her coming through the door."

The Chinese scowled. "That's how I got huh out. No hackamow, so I had to lug huh by the teeth. Velly funny ways to git hosses outa places like that."

There was nothing to do but stand and watch the stable disappear before the flames, until only some ends of logs were left to smoulder. Fortunately the wind was in the right direction, so that the other buildings were safe.

Mira came. Wing's screams had wound themselves into her disturbing dreams, so that it was several minutes before she was really awake. When her eyes opened she saw the light from the fire and smelled the smoke. Now she stood, silently watching. She was not surprised; she had expected something like this to happen.

Finally she asked: "Who was in the stable last?"

Grampa edged forward; he had forgotten the brevity of his attire. "I fed her myself, Mira, an' it was 'fore dark. I hadn' no light, an' I wasn' smokin'."

The chill of his bare legs struck him then, and with a shriek he turned and raced back towards the bunkhouse, clutching the tails of his shirt about his thin legs.

No one laughed; it was no time for laughter. Mira had not even noticed. For a long time she stood in silence.

Grampa reappeared. He stalked from the bunkhouse. He carried a rifle. Without a word he passed the silent pair. He opened the door of the other stable and went inside.

CHAPTER XXI

A FRIEND INTERVENES

"WHO done it?" Blue Pete asked again. No one replied, but Texas had stopped his pacing and stood looking down into the half-breed's face. He must have seen the answer there, for he nodded and turned away.

The half-breed rose and left the bunkhouse. Almost without conscious direction he made his way to the other stable. As his hand touched the catch, Whiskers neighed a welcome, and a smile broke the grimness of his expression.

He opened the door. A scramble from inside sent him swiftly back, drawing his .45, glaring with the fury that had accumulated as he listened to Texas' story. Cautiously then he eased the door wide.

A bullet whistled past him, and Grampa leaped out, yelling triumphantly.

"Got ye that time, ye low-down c'yute. Ye can't git away with it ag'in. Not when Grampa's on guard."

He recognized Blue Pete and sank back against the log wall of the stable. Then he commenced to curse. "Gol-durn blazes! I reckoned I'd got him." He spat with disgust and dropped the butt of his rifle as if it burned his hand. "Why'd it have to be you?"

"Shootin' loose like that, Grampa, ain' goin' to git yuh nobody—'less it's me," warned the half-breed. "Bes' take a look fust."

He entered the stable and rubbed the pinto's nose and laid his head against hers. "They'll pay fer this, ole gal," he whispered.

He remembered then that he had not yet seen Mira, and he hurried away to the ranch house. No light showed in any window, and by the time he reached the door he was running. Always before she had come to the door as he rode down the slope, with her welcome, "H'lo, Pete!" And always he had answered "H'lo, Mira!" There was never more; that was enough.

Anxiety that was like a pain round his heart held his hand for a moment as he lifted the latch. The room beyond was dark. Not a sound. He cleared his throat loudly. She might have slept through his return, after such a distressing night. Cold drops of perspiration broke out on his forehead. He tiptoed into the bedroom and struck a match. The bed was untouched.

In a panic he raced back to the bunkhouse, calling Texas as he went. The foreman met him at the door.

"Whar is she, Tex? Whar's Mira?"

Texas shrugged. "She rode away this morning on Whitey. Didn' say where she was goin'."

Blue Pete raised a bewildered hand to his face and turned to stare towards the wisps of smoke still curling from the ruins of the stable.

" 'Rode—away?' "

He walked slowly back to the ranch house. It was all too much for him, a combination of inexplicable events that confused him until it seemed little more than a dream.

Inside the house he sat for a long time in the dark, trying to get things arranged in his mind. Where had she gone? And she told no one . . . at a time like this! She must have known he would be back to-day.

He had a thought, and he rose and lit a lamp. With it in his hand he wandered from room to room. But she had left no note, and with a groan he extinguished the lamp and sat down.

All through the night he sat. There were moments of dozing, from which he would waken with a start and listen. Now and then he went to the window and looked towards the stable and bunkhouse, then back to the window in the bedroom, to stare into the darkness up the trail.

Daylight. He did not notice it until he heard the cowboys saddling their bronchos in the corral. Automatically he rose and prepared himself a skimpy breakfast, eating it without knowing what he put in his mouth. Then he returned to the chair. To wait.

It was noon when he heard the thud of approaching riders and ran to the door to look up the trail, his heart pounding.

It was Mira and Cooney Featherston, and he sank limply to the doorstep and waited.

Mira saw him and waved. "H'lo, Pete!"

That was what he had waited for, and his face split into a grin as he waved back. "H'lo, Mira!" Everything was all right once more.

He had forgotten her companion, and Cooney slouched in the saddle, smiling.

"I was a little doubtful about riding up like this with her, Pete," he said. "I wasn't sure you wouldn't feel it the proper time to use that .45 of yours on me for seeing your wife home. I have to admit that she took advantage of your absence to pay me a visit. Why in the world did you have to return and catch me at this?"

Blue Pete could laugh now. He felt like laughing at everything. He went to the corner of the house and whistled. Grampa appeared from the bunkhouse, and the half-breed pointed to the two horses, to be taken to the stable.

But as they entered the house he commenced to wonder. Mira had gone to Cooney and had brought him back with her. What did it mean? There must be something Cooney was going to try to do.

The heavy rancher let himself down gingerly into a chair. It groaned beneath his weight. He drew a huge bandana handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face.

"The more I ride," he puffed, "the more I know I should ride more. Some of these days I'll convince myself I'm too stout, and I'll take to riding herd. It keeps the boys thin; they get a lot of fun out of seeing me try my hand once more at cutting. Yes, I'm fat. It's the one thing my wife and I agree on." He threw his arms across the table. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to import a man's size horse from the East, and that'll get me in bad with my neighbours. I'm not fair to a broncho, even the crosses we raise now. Phew!" He mopped his face again.

It was a little forced, and Blue Pete knew it.

Cooney himself recognized it, and he grinned and glanced slyly towards Blue Pete. "That isn't what I came for, of course, as you know." He raised his eyes frankly. "Pete, you must call in the Mounted Police."

"'Bout wot?" He hadn't expected it to come so abruptly.

"Something drastic must be done, and you know it."

"Shure . . . I'm settin' 'bout doin' it."

"Then you're calling in the Mounties, eh? That's right. . . . You know, you should have done it long ago. There's the stampede, those murdered cows, those shots that night. And now the worst of all, the stable. If Whiskers had not been saved by Wing——"

"Ef they'd hurt her," snarled the half-breed, "I'd 'a' run 'em down 'fore I'd stop to eat. I'd git them skunks, every dang one o' them."

Cooney eyed him inquiringly. "You mean you know who did it—who has done everything?"

Blue Pete did not reply. His tightly closed jaws looked as if they weren't likely to open again.

Cooney shook his head gravely. "It's work for the Mounties, Pete. It's much too serious for you to undertake alone, serious for you, and for the rest

of us. That's what the Mounties are for. A word from you and they'd be on the trail."

"They wudn' find it," grunted Blue Pete. "They can't follow a trail like me. Anyways thar ain't none. I looked. Thar's too many cows an' cayuses bin moving around."

"But something will have to be done. You can't tell where it'll end. There'll be murder, if you don't act quickly with the Mounties."

"Shure! . . . Thar'll be murder."

Mira had not opened her lips. All the time she stood watching her husband. Now she came to him and looked down into his face. "What do you mean, Pete?"

He met her eyes frankly. "You know well's I do they ain' goin' to git 'way 'th wot they done, not by a long shot they ain't. Yuh know I'm goin' to stop it. I don' care how."

She shrugged and looked helplessly at Cooney, then went to the window and stood there, her back to the room.

Cooney's handkerchief worked more strenuously than ever. "But, Pete, if you delay in handing it over to the Mounties——"

"I ain't handin' nothin' over to the Mounties," Blue Pete dropped into a chair, his hands set firmly on his knees. "See here, Cooney, this is my fight. It's bin my fight—oh, fer a long time . . . on'y I wasn' quite sure, not till now. Now I know wot I gotta do. The Mounties? It's too cold a trail for them. But s'pose they picked it up an' nabbed the skunks. Wot 'ud happen? Them skunks 'ud be took in an' tried. An' how'd the Mounties prove anythin'? Nobody's seen 'em doin' nothin'. 'Course we know. They started that stampede, shure. Shure they shot them cows. An' they shot at us that night. Shure they fired the stable. We all know it. The law won't. We ain't seen 'em doin' a thing. Yuh don't think I'm trustin' all that to the law, Cooney?"

He sat back, shaking his head violently. "I ain' takin' no chances like that 'th them skunks. An' I'm not waitin' fer nothin' more. Like yuh said, Cooney: thar ain't no time to waste. Shure thar'll be murder. It's jes' which of us is goin' to be fust to do it. That's why I ain't waitin'. I'm startin' . . . right now."

CHAPTER XXII

MURDER

COONEY was really alarmed. He knew Blue Pete. What he did not know was the relationship between the half-breed and the Mounted Police. None but the two parties concerned, and Mira, knew that. Like the rest of the district Cooney was satisfied that Inspector Barker was nervous about Blue Pete's honesty, ever since he fled across the Border to return to his former rustling activities. He had the idea, therefore, that he did not wish to have any more to do with the Mounted Police than he could avoid, perhaps from a guilty conscience.

Accordingly, after much worrying reflection, he decided to appeal himself to the Inspector. He told what had been happening at the 3-Bar-Y. He did not know that some of it was already known to the Inspector.

What had reached him failed to worry him much, though had it occurred at any other ranch he would have looked into it without delay. With Blue Pete it was different. The half-breed could look after himself, so far as personal danger was concerned. Rustlers? Not a member of his Force could handle them as well or as safely. When official help was needed the call would come direct.

