

Square Deal Sanderson eBook

Square Deal Sanderson

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Square Deal Sanderson

CHAPTER I

THE NORTH RAID

An hour before, Deal Sanderson had opened his eyes. He had been comfortably wrapped in his blanket; his head had been resting on a saddle seat. His sleep over, he had discovered that the saddle seat felt hard to his cheek. In changing his position he had awakened. His face toward the east, he had seen a gray streak widening on the horizon—a herald of the dawn.

Sanderson found what seemed to be a softer spot on the saddle, snuggled himself in the blanket, and went to sleep again. Of course he had not neglected to take one sweeping glance around the camp while awake, and that one glance had convinced him that the camp was in order.

The fire had long since gone out—there was a heap of white ashes to mark the spot where it had been. His big brown horse—Streak—unencumbered by rope or leather, was industriously cropping the dew-laden blades of some bunch-grass within a dozen yards of him; and the mighty desolation of the place was as complete as it had seemed when he had pitched his camp the night before.

Sanderson reveled in the luxury of complete idleness. He grinned at the widening streak of dawn as he closed his eyes. There would be no vitriolic-voiced cook to bawl commands at him *this* morning. And no sour-faced range boss to issue curt orders.

In an hour or so—perhaps in two hours—Sanderson would crawl out of his blanket, get his own breakfast, and ride northeastward. He was a free agent now, and would be until he rode in to the Double A to assume his new duties.

Judging by the light, Sanderson had slept a full hour when he again awakened. He stretched, yawned, and grinned at the brown horse.

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"You're still a-goin' it, Streak, eh?" he said, aloud. "I'd say you've got a medium appetite. There's times when I envy you quite considerable."

Reluctantly Sanderson sat up and looked around. He had pitched his camp at the edge of a thicket of alder and aspen near a narrow stream of water in a big arroyo. Fifty feet from the camp rose the sloping north wall of the arroyo, with some dwarf spruce trees fringing its edge. Sanderson had taken a look at the section of country visible from the arroyo edge before pitching his camp. There were featureless sand hills and a wide stretch of desert.

Sanderson started to get to his feet. Then he sat down again, stiffening slowly, his right hand slipping quickly to the butt of the pistol at his right hip. His chin went forward, his lips straightened, and his eyes gleamed with cold alertness.

A horseman had appeared from somewhere in the vast space beyond the arroyo edge. Sanderson saw the outlines of animal and rider as they appeared for an instant, partly screened from him by the trees and undergrowth on the arroyo edge. Then horse and rider vanished, going northward, away from the arroyo, silently, swiftly.

Schooled to caution by his long experience in a section of country where violence and sudden death were not even noteworthy incidents of life, and where a man's safety depended entirely upon his own vigilance and wisdom, Sanderson got up carefully, making no noise, slipped around the thicket of alder, crouched behind a convenient rock, huge and jagged, and waited.

Perhaps the incident was closed. The rider might be innocent of any evil intentions; he might by this time be riding straight away from the arroyo. That was for Sanderson to determine.

The rider of the horse—a black one—had seemed to be riding stealthily, leaning forward over the black horse's mane as though desirous of concealing his movements as much as possible. From whom?

It had seemed that he feared Sanderson would see him; that he had misjudged his distance from the gully—thinking he was far enough away to escape observation, and yet not quite certain, crouching in the saddle to be on the safe side in case he was nearer than he had thought.

Sanderson waited—for only a few minutes actually, but the time seemed longer. Then, just when he was mentally debating an impulse to climb to the top of the gully, to see if the rider was in sight, he heard a sound as of a heavy body crashing through some underbrush, and saw two riders skirting the edge of the arroyo near him.

They halted their horses back of the spruce trees near the arroyo edge. The rank undergrowth in the timber prevented them seeing Sanderson's horse—which was further concealed by the thicket of alder. The men, however, did not look into the arroyo. Their attention and interest appeared to be centered upon the actions of the first horseman. Sitting erect in their saddles, they shaded their eyes with their hands and gazed northward.

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After a short look, one of the men laughed, unpleasantly.

"Sneakin'—he is," said the one who laughed. "Knows we're campin' on his trail, an' reckons on givin' us the slip. I never thought Bill would go back on his friends thataway. We'll make him sweat, damn him!"

The other cursed, also. "Hoggin' it, he is," he said. "I ain't never trusted him. He won't divvy, eh? Well, he won't need it where he's goin'."

Both laughed. Then one said, coldly: "Well, I reckon we won't take chances on losin' him again—like we did last night. We'll get him right now!"

They urged their horses away from the edge of the gully. Sanderson could hear the clatter of hoofs, receding. He had heard, plainly, all the conversation between the two.