And yet, at disturbing moments, he had a feeling that the call would never come.

When Cooney was gone, he called Sergeant Mahon to his office.

"Featherston has been giving me something more about affairs out at the 3-Bar-Y, Mahon."

"Has there been anything more, sir?" inquired Mahon.

The Inspector nodded. "A few nights ago one of the stables was set on fire . . . Whiskers was in it."

Mahon started violently forward. "Was she—burned, sir?"

"No, Wing saved her. Thank goodness for that." He ran a finger inside the collar of his tunic and clacked his lips. "It looks as if we must get into the thing. If Whiskers had been killed, you'd be on the way right now. As it is, Blue Pete is not going to let things lie, and where that may lead we can only guess."

"What are we going to do, sir?"

"I'm considering that. . . . By the way, how did Jason like Blue Pete helping himself to the mower?"

"He just laughed, sir. Red, over at the Royal, had the money for him, with something extra to pay for the damaged door."

They both laughed.

Inspector Barker's laughter petered out. He frowned. "He always gets what he wants when he wants it, doesn't he? Now I think I'll send you out to take a look at things, but there's a question I must settle with myself before we intervene." There was uneasiness in his eyes.

When Cooney had left the 3-Bar-Y, Mira came and seated herself across the table from her husband. "There'll be trouble, Pete."

He seemed not to hear, and she repeated it.

He nodded. "Shure . . . . I'll make it."

"You know who they are?"

He would not let her see his eyes. "I'm goin' to find out."

"Is it rustlers?"

He turned to her, his lip curling. No need to answer. No one knew better than Mira the ways of rustlers.

"Then who is it?"

Still he made no answer.

"Is it them young fellows you had the fight with in the Hat?"

"I didn' fight no young fellows. . . . Not 'nuff, anyways," he added.

"But it's them, isn't it?"

"I'm goin' to find out," he repeated, and she gave up.

"What are you going to do?"

His glance focused through the side window on the brilliant red and yellow mower standing beside the stable. "I'm goin' to set Grampa an' the Kid at gittin' that hay cut." His face brightened. "Durn lucky they come—Grampa an' the Kid—'cause the boys hate that sorta work. 'Tain't wot they come fer."

She frowned. She knew he was trying to turn her thoughts from the main question. "What are you going to do?" She repeated.

He rose and started for the door. "I'm ridin', jes' ridin'. I'll be keepin' an eye on things."

He went to the bunkhouse. Grampa and the Kid were there, with two cowboys. He beckoned them out to the mower.

Grampa looked it over sourly. "Mighty purty. What they otta do is rig up a bar on it, with a row o' bottles. Then a puncher'd mebbe take to usin' the dang thing. 'Spectin' an old puncher like me to run it?"

"Yuh said yuh knowed how, Grampa."

"Sometimes," growled Grampa, "I talk too dang much."

"Someun's gotta do it. You an' the Kid kin take turns, workin' together."

Grampa looked dubiously about. "I ain't seed no grass wuth cuttin'."

"Oh, I know the spot. I bin lookin' fer it fer a long time. It's off at the south end o' the lake, near the Hills."

Grampa scowled towards the Hills, though they could not be seen from the hollow in which they stood. "Durn long ways to haul the hay when we got it cut. Then we gotta haul that contraption back an' forrard every night an' mornin'."

"No you won't. Yuh kin stay with it o' nights. Yuh won't hev to git up so early in the mornin'."

Grampa nodded understandingly. "Sure. I see. Them skunks ain' goin' to hev no chance to smash a purty thing like that o' nights. I'll sleep on it—with a carbine. They won't git away with nothin' when Grampa's around. No, sir-ee."

"I'll stay with you," the Kid promised, with a laugh. "I've been wanting to sleep out in the open ever since I came. It must be lovely these beautiful nights, with only the stars over one's head, and nice, long, dry grass for a mattress."

Grampa grunted and spat. "That nice, long, dry grass gits mighty lumpy sometimes, son. An' the sky? Say, I sleep with my eyes closed. Don't you?"

They set off the next morning, the two well-broken bronchos hauling the mower on the buckboard. The Kid had his own broncho. Blue Pete went with them to help them get started.

Everything went smoothly at first, and Grampa grinned down from the hard seat, as the long grass fell before the shifting blade. He acclaimed it with a shout. Behind the mower the Kid moved along with a rake, dragging the grass into piles.

Blue Pete was less cheerful about it. For a long time he watched, and often his eyes would rise to the Hills. They would be alone there, the old man and the young. By day nothing threatened. The nights? He did not care to think of that too much. But no matter who had made life dangerous about

the ranch, they could have nothing against Grampa or the Kid. The mower, of course, was another matter. But Grampa had his rifle, and he knew how to use it.

He rode away.

He did not go far but cut into a coulee and rode around, to lie on a height and look at the haying operations. Grampa was having trouble now with the bronchos. The animals, as well as the cowboys, appeared to think it an insult to be put to such work. They were cow-ponies, not farm horses. They seemed to notice the rattle now and pulled unevenly. Then the mowing arm struck an uneven part of the ground, and Grampa had to act quickly to stop.

Presently the Kid went ahead, signalling to Grampa when the arm would have to be raised. Nevertheless the old man was forced frequently to dismount to tinker with the machine. Blue Pete could almost hear him cursing.

No other movement over the whole prairie was visible. The long slope to the Hills was empty—not even a coyote or a badger in sight.

He returned to the ranch, but late in the afternoon he returned to the mowing. It was growing dark, and he whistled to announce his coming. But Grampa was taking no chances; a rifle covered the half-breed as he approached.

The machine had given a lot of trouble, so that their first day's work was not encouraging. But the old man was convinced that he understood it better now. In a couple of days, he promised, they would have enough cut for the winter.

Twice during the following day Blue Pete rode out to them, carrying provisions and making inquiries. For some reason he did not wish to leave the ranch yet to do what he had in mind. He would feel freer when the haying was finished and the pair were back at the ranch.

Mira saw that he was troubled, but she said nothing, though she wondered that he delayed in doing what he assured her and Cooney he would do.

On the morning of the third day he scarcely knew what he ate for breakfast. He never talked much, but that morning he was unusually silent and restless as he waited for Mira to serve him. Several times he went to the window and looked out to where the blackened embers of the burned stable stared back at him.

He needed nothing like that to remind him. Inside he boiled with impatience, and when he had gobbled down an incomplete meal, he rushed away to the stable and saddled Whiskers. Without waiting to visit the

bunkhouse to see that the day herders had departed, he set off straight back towards the range where the mower should be at work. Whiskers was eager as he.

Mira watched him disappear over the rise, and she went about her work absent-mindedly. An hour passed. She could stand it no longer, and she went to the stable and saddled Whitey and set off after her husband.

Blue Pete rode fast. Though he always wore two-inch spurs, he never used them on Whiskers. A touch of the side of his foot was sufficient to increase her pace. This morning she did not wait for even that. She must have felt the impatience surging within her rider.

They did not keep to the trail but struck straight across the prairie. The Hills rose directly before them, as they rose and fell in the uneven rolls. Often the depth of the coulees they crossed blotted out the Hills, and always there they were both more impatient. Blue Pete's eyes kept searching the dark line of the trees away at the top of the long slope, though he could not have told what he expected to see.

It was an hour's fast ride. He knew he would be unable to see the pair at work until he was almost on them, since the area they were cutting was a wide coulee in which the spring moisture had added growth to the grass. He had purposely kept the cattle from feeding there, saving it for the winter's hay. Nevertheless it worried him that he could see no sign of life. As he neared the spot he even kept to the heights, hoping to see some movement, or to hear the mower.

He rose in the saddle, scanning the prairie before him. He listened as he had never listened before. But he could see nothing, and the mower was obviously not working at the moment. It was, he tried to convince himself, only more trouble with the machine, with its inexperienced operator. Perhaps something had broken. That would mean another visit to town, and he hated the thought. But if there was a break, the Kid would have ridden back to report to the ranch.

He slapped the sides of his riding-boots against Whiskers' ribs, and the pinto shook her head irritably; she was making as much speed as she dare on such rough ground that was full of badger-holes.

Then, far away to the south he saw a broncho feeding. Then a second—and a third. They had heard him and had come to a rise to watch him.

He recognized them, and his heart almost stopped beating, for he saw they were hobbled. Dread fear shot through him, making him shudder, and for a moment he closed his eyes, as if it might all be his imagination, born of his anxiety.

He reached the rise above the coulee where the mower would be, and he pulled in and stared.

Down below him the yellow and red of the new mower blazed back at him from a great area of mown and piled hay. Beside it stood the buckboard.

But there was no sign of life.

His eyes swept the prairie in all directions, but there were only the three bronchos far away to the south. Slowly then, scarcely breathing, he rode down the slope.

He was confused. Everything was so peaceful that more and more it was like a dream. Already it was very hot, with promise of a blazing day. Heat waves rose from the dead grass. Perhaps Grampa and the Kid, their work finished, had sought the shelter of the trees away at the top of the slope. Perhaps they had overslept. They may have gone to the lake for water. With so much hay cut they could afford to take their time.

But there were the three bronchos!

He tried to forget them, then to explain. But, hobbled, they must have been left that way the night before.

He reached the mower and moved round it.

He understood then. There in the grass Grampa lay—dead!

CHAPTER XXIII

ANOTHER COLLECTION

BLUE PETE dismounted. He bent over the still body. And, like an electric shock, a blaze of fury shook him, and for several moments he stood, his teeth clamped together, staring towards the dark trees of the Hills.

Grampa lay half on his back, his rifle in his hand. A bullet had entered his forehead. There was only a little blood, and the look in his wrinkled old face told a story—that he had not been taken entirely by surprise; it was too grim for that.