There was a grin of slight relief on Sanderson's face. The men were not aiming at him, but at the first rider. It was clear that all were concerned in a personal quarrel which was no concern of Sanderson's. It was also apparent to Sanderson that the two men who had halted at the edge of the arroyo were not of the type that contributed to the peace and order of the country.

Plainly, they were of the lower strata of riffraff which had drifted into the West to exact its toll from a people who could not claim the protection of a law that was remote and impotent.

Sanderson suspected that the first rider had been concerned in some lawless transaction with the other two, and that the first rider had decamped with the entire spoils. That much was indicated by the words of the two. Dire punishment for the first man was imminent.

Sanderson had no sympathy for the first rider. He felt, though, a slight curiosity over the probable outcome of the affair, and so, working rapidly, he broke camp, threw saddle and bridle on the white horse, strapped his slicker to the cantle of the saddle, and rode the brown horse up the slope of the arroyo, taking the direction in which the three men had disappeared.

CHAPTER II

A MAN'S CURIOSITY

By the time Sanderson urged the brown horse up the crest of the slope, the men he had determined to follow were far out in the desert. Sanderson could see them, though the distance was considerable, riding the crest of a ridge, directly northeastward. As that

was following the general direction in which Sanderson wanted to travel he was highly pleased.

“They’re company,” he told himself as he rode; “an’ I’ve been a heap lonesome.”

The men were not traveling fast. At times, when the first rider was compelled to traverse high ground, Sanderson could see him—horse and rider faintly outlined against the sky. Sanderson would note the figure of the first rider, then watch the point at which the first rider appeared until the others reached that point. Then, noting the elapsed time, he could estimate the distance at which the pursuers followed.

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"I reckon they're gainin' on him," was Sanderson's mental comment when an hour later he saw the first rider appear for a moment on the sky line, vanish, reappear for an instant, only to be followed within a few minutes by the figures of the other men.

Sanderson was closing up the space that separated him from the two men, and by that medium he knew they were not traveling rapidly, for the brown horse was loping slowly. Thus he knew that the first man was not yet aware that he was being followed.

But some time later to Sanderson's ears was borne the faint, muffled report of a firearm, and he smiled solemnly.

"That first guy will know, now," he told himself. Sanderson kept steadily on. In half an hour he heard half a dozen rifle reports in quick succession, He could see the smoke puffs of the weapons, and he knew the pursuit was over.

The second riders had brought the first to bay in a section of broken country featured by small, rock-strewn hills. By watching the smoke balloon upward, Sanderson could determine the location of the men.

It seemed to Sanderson that the two had separated, one swinging westward and the other eastward, in an endeavor to render hazardous any concealment the other might find. It was the old game of getting an enemy between two fires, and Sanderson's lips curved with an appreciative grin as he noted the fact.

"Old-timers," he said.

It was not Sanderson's affair. He told himself that many times as he rode slowly forward. To his knowledge the country was cursed with too many men of the type the two appeared to be; and as he had no doubt that the other man was of that type also, they would be doing the country a service were they to annihilate one another.

Sanderson, though, despite his conviction, felt a pulse of sympathy for the first rider. It was that emotion which impelled him to keep going cautiously forward when, by all the rules of life in that country, he should have stood at a distance to allow the men to fight it out among themselves.

Sanderson's interest grew as the fight progressed. When he had approached as far as he safely could without endangering his own life and that of Streak, he dismounted at the bottom of a small hill, trailed the reins over Streak's head and, carrying his rifle, made his way stealthily to the crest of the hill. There, concealed behind an irregularly shaped boulder, he peered at the combatants.

He had heard several reports while dismounting and ascending the hill, and by the time he looked over the crest he saw that the battle was over. He saw the three men grouped about a cluster of rocks on a hill not more than a hundred yards distant. Two of

the men were bending over the third, who was stretched out on his back, motionless. It appeared to Sanderson that the two men were searching the pockets of the other, for they were fumbling at the other's clothing and, seemingly, putting something into their own pockets.

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Sanderson scowled. Now that the fight was over, he was at liberty to investigate; the ethics of life in the country did not forbid that—though many men had found it as dangerous as interference.

Sanderson stood up, within full view of the two men, and hailed them.

“What’s bitin’ you guys?” he said.

The two men wheeled, facing Sanderson. The latter’s answer came in the shape of a rifle bullet, the weapon fired from the hip of one of the men—a snapshot.

Sanderson had observed the movement almost as soon as it had begun, and he threw himself head-long behind the shelter of the rock at his side as the bullet droned over his head.

If Sanderson had entertained any thought of the two men being representatives of the law, trailing a wrongdoer, that thought would have been dispelled by the action of the men in shooting at him. He was now certain the men were what he had taken them to be, and he grinned felinely as he squirmed around until he got into a position from which he could see them. But when he did get into position the men had vanished.