Slowly the half-breed picked up the rifle and examined it. It had not been fired. And yet he knew that Grampa had known that danger was near. He sank to his knees, for a moment cradling the old head in his arms; and his eyes were turned once more to the Hills.

He forced himself to a greater calmness. He had to think. He knew what had happened; now he had to decide what to do. The story of the murder was there. It had occurred during the night, as the pair slept beside the mower. Grampa had heard something in the darkness and had seized his rifle. But a bullet had picked him off before he could find a target.

For the moment Blue Pete forgot the Kid. The limp old body in his arms called for revenge, and without delay. Lives must pay for it. An eye for an eye—his creed, a creed he had learned throughout a hard life.

For a time he leaned against the mower, laying his plans. Then, outwardly calm, he set off at full speed back towards the ranch.

He did not go far. Fading away into a coulee, he altered his direction. The coulee—it was part of his plan—turned away towards the south, and he followed it. Every foot of the ground in that part he knew, every dip, every slope, every height. A thousand times he had used them, the coulees to escape prying eyes, the heights to see. Whiskers knew them as well.

He knew. He knew that far away among those dark trees at the top of the long slope eyes watched his every move, so long as he was in sight. It was those eyes that he longed to see now, to see them along the sights of his rifle, if he could get no nearer. Not a twinge of hesitation would hold his trigger-finger now.

They had seen him find Grampa. They had seen him strike away towards the ranch, of course to report and perhaps to get help. It was the natural

thing. He could only hope that they were satisfied that he had continued on back to the ranch. If he had thrown them off guard, he would circle away to the south and enter the Hills from that direction. The coulee, he knew, swung exactly in the direction he wanted, some distance from the lake, curving with the shore. Then, far to the south, it curved back towards the east.

On and on he rode, lying low in the saddle that he might not be seen where the depression was shallower. He knew when he had passed the end of the lake. In another mile he would be covered by the Hills themselves.

Something urged him to take a look, and he dismounted, scrambled up the incline and, having removed his sombrero, lay down behind a cactus.

He had scarcely dropped to cover, when the drumming of hoofs to the west brought his eyes swiftly in that direction. Someone, he knew, must be coming from the ranch, though for the time being the rider was concealed in a coulee.

Then over the height came Mira.

She was more than a mile away, but he recognized her even before he saw Whitey's head rise into view.

With a lump of dread in his throat he turned his eyes quickly back to the Hills. Those eyes up there would see her.

And she was riding directly towards them—eyes that had been behind rifle-sights only a few hours before, aiming to kill!

He did not wish his position to be revealed, and he ran back to Whiskers and mounted, hurrying farther along to the east. There he dismounted again and slid up through the grass to see if anything had happened.

He saw something then that sent a fresh wave of fear through him.

Far away to the north a broncho lay in a depression. And beside it a man lay in the grass, his rifle thrust before him.

It was too distant to see who it was, too distant to risk a shot, though the half-breed's rifle had worked havoc at even greater distances. At the moment he could only wait to make certain. The first bullet must not fail to reach the target.

Mira, too, was still beyond danger from that waiting rifle; but in a few minutes she would be within range.

Blue Pete had to do something.

Racing back to Whiskers, he struck back towards his wife, still sticking to the coulee. When he thought he had gone far enough, at least as far as he had time for, he dismounted again and climbed up the slope.

He started as a rifle-shot rang out. With a groan he looked swiftly towards where Mira had been a few moments before. The man had fired at her!

For an instant his mind whirled dizzily about. For he could not see her. And Whitey was running wild, his saddle empty.

Then he saw her rolling away, her rifle in her hand, and he knew she had not been hit.

A fresh blaze of murderous fury swept through him, and he mounted again and rushed towards the spot where the man had been. He scorned cover now. It would be the death of one of them, for the fellow could not escape. He could have shot him, but he wanted to be near enough to see the look of terror in the fellow's eyes when he saw what threatened.

Then he realized that even yet he had not been seen, and he pulled in. A cold smile twisted his dark face. There was no hurry. He dismounted and lay in the grass, the pinto lying down beside him. He saw the man raise his head to look towards where Mira had been.

The half-breed rose to his feet. He shouted. The man swung sharply towards him, terror in his eyes. His hand pawed backward for his rifle.

Blue Pete fired. He walked slowly forward then, the rifle cradled in his arm, a smile on his face. He reached the body. The man was curled up, so that his face was hidden. The half-breed kicked him straight.

CHAPTER XXIV

A CAPTURE

AT that moment, from far away to the north, another rifle snapped, and a bullet flicked up dust a few feet from where the half-breed stood.

As if he had been hit, Blue Pete dropped beside the dead body and rolled swiftly behind it. He slid his rifle forward, waiting. Nothing happened. On his rifle he raised his sombrero. Still nothing happened. Curiously he raised his head.

Not more than a couple of hundred yards away Texas ran towards him, rifle in hand.

Puzzled, the half-breed clambered to his feet, frowning, waiting for the explanation. Away to the west Mira had recovered Whitey and was riding swiftly nearer.

Texas came panting up. With only a glance at the dead man he grinned apologetically at the half-breed. "Yu didn' think I was shootin' at you, didju, Pete?"

The half-breed pushed his sombrero back and ran a hand through his black hair. "I dunno. Too much happened this mornin' to think much o' anythin'. D'ju know wot yuh was shootin' at? 'Cause I'd done fer him awready. Yuh didn' need to do no shootin'—me standin' right here."

Texas shook his head. "*I* shot him."

Blue Pete's eyes flashed angrily. "Yuh dang fool! He was dead 'fore yuh fired. I got him in the eye, jes' whar I aimed." He pointed contemptuously to where Texas' bullet had flicked up the dust. "*You* hit thar. An' thar ain't nothin' thar to shoot at but grass an' dust."

Mira had reached them. Texas winked at her. "*I* shot him," he repeated.

She understood. "Yes, Pete, he shot him. It wouldn't do for you to do it, would it? The Mounties would be askin' questions. It'll be easier for Tex to answer them."

"Sure I shot him," Texas persisted. "He was shootin' at you, Mira, so I hadta shoot."

Blue Pete shrugged. "Seems like I wasted some lead. Do' matter none. He's shure dead." He jerked a thumb to the body but did not look at it. "Know him, Tex?"

"Sure. It's Shorty Price. Useta ride for the Double X. Threw up the job an' went to town. Friend o' Bruiser Salmon's." He scowled down on the still face. "What the devil's he got ag'in' Mira? What's he doin' out here anyway?"

Blue Pete looked more closely. He remembered. "Shure. I know him now . . . I didn' want him to go so easy, gol-durn him."

It was Mira who remembered the Kid. She had seen Grampa's body. "Where's the Kid?" she asked.

Blue Pete looked helplessly round. "I—I didn' think o' him. I seen Grampa back thar." He scowled at his wife. "I clean fergot. I was shootin' Shorty fer Grampa. I knowed you was safe when I seen yuh roll away. The—Kid?" He held a hand to his head.

Mira came to him and touched him on the shoulder. "Pete, when is this going to end, when?"

He turned and touched the hand on his shoulder. "It's endin' soon now, Mira, durn soon. . . . It'll end when I come on Bruiser Salmon." His lips came together tightly.

They were silent for several moments, staring down on the dead cowboy.

Mira spoke first: "Someone will have to tell Inspector Barker now. And remember, it was Texas shot him."

A scowl deepened on the half-breed's face. "Thar'll be no Mounties in this, not by a long shot. I'm takin' over alone . . . an' right away." He took a firmer hold on his rifle and glared up at the Hills. Then, before anyone else could speak, he wheeled away and strode off towards where Whiskers stood waiting.

Mira called after him: "But, Pete, they'll have to know. With this," pointing to the body, "they'll have to be told."

The half-breed hesitated, staring thoughtfully at the ground. After a moment or two he sighed and shrugged resignedly. "Reckon yuh're right. They gotta be told." He turned to face his wife, appeal in his eyes. "But thar ain't no need to rush 'bout it. Gimme three—four days. I'm goin' back to the ranch to pick up some grub, then jes' three—four days."

Texas came and stood by his side. "I'm goin' with you, Pete. We'll make 'em pay. An' we gotta find the Kid."

"No, I'm goin' alone, Tex." Blue Pete shook his head firmly. "It's my job. It gotta be my job right back thar in town three—four weeks ago. I'm goin' to finish it." He stalked away.

They watched him go, uncertain, worried, not knowing what to do.

Blue Pete had taken only a few steps, when he turned and came back. "We gotta look after Grampa back thar. Ketch them broncs, Tex. We ain't leavin' Grampa fer the wolves er the c'yutes."

"An' him?" Texas asked, pointing to the dead cowboy.

Blue Pete spat noisily. "Think we're goin' to pile him in the buckboard 'side Grampa? Leave him thar. . . . An' I hope it's the c'yutes git him. They'll worry him more'n the wolves. On'y way I'd tech him's with a pitchfork—an' I ain' got one handy right now. I'll help you."

He whistled, and Whiskers came to him. Texas left to get his own broncho and round up the three they could see on a distant ridge.

It left Blue Pete and Mira alone. Neither spoke for several moments, then Mira laid a hand on his arm.

"You're goin' into trouble, Pete."

"Shure hope so," he grunted, "trouble fer them skunks."

"And for you. Why don't you leave it to the Mounties? They'd clear up the whole thing, and that 'ud be the end of it."

"An' wot 'ud they do to Bruiser?" He inquired, with a scowl. "We ain't got nothin' to prove nothin' ag'in' him. They got Grampa. But the Mounties cudn' prove nothin'. No, sir. Bruiser's got to pay, an' he's payin' to me."

She pointed to the body. "Isn't one death enough? And what about the Kid?"

He seized on it. "I gotta find that out. Yah, wot 'bout the Kid?" He raised his eyes to the forested heights. "I shuda got after 'em long ago. It's part my fault it went so far. I shudn' 'a' waited so long. I kin see Grampa tellin' me I shudn' 'a' waited. I knowed they come from up thar. I waited too long."

Texas caught the bronchos and brought them to the buckboard, and they lifted the thin old body into it. No one thought of the mower; its bright newness seemed akin to sacrilege. The procession went slowly back to the ranch.

With a parcel of food tied to the cantle Blue Pete started away again. He did not set off directly towards the Hills but went south until he was half a dozen miles from the Border. Then he turned east and, when the end of the Hills lay to the north of him, he turned towards them. Not a living thing was in sight, and he rode fast as he neared the slope.

It had occurred to him that the shooting of Shorty Price might not have been unobserved by his friends, but they would not risk exposing themselves in the open to recover the body. They might still be up there, waiting for

darkness. At least if they had not seen they would wonder when Shorty failed to return, and they would set out to look for him.

He tried to figure out how they would act then. There would be little they could do about it, and they would be terrified at what might happen when the Mounted Police were brought into the tragedy. They would surely take flight, in the hope that, not having been seen, nothing could be proven against them. That was their one chance.

And he had to intercept them before that happened.

The Kid!

Grampa's murder had wiped from his mind anything more than a fleeting thought of the young man. Now, as he rode, Blue Pete kept thinking of him. Where was he? What had happened to him? How was it that his body, too, was not found? Unless—— Unless——

He tried to shake the thought from him. The Kid was surely not linked with the Bruiser gang. It could not be that he had come to the ranch merely to lay the foundation for all that had been happening. No, that could not be.

But if he was still alive, why had he not made straight back for the ranch? Had he put up a fight against the gang? Had they captured him?

He had to find out. He knew it would be all clear when he overtook the gang.

He reached the long slope to the heights and stopped, scanning the trees above his head. If they had seen him, they would surely be waiting for him; and they would shoot to kill, more surely now that Grampa had been killed, and one of their own crowd.

He started on, keeping his rifle ready.

He had just reached the shelter of the trees when a movement to the north caught his eye, and he dismounted and moved swiftly behind a tree.

He could scarcely believe what he saw. A man rode out from the trees to the north, fully two miles away. He rode slowly, looking everywhere about him as he advanced down the slope.

A single swift glance, and Blue Pete mounted and hurried through the trees. But they were thick, and he had to restrain Whiskers. Besides, he did not wish the man to hear what was happening behind him.

Whoever it was, he was plainly no cowboy. He rode differently, seemed unusually fearful. But that was not surprising, with a dead body within sight.

Blue Pete reached a point directly behind him and there stopped. The man had reached the body and dismounted. His back was to the Hills; he had no suspicion that a pair of hostile eyes watched his every move.

The half-breed did not know what to do. If the man saw him, he was distant enough to make his escape, to throw off pursuit in the tangle of coulees down the slope. He could have been shot, but Blue Pete did not so much as consider using his rifle. It was for protection, not punishment. The weapons for punishment were more satisfying.

The man continued to stand, staring down at the body, evidently deciding what to do. He placed his rifle to one side and bent over the body.

"We gotta go quiet, ole gal," Blue Pete whispered to the pinto, as he rode out from the trees. And Whiskers placed her small hoofs gently down as she descended the slope.

The man now knelt by the body, his back to the half-breed. He raised the body in his arms and turned towards his broncho.

It was then he saw Blue Pete. For a moment or two, too startled to move, he stared. Then he dropped the body and leaped towards his rifle. He never reached it. Blue Pete pulled the trigger of his own rifle. The bullet caught the broncho in the chest, and it reared and fell over sideways, knocking the man from his feet.

Before he could twist free, a second bullet cut into the grass close beside his head, and he knew better than to move again.

As Blue Pete rode swiftly down the slope and leaped from Whiskers, the man remembered his revolver and reached for it.

Blue Pete's foot lashed out and sent the gun flying. Then he stood over him, his rifle raised in both hands, as if to crash it down on the unprotected head beneath him.

"I was just—just——" whimpered the fellow.

"Yes," snarled the half-breed. "I shud otta beat yer brains out, Bill Fraser. I got suthin' else fer yuh an' yer gang, else I wud."

CHAPTER XXV

MISFORTUNE

FRASER remained crouched over the still twitching broncho, and Blue Pete drew his .45 and sent a bullet into its head.

The man beside it winced as the shot rang out. "I didn't do anything," he whined. "I was up there in the trees, and I saw something lying here. That's all."

The half-breed caught him roughly by the shoulder and jerked him to his feet, at the same time running his free hand over him in search of a gun. The one he found he threw away.

"Shure, shure! Yuh didn' even know 'twas yer friend, Shorty Price, didju?" He kicked Fraser's rifle beyond reach. "Shure I knowed all the time 'twas Bruiser Salmon's skunks. Yuh didn' know neither 'twas one o' yu shot ole Grampa. Yuh didn' know Shorty tried to shoot Mira. Yuh didn' hev nothin' to do 'th settin' fire to the stable at the 3-Bar-Y, an' near burnin' Whiskers up. Yuh jes' didn' know nothin' 'bout the other things neither. Oh, no. Yuh jes' happened to be around, an' yuh seen Shorty here; an' that didn' look so good, speshully ef the Mounties come out. Wal-l, I ain' callin' no Mounties. Stand up, yuh low-down skunk." He kicked the cringing Fraser in the thigh.

The latter straightened gingerly, his eyes flickering away to the trees over their heads. "I don't know what you're talking about. I was up there in the Hills, hunting wolves, Shorty and I. We got separated." He glanced again at the Hills.

Blue Pete sneered. "It's a bit far fer a rifle, like they shoot. An' they dassent come out in the open, to show themselves. You 'n' me we're not goin' that way, not fer a while. Git down that way thar, an' make it snappy."

The terrified fellow watched Blue Pete pick up the extra rifle before mounting, then he set off on foot down the slope before the pinto.

"Where are you taking me?" he almost sobbed. "What are you going to do with me? I didn't have anything to do with shooting anybody. I don't know what you're talking about."

The only reply was the snap of a quirt close to his ear, and he hurried forward.

They rounded the end of the lake, proceeded over a rise, and sank into a deep coulee where they were invisible from the Hills.

Blue Pete pointed along to the south. "Git 'long that way," he ordered.

For almost a mile the coulee continued parallel to the lake, then edged around the end towards the south-east—the one Blue Pete had followed not long before. After a time they were to the south of the western end of the Hills. The man on foot, panting heavily now, plodded along, nosed ahead by Whiskers when he attempted to stop.

"Hold on!"

Fraser stopped and sank panting to the ground. Blue Pete dismounted and, carrying both rifles, crept to the top of the slope and looked away towards the Hills. No movement was in sight.

They continued on towards the east, still in the coulee, though now it was shallower. Again Blue Pete looked the trees over, then he ordered Fraser up the slope.

"An' the fust shot's goin' to be in yer gizzard, yuh dirty skunk," he threatened. "Ef yer frien's try anythin' it'll jes' be too bad fer you."

"I don't know what you want," protested the terrified fellow. "Why are you taking me up there?"

"I'm takin' yuh back whar yuh come from," the half-breed told him. "I wanta git yuh all together, to make a clean sweep of it. I'm startin' to clean things up. Wal-l, mebbe I started 'th Shorty back thar. But it's Bruiser I want. Him an' me's got lots o' things to settle. . . . An'," he added, "you're takin' me to him an' th' others."

For a moment his victim hesitated, but Whiskers almost knocked him over with her nose, and he plodded ahead.

"I—I don't know where Bruiser is. I haven't seen him for—for a long time. There was just Shorty and me."

"Uh-huh! Mebbe yuh'll 'member more 'fore I'm through 'th yuh. Got lots o' ways o' doin' that. Shure yuh don' know—not till I make yuh know. Yuh don' know nothin'. . . . Yuh don' know where the Kid is neither. Wal-l, I'm takin' my chances o' findin' the Kid when I find Bruiser. Git 'long."

But a few minutes later he stopped. It was late in the afternoon, and the prairie glowed momentarily with the last rays of the setting sun.

"No, reckon we'll stick right here fer the night. Thar ain't goin' to be no shenanigans in the Hills in the dark. 'Tain't goin' to be easy like that fer yuh."

He dismounted. "Lie down," he ordered. "Face down."

When Fraser hesitated, a lash of the quirt across his neck made him change his mind; and in a few minutes he was helpless, securely tied with the half-breed's rope.

"An' I hope yuh don' git no sleep," Blue Pete growled, as he finished a hasty meal from a parcel he carried. He did not offer his victim so much as a bite.

It was Whiskers who remained on watch, while Blue Pete slept. When Fraser moved, the pinto stood over him, ready for anything. There was no chance that he might be able to free himself; the half-breed had used the rope for the same purpose too often to risk that.

It was Whiskers who aroused her master shortly after midnight. She made no sound, merely pushing her nose into his face and gently stirring him.

Blue Pete wakened suddenly and completely. He had learned it in the Badlands, where a moment's tardiness meant the difference between life and death. He sat up, one hand on the pinto's neck, the other reaching for his .45. Against the sky he could see Whiskers facing directly up the slope, her ears stiffly forward. He strained to hear but heard nothing.

No difference. He knew the pinto had heard, and he rose and crept to the bound man. The fellow still slept, the rope was in position.

Then, without saddle or bridle, the half-breed mounted Whiskers.

Someone, he knew, was up the slope in the darkness towards the trees. It had to be attended to, and without delay.

He did not ride towards it but set off down the slope. At first he went slowly, the light hoofs of the pinto making no sound in the soft grass. A few hundred yards only, then he struck towards the north, moving around in a great circle up the slope towards the trees.