However, Sanderson was not misled. He knew they had secreted themselves behind some of the rocks in the vicinity, no doubt to wait a reasonable time before endeavoring to discover whether the bullet had accomplished its sinister object.

Sanderson’s grin grew broader. He had the men at a disadvantage. Their horses, he had observed before calling to them, were in a little depression at the right—and entirely out of reach of the men.

To get to them they would have to expose themselves on an open stretch between the spot where the horses were concealed and the hill on which they were secreted, and on the open stretch they would be fair targets for Sanderson.

The men had brought Sanderson into the fight, and he no longer had any scruples. He was grimly enjoying himself, and he laid for an hour, flat on his stomach behind the rock, his rifle muzzle projecting between two medium-sized stones near the base of the large rock, his eye trained along the barrel, watching the crest of the hill on which the men were concealed.

The first man was dead. Sanderson could see him, prone, motionless, rigid.

Evidently the two men were doubtful. Certainly they were cautious. But at the end of an hour their curiosity must have conquered them, for Sanderson, still alert and watchful, saw a dark blot slowly appear from around the bulging side of a rock.

The blot grew slowly larger, until Sanderson saw that it appeared to be the crown of a hat. That it was a hat he made certain after a few seconds of intent scrutiny; and that it was a hat without any head in it he was also convinced, for he held his fire. An instant later the hat was withdrawn. Then it came out again, and was held there for several seconds.

Sanderson grinned. "I reckon they think I'm a yearlin'," was his mental comment.

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There was another long wait. Sanderson could picture the two men arguing the question that must deeply concern them: “Which shall be the first to show himself?”

“I’d bet a million they’re drawin’ straws,” grinned Sanderson.

Whether that method decided the question Sanderson never knew. He knew, however, that a hat was slowly coming into view around a side of the rock, and he was positive that this time there was a head in the hat. He could not have told now he knew there was a head in the hat, but that was his conviction.

The hat appeared slowly, gradually taking on definite shape in Sanderson’s eyes, until, with a cold grin, he noted some brown flesh beneath it, and a section of dark beard.

Sanderson did not fire, then. The full head followed the hat, then came a man’s shoulders. Nothing happened. The man stepped from behind the rock and stood out in full view. Still nothing happened.

The man grinned.

“I reckon we got him, Cal,” he said. His voice was gloating. “I reckoned I’d got him; he tumbled sorta offish—like it had got him in the guts. That’s what I aimed for, anyway. I reckon he done suffered some, eh?” He guffawed, loudly.

Then the other man appeared. He, too, was grinning.

“I reckon we’ll go see. If you got him where you said you got him, I reckon he done a lot of squirming. Been followin’ us—you reckon?”

They descended the slope of the hill, still talking. Evidently, Sanderson’s silence had completely convinced them that they had killed him.

But halfway down the hill, one of the men, watching the rock near Sanderson as he walked, saw the muzzle of Sanderson’s rifle projecting from between the two rocks.

For the second time since the appearance of Sanderson on the scene the man discharged his rifle from the hip, and for the second time he missed the target.

Sanderson, however, did not miss. His rifle went off, and the man fell without a sound. The other, paralyzed from the shock, stood for an instant, irresolute, then, seeming to discover from where Sanderson’s bullet had come, he raised his rifle.

Sanderson’s weapon crashed again. The second man shuddered, spun violently around, and pitched headlong down the slope.

Sanderson came from behind the rock, grinning mirthlessly. He knew where his bullets had gone, and he took no precautions when he emerged from his hiding place and approached the men.

“That’s all, for you, I reckon,” he said.

Leaving them, he went to the top of the hill and bent over the other man. A bullet fairly in the center of the man’s forehead told eloquently of the manner of his death.

The man’s face was not of so villainous a cast as the others. There were marks of a past refinement on it; as there were also lines of dissipation.

“I reckon this guy was all wool an’ a yard wide, in his time,” said Sanderson; “but from the looks of him he was tryin’ to live it down. Now, we’ll see what them other guys was goin’ through his clothes for.”

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Sanderson knelt beside the man. From an inner pocket of the latter's coat he drew a letter—faded and soiled, as though it had been read much. There was another letter—a more recent one, undoubtedly, for the paper was in much better condition.

Sanderson looked at both envelopes, and finally selected the most soiled one. He hesitated an instant, and then withdrew the contents and read:

MR. WILLIAM BRANSFORD,

Tucson, Arizona.

Dear brother will: The last time I heard from you, you were in Tucson. That was ten years ago, and it seems an awful long time. I suppose it is too much to hope that you are still there, but it is that hope which is making me write this letter.

Will, father is dead. He died yesterday, right after I got here. He asked for you. Do you know what that means? It means he wanted you to come back, Will. Poor father, he didn't really mean to be obstinate, you know.