Presently he pulled in. He could hear now what Whiskers had heard—movement along the slope above him—someone coming cautiously down towards where he had lain asleep. He rested his rifle on the saddle-horn and considered.

He knew he could not hope to get much nearer without being heard. He knew, too, that he must take the unknown riders off there in the darkness by surprise or the advantage would be theirs.

Jerking his legs out, he crashed the sides of his riding-boots into the pinto's ribs, and she was away like a shot towards the sounds.

They heard him then, but held their fire for a few moments. Then, in a panic, they shot wildly into the darkness. The bullets went wild.

And Whiskers was closing in on them, her rider bent low, rifle ready, hoping to catch some movement against the sky at which to shoot.

It happened then. Whiskers went down. So violently that Blue Pete shot over her head. The sure-footed little pinto had stepped in a badger-hole. The half-breed did not know what happened. He was unconscious.

CHAPTER XXVI

CAPTURED

WHEN his senses returned, his eyes opened into darkness, through which a glint of light shot from a distant opening. Bewildered, he tried to rise, only to discover that hands and feet were tied. For a few moments he lay, wondering if he was dreaming. Something familiar about that round spot of daylight only added to the unreality, for he had no idea at the moment how he had arrived in one of the familiar caves in the Hills.

Suddenly he remembered—the alarm in the night, the sounds in the darkness, the reckless ride, rifle-shots. Then a blank. For a time he concentrated on his body, feeling for a wound. His head was sore, but that was no bullet-wound. He twisted head and arms and legs, as much as the rope permitted. Still only that soreness on the top of his head.

Whiskers?

A sharp stab of memory, and he struggled once more to get to his feet. Had the pinto been shot; had she fallen on him as she went down? He groaned.

And into that circle of light walked Bruiser Salmon and Bill Fraser!

Bruiser came slouching along the path of light, laughing nastily. Legs braced, his fists clenched at his sides, he stood over the helpless half-breed and sneered.

"Things have changed a bit, eh, Pete?" He jerked a thumb towards Fraser. "Not the way you saw him last, eh? Bill didn't like the rope, the way you tied it, so we transferred it to you. How d'you like it?"

In the dim light Blue Pete scowled up at him. "Whar's Whiskers?"

Bruiser's smile changed to a return scowl. "That the little rat of a pinto that kept running around us in the dark?"

Blue Pete's spirits rose. Then Whiskers had not been shot! "Whiskers ain't no rat. She ain't keen on rats. Whar is she?"

"We tried to shoot her, but it was too dark. But don't worry, she's on our list next."

"Ef yuh hurt Whiskers," snarled the half-breed, "I'll cut yer liver out, yuh dirty skunk. An' I'll make it last, so yuh'll holler. I'll snick off yer ears, an' slit yer throat, an'—an' jerk off yer nails. An' how'd you like to be drug at her heels fer a while?"

For answer Bruiser kicked viciously into the half-breed's ribs. "You talk mighty big, you low-down breed. You know what I did to that old geezer you had on the mower, and——"

"Whar's the Kid?"

Bruiser laughed. "Oh, he's all right. I wouldn't hurt him for anything. He's much too valuable to me for that. He's worth a fortune. You thought you'd keep him from me, didn't you? What do you think I came out here for? Oh, you yourself were part of the reason; I can admit that now. But I need the Kid's money more. He's a friend of mine; we come from the same place back home. He knows you damned well now, and he's sick of you.

"A lot to happen in about a day, isn't it? I didn't figure on things coming so easy, but that pinto of yours helped when she piled you. A real bit of luck."

He laughed and rubbed his hands together. And again he kicked the recumbent half-breed.

He moved away, looking about the gloomy cave. "This place looks as if it's been used before. We've found another cave like that, too. Perhaps you've used it. In that case you'll feel quite at home; you'll die in your own bed, so to speak. That's how soft-hearted I am." He laughed again and slapped his friend on the back. "That sound all right, Bill?"

"Serves him damned well right," growled his companion.

Bruiser noticed a lack of enthusiasm in the tone and he slapped him again. "Cheer up, Bill. This is my job. Never knew the Hills could be so comfortable. We've been summering in another cave. Very comfortable there, too. We've had a good time, getting even."

He kicked again. "That's for what you did to Shorty. Just part-payment, of course. There's more to come. Come on, Billy, give him a salute with your boot."

Bill applied the boot, though less vigorously than his companion.

Bruiser looked down on the silent half-breed. "For myself—for that broken shoulder—I've other treatment for you. I'm not going to kill you. Oh, no. I've thought out something more satisfying than that. Know what? I'm going to leave you here, just as you are. You'll either starve to death, or —or the wolves'll enjoy a feast. Then I'll come back out in a week or two and take the ropes away, and scatter your bones. There won't be a thing to point to us. Bruiser Salmon always pays a debt—this kind with interest."

He caught his companion's arm, and they left the cave.

Hours passed. Only by the light through the entrance to the cave could Blue Pete estimate the time. He had had nothing to eat since the previous night, but he was not conscious of hunger.

Escape? He had tried to work at the ropes but realized quickly that it was hopeless. And there were no sharp stones against which he could wear the ropes through. His wrists were bound tightly behind him, and the knot of the rope about his ankles was at the front, where he could not reach it with his bound hands. Bruiser was no novice at that sort of thing.

He thought of Whiskers. At least she had escaped. Had she continued to hang around where she had fallen, or had she returned to the ranch? If the latter, someone would come to search for him. But how would they know where to look for him? He smiled. Bruiser had not thought to gag him.

Almost with the thought Bruiser returned. "Hungry?" he jeered. "I hope so. Well, here's something to fill your mouth."

He had a small stick in his hand, and he jerked the kerchief from the half-breed's neck, wrapped it about the stick, and tied it across the lips of the helpless victim. Blue Pete did not resist; he knew it would earn him nothing but kicks, and his ribs already pained.

Bruiser rose, wiped his hands. And as a parting token he kicked the half-breed in the head. "Goodnight," he jeered. "And, as you told Bill, I hope you don't sleep."

From beyond the cave Blue Pete could hear the laughing continue.

It was the day after Blue Pete left the 3-Bar-Y that Sergeant Mahon rode down the trail to the ranch house. At a leisurely lope he had come directly from town, more leisurely as he came within sight of the house. He did not wish to arouse any suspicion of the purpose of his visit.

A few yards from the crest he pulled Jupiter in abruptly. The charred remains of the burned stable stared up at him. Then Jupiter, spurred forward, tore down the slope.

Mira had heard and had come to the door.

At sight of the Sergeant she made an involuntary movement to retire. The Sergeant was the last one she wished to see at that moment. So much had happened—there was so much that should be told the Mounted Police, but it was not yet the time to tell it. Blue Pete had said so. He wanted time; he had driven that home to her and Texas, and in her anger she agreed with him. This was no time for the slow, methodical methods of the law, its uncertainties, its formal demand for proof they could not offer. Retribution,

punishment, must be assured, and Blue Pete alone could attend to that. The dead body of the old man had closed her mind to danger.

The Kid? He, too, was in her thoughts, and Blue Pete would find him.

But some of the story had to be told. The burned stable could not be ignored.

Mahon listened as she talked. He showed little surprise, but his eyes flashed with anger and excitement. "Where's Blue Pete?"

She hesitated, wondering how much she should tell. "He's after them now, Sergeant—up in the Hills, of course. That's the only place they could hide. He couldn't wait for the Mounties. They'll skip out, now that things have gone so far."

Mahon's head shook, half disapprovingly, half uncertain, wholly grave.

Mira continued defensively: "It would have taken days to get you. By that time they would have gone."

"You left Shorty Price out there where he was shot?"

"No, after Blue Pete had gone, we went out and brought the body in. I couldn't leave him there for the wolves. Blue Pete wanted to; he thought you'd like to see him where he was shot."

"Where's the old man?"

"They're both in the stable."

"I'd better see them."

He went to the stable. In a few minutes he was back. Mira had waited outside for him. His expression was very grave.

"Right in the temple," he muttered. "We may want that bullet. But they'd both better be buried right away. We can get the bodies later, if we want them."

He mounted Jupiter.

"Don't go into the Hills after dark, Sergeant," she warned. "Wait till daylight. If you like, Texas will go with you. There should be two of you. It isn't safe up there, particularly now. They'll shoot rather than be discovered."

He sat for a moment, considering. "No, I'll go alone. If there's shooting, I don't want to have to think of anyone else. . . . But you're right: I'll wait for daylight. Nothing much could happen now before then. I'll wait up there in the open. I'll be there to hear any shooting there might be. I may be two or three days. I won't just plunge into the trees and get lost, but I must look around . . . I may ride into the trees from the south; they won't be looking for anyone from that direction."

He rode away.

It was almost dark when another rider came down the slope to the ranch house. Texas, from the bunkhouse, heard and came hurriedly to see who it was.

A stranger dismounted stiffly, groaned, wiped his face, and dropped wearily to the steps before the door. Mira opened the door behind him and stared from him to the foreman.

The stranger turned and saw her. He rose awkwardly and bowed, removing his hat. "My name's Pierson, Martin Pierson. I've come on important business . . . which looks less important at the moment than the way I feel after that long ride. I haven't been on horseback since I was a kid, and that broncho knew it and took advantage of me, drat the creature! He took charge from the first. And," he added, with another groan, "the charge was mighty steep. I got lost, too, and I think he did it on purpose."

"Yes?" Mira inquired.

"Inspector Barker couldn't give me any help, but I managed to find what I wished to know. Is there anyone here you call the Kid? Is Blue Pete at home?"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE KID ACTS

IT was still daylight, but the shadows were deepening when a slight noise from beyond the entrance to the cave brought Blue Pete's eyes to focus on the spot of light.

He saw a head appear. He waited, wondering what new tortures Bruiser had for him. Then a small figure stepped into the opening.

It was the Kid.

Because of the gag Blue Pete could not speak. He didn't wish to, after what Bruiser had told him. He continued to wait. But as the Kid stepped back, he groaned through the gag. At least the Kid would not be brutal.

The small figure disappeared quickly, and Blue Pete closed his eyes and sighed. What was the use?

He opened them, to see the head once more. Then slowly the Kid entered the cave, moving forward step by step, hesitating between each as if listening.

The half-breed groaned and grunted.

It was too dark, entering from the light, for the Kid to see, but after a time he reached the half-breed and bent over him. When he recognized him, he started back.

Blue Pete lay and watched.

The Kid frowned. "Who did this?" he asked.

The half-breed could only grunt; he was angry now. It didn't matter what the Kid thought of him, all Blue Pete wanted was to be free to find Whiskers. After that—the rest.

Slowly, as if debating the wisdom of it with himself, the Kid drew a knife from a pocket and cut away the gag.

"Phew!" Blue Pete turned his bound hands towards the knife. "Git to work on them, too," he growled. "They told me I'd be here till I starved, er the wolves got me. An', gor-swizzle, I a'most begun to think they was right. This is the time a knife is better'n a six-shooter. Git it workin'."

The Kid had spoken only the three words. Suddenly he knelt and slashed away the ropes.

As the half-breed sat up, a groan burst from him. "They shure know whar to kick whar it hurts," he said. " 'Sortment o' ribs busted, I reckon. Bin gittin' wuss broke up this summer 'n ever before." He rose painfully to his feet.

The Kid stood back in silence. Then his lips parted. "It's a wonder they didn't kill you when they were at it."

"They reckoned 'twud be wuss to hev the wolves nibblin' at me."

"Are rustlers that bad always?"

Blue Pete stared at him. "Rustlers? Watchu mean?"

Suddenly he gripped the Kid's shoulder and flung him well back into the deeper darkness at the back of the cave. Then he lay down, hurriedly placing himself the way he had been, gag and all. Even the ends of the rope lay across his ankles.

A few moments later the lighter entrance was partially blanked out, and Bruiser and Fraser entered. They peered into the cave. Blue Pete groaned.

Bruiser laughed scornfully. "You know, Bill," he said to his companion, "I almost think he must be uncomfortable, perhaps even hungry, by this time. Tsch! Tsch! That's all the thanks I get for filling his mouth. But what else could one expect from a damned breed? Oh, well, the wolves are always hungry, they tell me." The sneering laugh broke out once more. "Well, Pete, pleasant dreams! And," with a snarl, "a slow, painful demise. Perhaps it'll help to know that we got your damned pinto. Shot her. That's the pleasant memory we leave with you. The little brute hung around just too long. My, what a feast the wolves'll have to-night!"

The laugh drowned the sound of the sudden movement Blue Pete made, and it was too dark to see.

The half-breed heard another sound. It was the Kid, creeping to him, to shove into his hand a gun. Blue Pete's fingers closed over it eagerly, but he did not use it.

"Now," jeered Bruiser, "we're going back to our own cave to have a nice friendly chat with that little sucker who's getting so much money for us. What a sap! Thanks for lining him up so nicely for us. It'll be worth a million or so to us. Toodle-oo! as we say back home."

When they were gone, a gasp broke from the Kid's lips. "My God, Pete, I didn't know, I didn't know. They told me—they told me——" He stopped and groaned. "Why didn't you let him have it? You could have got them both. The gun's loaded."

The half-breed rose slowly to his feet. He breathed heavily. "They—shot—Whiskers!" He reached out to steady himself against the rocky wall.

"They—they—shot th' ole gal!"

"Oh, Pete, Pete!" The Kid laid a gentle hand on his arm. "It was so—so unforgivable of me. They told me—such dreadful things about you. And—I believed them!"

The half-breed appeared not to hear. "They—shot—Whiskers!" He turned on his companion with a savage snarl. "Shure I cuda shot 'em. But shootin's too easy fer that Bruiser Salmon. I got suthin' else fer him, an'—an' it'll hurt." He made a sudden move, and his face twisted with pain.

The Kid noticed it. "Does it hurt like that, Pete—the ribs?"

Blue Pete laughed shortly. "Jes' suthin' to 'mind me not to be easy 'th 'em when I git my hands on 'em. I'll keep this gun." He shoved it in his pocket.

He started away but returned and thrust the Kid before him into the open. "I figured mebbe they'd got yuh, like they got Grampa. You b'lieved wot they toldju 'bout *me*. I b'lieved wot they tol' me 'bout *you*. We're even, Kid."

The Kid's eyes were wide and staring. "Grampa—you said! Did they—shoot him?"

"Through the head."

The Kid covered his face with his hands. "I didn't know. I was on my way out to see if I could learn what had happened."

"Wot happened out thar, Kid?"

"We heard them—or Grampa did. He wakened me and told me to clear out, and perhaps I could follow them and find out who they were. I ran off a few hundred yards and waited. I had my rifle and the revolver, but I daren't get my broncho. I knew they'd come down from the Hills, and I thought I might be able to follow in the dark, like Grampa said, after he'd scared them off. That was what he had in mind. If I found where they were hiding, then I'd go back and tell you. I—I was sure it was rustlers. So was Grampa."

He stopped and looked appealingly into the half-breed's face. "I never thought of Bruiser."

Blue Pete nodded. "I knowed it all the time."

"Why, oh, why didn't you say so?"

"'Cause 'twas my job. I didn' want nobody else to butt in. Go on."

"I heard one shot back where Grampa was. I thought it was he scaring them away. I heard them riding back to the Hills then, and I followed. I lost them, of course. I should have known I couldn't keep up with them on foot. . . . In the morning Bruiser found me wandering about here. I told him

of the rustlers—as I thought. He said he'd heard them around but had carefully avoided them."

"Wot'd he say he was doin' out here?"

The Kid dropped his eyes. "He said—he said he'd come to save me from you, Pete."

Blue Pete ran a hand through his hair. "Wot the blazes!"

"He told me he learned only a few days ago that my father was dead, leaving me everything. He said—he said you knew it long ago, that you'd learned it from that man who had the fight with Bruiser. I could believe it, because I'd seen you talking to him."

Blue Pete snorted indignantly. "Shure I knowed he was sarchin' fer someun, but 'twasn' your name. I didn' pay no 'tention then, 'cause I ain't never heerd the name before."

"You remember, Pete, I told you Longman wasn't my name. Well, Bruiser said you'd brought me out to the ranch to get your hands on the money. It all fitted in so nicely—seeing you with that lawyer; and you remember you invited me out, pressed me to come. So, Bruiser said, he had to do something to get me away. That's why I was so—so unnatural when I found you here."

He laughed shortly. "Bruiser even offered to help me find the rustlers. One of his friends set off yesterday to look for them."

"He didn' find 'em. Not Shorty he didn't. . . . Wot he found was a bit o' lead—in a place it done fer him. He's out thar now, plumb dead . . . ef the wolves ain't got him awready. He tried to shoot Mira. Nachully Tex an' me we let him hev it." He shook his head. "Shorty didn' live to larn the lesson I got fer these skunks."

He held out his hand. "Whar's that carbine yuh got?"

The Kid went to a bush and picked up a rifle from beneath it. "I left it there when I went back to the cave, after I heard you groan. I wanted to be free to use my revolver. I thought it might be the rustlers."

"Yuh durn fool yuh!" Blue Pete shook his head angrily. "Don't face no rustlers like that. It's plumb silly."

He raised the rifle and ran his eye along the barrel. He nodded.

"I lent this to yuh, so I know how it kin shoot . . . ef I need it. I ain't usin' it 'less I gotta. Thar's Whiskers to pay fer—an' Grampa . . . an' that shot at Mira."

He had turned away, but the Kid stepped nearer and pulled him around. "Your ear's bleeding, Pete."

Blue Pete felt at his ear. “Reckon it’s whar Bruiser kicked me.”

“But your ribs, too. Why don’t you wait till you’re fixed up?”

The half-breed laughed. “Do’ need no fixin’ up. They done the fixin’ I need. Busted ribs, an’ busted ear—jes’ suthin’ to add to two busted teeth an’ a busted head a while back. Then Whiskers an’ Grampa. I got lots to colleck fer.”

He had started away but stopped. “Say, Kid, d’yuh know whar them skunks is? Show me the way. Then yuh gotta scoot back to the ranch bes’ way yuh kin. I’m doin’ this alone. D’ know ef I kin colleck it all, but I’m shure goin’ to try.”

Daylight had faded within the trees as they talked, though the sky, where it was visible through the thick foliage, was still bright.

“They’re in a cave,” the Kid told him. “It’s back that way, not more than half a mile or so. It has long vines hanging over the entrance.”

The half-breed smiled and nodded. “I know the place. I bin thar lots o’ times.”

“Yes, Bruiser said it looked as if it had often been used, even by horses. There were ashes, too, and a couple of piles of dead grass.”

“Think yuh kin find yer way out?” Blue Pete asked.

The Kid nodded, then frowned. “But I want to go with you. I want to throw it in Bruiser’s teeth that——”

“Kid,” said the half-breed solemnly, “yuh ain’ goin’ to throw nothin’ in his teeth. I’ll do the throwin’, an’ I don’ want nobody to see me doin’ it. I don’ want to have to worry ’bout nobody else neither.” He pointed towards the West. “It’s durn easy to git lost in the Hills. Ef yuh keep straight for half a mile, yuh kin mebbe see the way out from thar. Jes’ keep them two trees in line. When yuh pass ’em, git ’nother in line an’ go on that way. Ef yuh hurry yuh kin do it ’fore dark. Yuh’ll strike the open jes’ above Elk Lake.

“An’ thar’s that rifle o’ Bill Fraser’s out thar somewheres. Yuh kin mebbe find it. ’Twas a bit south o’ the edge, down half-way o’ the slope. Git it ef yuh kin, an’ stick ’round whar Whiskers is an’ keep the wolves off her. Don’t leave her. . . . An’ don’t tell nobody ’bout me, an’ don’ bring ’em to look fer me. Not fer coupla days.” He grinned. “Yuh kin bring Tex then to pick up the pieces. Now git goin’. Ef it gits too dark to line up the trees, don’ go on. Yuh cud wander here fer days till yuh starve to death. Then the wolves ’ud git yuh.”

He shoved the Kid away and set off in long strides up the opposite slope.

The Kid lined up the two trees, hurried to the furthest and stopped to look behind him to get another line. Blue Pete was just disappearing into the gloom beyond the ravine.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ON THE TRAIL

BLUE PETE knew the cave well. It was his favourite resort in the Hills, a great hole in a cliff, the entrance well concealed by a hanging growth of thick vines. He wondered that it had been discovered by a casual visitor like Bruiser Salmon.

Whiskers!

The fate of the little pinto kept forcing its way into his mind, though he knew it would be better for the time being to forget it. To remember would make him reckless, and he must keep his wits about him. But now and then a low snarl of fury burst from him as he remembered, unable to blot out the shocking picture. He felt for his .45, but, of course, Bruiser had taken it. His rifle, too. It may have been his own rifle that had killed the pinto.

At the thought perspiration broke out on his forehead, and his eyes glared madly into the growing darkness.

He realized then that he had been crashing along in his anger—so different from the way he always moved about within the Hills, where every hand was almost certain to be against him. Rustlers always worked from the Hills, and any rustler would be willing to lose a herd to get him, to repay him for the havoc he had once worked in their depredations over in the Badlands, when he himself was in the same game.

There in the Hills he had fought them even more bitterly, for he was a rancher now, protecting his own herds. Also he had the backing of the Mounted Police. Several times Sergeant Mahon had been with him.

Realizing his carelessness, he stopped until he could control himself. Grimly he brought his thoughts back from Whiskers. He wondered what Bruiser's next step would be. When he returned to the cave and found the Kid was not there, would he set out to search for him, or would he just wait, in the hope that the Kid had temporarily lost himself?

But the Kid would not return. How long would Bruiser wait then?

So much had happened, so much that was serious in the eyes of the law, that Bruiser was not apt to take a chance. He might wait for a few hours, but he would flee the Hills then, leaving the Kid to his fate. Only by flight could he hope to cover his connection with the murder of Grampa, the burning of the stable, and the other crimes for which the Mounted Police would be only

too glad to hold him responsible. Then there was Shorty Price, his friend, lying dead out there on the slope.

Bruiser would not wait; that was certain.

He picked his way along cautiously now, the Indian killer, with all the cunning and ruthlessness of his mother's race.

It was quite dark now among the trees, with here and there spots of brighter tone where the fading brightness of the sky penetrated the foliage. A confusing floor of light and dark spots; but he was accustomed to it, and he knew the way.

After a time he turned to the south and, swinging round towards the north, then to the west, he dropped cautiously down a tree-lined slope into a ravine that ran northward. In its heart gurgled a small stream, and he crowded close to the cliff and worked slowly along it. At intervals he stopped to listen, but only the ripple of the stream broke the silence.

He reached the edge of a curtain of vines and stopped.

Now he could hear voices, but they were too far within the cave for the words to be audible. Cautiously he eased his way through the vines.

That was better. Only a few feet before him now he could dimly make out the dark opening of the cave. For the moment no one spoke.

A spurt of light appeared. Someone had lighted a match, and a few moments later a dull glow shone out on the overhanging vines, and the sputter of a burning pine knot reached the half-breed.

"Where the devil can he have gone to?" That was Bruiser's voice, harsh and angry, boding no good for the Kid if they found him. "I told him we'd be back soon, and to wait here. Damn little fool! I'll have something to say to him, I can tell you."

"Oh," said Fraser, "he's just gone and lost himself. He'll turn up. Tomorrow we'll find him—if he doesn't find his way back earlier."

Bruiser grunted. "I hope you're right. . . . But I'm not so sure. It sort of staggered him. It was hard for him to picture Blue Pete as I described him. What I'm afraid of is that if he's too much alone he'll think things over and perhaps question in his mind what I told him. You never know where a chap like that will land. He's not our sort, you know. Back home he was a different class. You won't understand that here. He and I would never have met."

He laughed shortly. "You couldn't imagine how it spunked me up, just to talk to him like an equal, to drink with him, to be what he thought was his friend. Well, let's hope it'll pay off. If he comes back, we'll know it will."

"If he doesn't come back?" Fraser suggested.

Bruiser swore. "Don't let's think of that . . . 'if he—doesn't—come back'."

"Maybe we should fire a gun to direct him. If he's lost——"

"Not on your life. We don't want anyone to know we're here. Someone might be out looking for Blue Pete. A rifle-shot might carry a long way in the dark."

"You should 'a' let the breed have it. Then nobody'd find out what happened, even if they found him," Fraser protested.

"They'd see he was shot. They'd find the bullet and maybe trace it to my gun. No, in a week or two I'll get back here and take the ropes. The wolves'll have found him by that time; there won't be much else to find."

There was silence for a time. The pine knot sputtered and hissed. Blue Pete could almost see them listening for the Kid to return.

Then Bruiser said: "If the Kid did begin to doubt what I told him, and has gone back to the ranch, we'll be in trouble. I'm worried. . . . One thing, nobody'll find the breed there. The Kid won't know he came into the Hills. And if the breed isn't at the ranch, how could the Kid be sure I didn't tell the truth? As I look at it, we're safe, no matter what happens. . . . That is, if we clear out without wasting more time. That's the thing for us to do. No matter if the Kid tells all he knows, we can say we were hunting wolves or something. . . . Or we can say we were looking for him, because I'd learned of the death of his father. That's what we told him.

"Yes, to-morrow morning, just as soon as it's light, we'll clear out. Now let's have something to eat—and I'm getting damned tired of the grub. By the way, take a look at the horses before we settle down."

Blue Pete slid back through the vines. He heard Fraser leave the cave, the rattle of stones as he moved in the darkness along the side of the stream. In a few minutes he was back.

"The hobbles had almost worked loose on your broncho," he said. "God, I'd hate to be left on foot in this place. I'd be in a panic, I tell you. It must be awful to get lost here, and without a horse I know I would. It must be twenty or thirty miles to the nearest ranch—unless it's the 3-Bar-Y. I don't think we'd like to show up there," he said, with a short laugh.

Bruiser's thoughts, during his companion's absence, had evidently been unpleasant, for he swore viciously. "What frightens me," he said, "is Shorty. They know he's one of the crowd. They'll ask how he came to be out here—the Mounties will. It's a good thing the breed isn't alive to tell what he knows . . . I wish we'd got there earlier, to see just what happened. He must

have tried something crazy or they wouldn't have dared to shoot him. . . . If we could have got his body, too!"

A moment later he uttered an exclamation of dismay. "Lord, Bill, I only got two cartridges left for my rifle. I didn't know I used so many. It's that damned pinto."

"Grampa got one of them," said Bill, and laughed.

"You just keep your mouth closed about that," snarled Bruiser. "Have you any shells?"

"The breed took them all. Say, we should have looked about for my rifle when we were out there. I know exactly where it was; I didn't think of it when you cut me loose."

"Well," declared Bruiser gloomily, "the sooner we get out of this, the better. I didn't have any idea we'd get ourselves into this mess when we came. I just wanted to get even with that breed. Now the Mounties'll be in on it. Damn you!" he grated. "Why did you have to go out there and let the breed get you? That's what made a mess of the whole thing."

"I didn't shoot Grampa," his companion reminded him.

There was the sound of movement, then Fraser cried out: "Cut it out, Bruiser, cut it out! I was just fooling. What you got to get so mad about? We're both in it to the hilt, but—but——" Evidently he thought it better not to complete the sentence.

For a long time neither spoke. There was the rustle of dry grass as they apparently settled down for the night.

Bruiser broke the silence later: "I'm scared stiff, Bill."

Blue Pete crept away. He had to think things out anew. Of course he could creep in there while they slept and kill them both, but that would not pay for Whiskers and Grampa. Sudden death was too good for Bruiser Salmon. Something more than swift death must pay for what he had done—Whiskers and Grampa.

He lay down just outside the vines, near enough to be wakened by any movement outside the cave. He slept.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CHASE

IT was still quite dark where he lay, but up through the trees the sky was rosy with the rising sun, when he wakened suddenly with the feeling that he should be on guard.

Someone had come quietly from the cave, someone trying hard to make no noise.

With his keen ears Blue Pete was able to follow every move as soft footsteps moved away along the ravine towards the north where the bronchos fed. One of the pair was sneaking away, and anxious not to waken his companion.

He rose and pushed through the vines, following them to the other end. It was too dark to see who it was, for the trees were thicker there. But he had to know. The ravine curved away slightly towards the west where the unknown was picking his way along now, and Blue Pete slid along behind, keeping close to the cliff.

At the curve he looked out. Leather creaked. Someone was saddling a broncho.

Still he could not see who it was. If it was Fraser, that would suit his purpose better than he had expected: Bruiser would be alone back in the cave. He smiled at the thought, a grim twisting of the lips.

And then the broncho started away. Both bronchos! That would be Fraser's joke on Bruiser. Bruiser would be left alone in the Hills without a mount.

But as the bronchos climbed the slope, a low oath returned to the half-breed. Bruiser's voice!

It was too late to stop him—too late to do more than to fall in behind and wait for daylight.

The bronchos picked their way through the trees. Blue Pete followed, his teeth set together, his rifle in the bend of his left arm. Up the bank and away, dodging trees and bushes, staking his own eyes against those of the bronchos. Nevertheless he must move cautiously. The brittle snap of a twig beneath his feet would warn the bronchos, even if Bruiser failed to hear it. He must try to keep up.

The bronchos knew the shortest route to the open prairie and kept to it, and Bruiser was wise enough to leave them to follow it. They hated the forest; they had heard the wolves.

Panting with anxiety, not with fatigue, Blue Pete managed to keep within hearing. Then a thought came to him, and he turned to the west and ran. He could move more swiftly now, and he need not be so careful. He might thus be able to reach the edge of the trees before Bruiser and waylay him.

He made good time, for he knew that end of the Hills well, and he ran with the sureness and soundlessness of one accustomed to a life of danger. Half an hour passed. Surely he was ahead now. He waited, then, listening, scarcely breathing.

For a time he heard nothing, and he commenced to worry, muttering to himself. Bruiser must have lost his way.

Then, some distance to the east, he heard him. A small branch snapped, and Bruiser, startled by the sound, swore.

Blue Pete ran. Close at hand was the last of the trees, and beyond lay the open prairie. If Bruiser reached the open, he would ride fast. He could not be stopped. Even now he could be heard urging the broncho on, driven by a mounting terror.

Perhaps it was the broncho heard the half-breed first, for it broke into a run. The second broncho had evidently been set free. Fraser would never find it; and he had said he would be in a panic without a horse—would probably lose himself and die in the Hills.

The prairie opened up, and the broncho shot out and tore down the slope. Bruiser was kicking it on now.

The half-breed came from the trees five hundred yards away.

It was light enough out there for both to see. Bruiser glanced back over his shoulder; and he dug his heels more fiercely into the broncho's ribs.

The half-breed drew a long breath. He raised his rifle. Five hundred yards, and a swiftly moving target. It did not disturb him. He pulled the trigger.

The broncho gave a great leap and crashed to its knees. For a moment it struggled to regain its feet, screaming with terror and pain, then slowly it rolled to its side and lay still.

Blue Pete ran down the slope.

CHAPTER XXX

THE FINAL SETTLEMENT

BRUISER had not been injured. He slid around the dead broncho, leaned his rifle on its side, and fired.

The bullet whistled past the oncoming half-breed. He appeared not to have heard it. A second shot. A jab of pain shot through his left arm, but he kept on, crouched a little now, automatically decreasing the target.

Bruiser's rifle still covered him; and he was so near now that he could not miss.

Suddenly Blue Pete slowed down to a walk. He straightened. He laughed. He remembered—last night—from the cave: "I only got two cartridges left for my rifle." A few yards only between them now. He laughed again. It was not a pleasant laugh. He flung his rifle away.

"Yuh dirty skunk," he snarled, "yuh gotta fight it out now, an' no other skunks to help yuh. An' anythin' goes. I bin waitin' fer this all these weeks. Thar's Whiskers to pay fer, too, an' Grampa. An' it's goin' to be hard to pay —fer you."

Bruiser clambered to his feet, the rifle barrel caught in both hands, waiting. He stepped away from the dead broncho, and the rifle swung back. His face was white, but his teeth bared and clenched together. He knew it was a fight to the death.

It was then that Blue Pete discovered that his left arm was dead, for he could not raise it. That second bullet! It made no difference; he still had one good arm.

He moved nearer, circling Bruiser and the dead broncho, getting the rising sun in Bruiser's eyes. Suddenly he stepped forward.

The rifle came viciously swinging at him. But he had watched for it and stepped swiftly back. Then, before it could be drawn back, he leaped. This time he did not stop.

Back in the Hills Fraser wakened to a deserted cave. He rubbed his eyes, blinked towards the brighter circle that was the entrance, and sat up. He yawned aloud.

"Hey, Bruiser, it's time we got started. It must be daylight out on the prairie."

When there was no answer, he reached over on his knees and slapped down where his companion had slept. The pile of dead grass was empty.

He rose, dazed a little, and moved towards the entrance. It was still only dim daylight outside, but the sky was bright overhead. Still in a slight daze he stumbled along the ravine.

The horses were gone!

He stood and cursed.

Only a few moments, then he set off, running. He was terrified, but even in his panic he managed to choose the most direct course. Bruiser had run out on him, had left him to take the blame for everything! Bruiser would pay for this, pay dearly. He would tell everything to the Mounted Police. After all it was Bruiser had done all the shooting. . . . But could he prove it?

He reached the edge of the trees. Where to go then—what to do?

Suddenly he stopped. Out below him and to his right there was life—movement. His eyes focused hopefully on it. Two men, facing each other—and a broncho lying dead beside them! The half-breed! And they had left him in a cave only a few hours before to be food for the wolves! The half-breed free! Then all their precautions were useless. The half-breed would tell the whole story!

The other? That was Bruiser.

He knew what he had to do. No matter what Bruiser had done, the half-breed must not live to tell. He set off down the slope at top speed.

"Stop where you are!"

It came from behind, an order he dare not disobey, and he turned and stared.

It was the Kid—mounted on Whiskers! And the Kid had a rifle in his hands that pointed threateningly.

"I've been following you," the Kid told him. "This is your rifle. I found it—and Whiskers, that you told Blue Pete you'd shot. That's something more for you and Bruiser to answer to him for, and I hope the settlement isn't long delayed. If you move now, it'll be settled right away, so far as you're concerned. My God!"

He had seen the struggle far down the slope. "What—what——" Then he was off at full speed, leaving Fraser staring after him.

Bewildered for a moment, Fraser faded back into the trees.

Sergeant Mahon had passed around the southern end of the lake and had entered the forest near the end. As he rode, a great anxiety grew within him. Blue Pete, his special friend, was somewhere in the Hills, and with murder in his heart. None knew better than he how ruthless the half-breed would be for the murder of the old man. The Indian in him, a keen sense of justice, the primitive instinct for immediate punishment, without waiting for the law, would direct him straight to the one fitting punishment he knew—death.

If only he could be in time to prevent that! Then they could go on together to run down Bruiser and his gang under the immunity of the uniform.

It was dark by the time he reached the trees. Useless to continue further—and dangerous, as Mira had said. He dismounted, unsaddled Jupiter and hobbled him, and lay down to sleep.

He was up and away with daylight. At first he worked directly into the Hills, but he quickly decided to remain near the edge, so that he could move more quickly towards any sound. If there was shooting he would hear it. Skirting the edge, he circled round the western end of the forest.

Suddenly Jupiter's head turned inward towards the trees, and his ears shot forward. Mahon pulled in and listened, but he could hear nothing. Nevertheless he knew that Jupiter had heard. The broncho even raised his head to whinny, but a sharp blow on the nose stopped him.

Mahon left him to choose his course, though still he heard nothing.

Then he noticed how quiet it was. That in itself told him much. It meant that somewhere off to his right, within the trees, strange life moved—probably human life, silencing the wild life.

Mahon tugged at the reins—jerked—urging Jupiter forward. A great excitement swelled within him.

Then he saw. They had come to the edge of the trees, and Jupiter shot into the open—into the sunlight.

Half a mile away, just beyond the trees, at the top of the slope, were two men, one of them mounted. And the mounted man had the other covered with a rifle.

He struck his boots against Jupiter's sides and set off towards them.

At that moment the mounted man turned and raced down the slope, while the other slunk back into the trees.

Down the slope was another group—two men—and a broncho lying dead. One of the men swung a rifle at the other, missed, and was seized.

He did not stop to recognize them. It was a battle of some kind, and he knew that Blue Pete was in it, knew it, though the pair down the slope were clasped together.

Blue Pete's leap had carried him against Bruiser, and his good right arm wound mercilessly about Bruiser's neck, his shoulder pressed upward against Bruiser's throat—pressed—pressed. And the head above the neck was forced back further and further as the arm tightened, and the body beneath his chin worked ruthlessly upward. The arm about the neck was like steel—a steel band that kept tightening.

Round and round they swung, but their position, each to the other, did not alter—except that Bruiser's face was forced further and further upward, as that crushing shoulder pressed against his throat.

Bruiser's right fist came up blindly. He could not see, for his head was forced upward, making his blows blind. But they reached the half-breed's face again and again, and blood gushed over the dark skin and over the flailing fist.

As they turned, Blue Pete's bloody face was directed up the slope. And then he saw—Whiskers! Whiskers was tearing down the slope towards him. Whiskers that he had thought dead!

He stared. He saw nothing else, felt nothing, even that swinging fist that beat horribly against his mashed nose. That pressing arm did not flinch, and Bruiser's head kept moving upward and back.

Then Bruiser screamed. He could not breathe. Something was going to snap. A tearing agony at the back of his neck drew scream after scream from his stifled throat.

The Kid came nearer—stopped—leaned down to look into Blue Pete's face. But he did not interfere. He only turned away, to hold his hands over his eyes. This was the half-breed's chance, his fight.

Mahon came racing down. Long before he reached the struggling pair he knew. And he did not speak.

Just as he reached them and stopped, Bruiser's screams stopped abruptly. Something seemed to snap.

"Let him go now, Pete," Mahon ordered quietly, and he realized that he had been holding his breath. "You had to kill him. It was self-defence."

Blue Pete released his hold. His eyes had never left Whiskers. Bruiser's limp body dropped and lay beside the dead broncho. For a moment the half-

breed turned to look at it. Then slowly his left hand rose to his face and dragged loose a small piece of adhesive.

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[The end of *Blue Pete and The Kid (Blue Pete #18)*, by Luke Allen (ps. of William Lacey Amy).]