I shall not write any more, for I am not sure that you will ever read it. But if you do read it, you'll come back, won't you—or write? Please.

Your loving sister,

Mary Bransford.

The Double A Ranch.

Union County, New Mexico.

Sanderson finished reading the letter. Then folding it, he shoved it back into the envelope and gravely drew out the other letter. It bore a later date and was in the same handwriting:

MR. WILLIAM BRANSFORD,

Tucson, Arizona.

Dear brother will: I was so delighted to get your letter. And I am so eager to see you. It has been such a long, long time, hasn't it? Fifteen years, isn't it? And ten years since I even got a letter from you!

I won't remember you, I am sure, for I am only nineteen now, and you were only fifteen when you left home. And I suppose you have grown big and strong, and have a deep, booming voice and a fierce-looking mustache. Well, I shall love you, anyway. So hurry and come home.

I am sending you a telegraph money order for one thousand dollars, for from the tone of your letter it seems things are not going right with you. Hurry home, won't you?

With love,

Your sister,

Mary.

Sanderson finished reading the letter. He meditated silently, turning it over and over in his hands. The last letter was dated a month before. Evidently Bransford had not hurried.

Sanderson searched all the other pockets, and discovered nothing of further interest. Then he stood for a long time, looking down at the man's face, studying it, his own face expressing disapproval.

"Mebbe it's just as well that he didn't get to the Double A," he thought, noting the coarse, brutal features of the other.

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"If a girl's got ideals it's sometimes a mighty good thing the real guy don't come along to disabuse them. William ain't never goin' to get to the Double A."

He buried the body in a gully, then he returned to the other men.

Upon their persons he found about nine hundred dollars in bills of small denomination. It made a bulky package, and Sanderson stored it in his slicker. Then he mounted Streak, turned the animal's head toward the northeast, and rode into the glaring sunshine of the morning.

CHAPTER III

"Square" Deal Sanderson

Three days later, still traveling northeastward, Sanderson felt he must be close to the Double A. Various signs and conclusions were convincing.

In the first place, he had been a week on the trail, and estimating his pace conservatively, that time should bring him within easy riding distance of the place he had set out to seek. There were so many miles to be covered in so many days, and Streak was a prince of steady travelers.

Besides, yesterday at dusk, Sanderson had passed through Las Vegas. Careful inquiry in the latter town had brought forth the intelligence that the Double A was a hundred and seventy-five miles northeastward.

"Country's short of cow-hands," said Sanderson's informer. "If you're needin' work, an' forty a month looks good to you, why, I'd admire to take you on. I'm German, of the Flyin' U, down the Cimarron a piece."

"Me an' work has disagreed," grinned Sanderson; and he rode on, meditating humorously over the lie.

Work and Sanderson had never disagreed. Indeed, Sanderson had always been convinced that work and he had agreed too well in the past. Except for the few brief holidays that are the inevitable portion of the average puncher who is human enough to yearn for the relaxation of a trip to "town" once or twice a year, Sanderson and work had been inseparable for half a dozen years.

Sanderson's application had earned him the reputation of being "reliable" and "trustworthy"—two terms that, in the lexicon of the cow-country, were descriptive of virtues not at all common. In Sanderson's case they were deserved—more, to them might have been added another, "straight."



Sanderson's trip northeastward had resulted partly from a desire to escape the monotony of old scenes and familiar faces; and partly because one day while in "town" he had listened attentively to a desert nomad, or "drifter," who had told a tale of a country where water was to be the magic which would open the gates of fortune to the eager and serious-minded.

"That country's goin' to blossom!" declared the Drifter. "An' the guy which gets in on the ground floor is goin' to make a clean-up! They's a range there—the Double A—which is right in the middle of things. A guy named Bransford owns her—an' Bransford's on his last legs. He's due to pass out *pronto*, or I'm a gopher! He's got a daughter there—Mary—which is a pippin, an' no mistake! But she's sure got a job on her hands, if the ol' man croaks.

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"They's a boy, somewheres, which ain't no good I've heard, an' if the girl hangs on she's due for an uphill climb. She'll have a fight on her hands too, with Alva Dale—a big rough devil of a man with a greedy eye on the whole country—an' the girl, too, I reckon—if my eyes is any good. I've seen him look at her—oh, man! If she was any relation to me I'd climb Dale's frame sure as shootin'!"

There had been more—the Drifter told a complete story. And Sanderson had assimilated it without letting the other know he had been affected.

Nor had he mentioned to Burroughs—his employer—a word concerning the real reason for his desire to make a change. Not until he had written to Bransford, and received a reply, did he acquaint Burroughs with his decision to leave. As a matter of fact, Sanderson had delayed his leave-taking for more than a month after receiving Bransford's letter, being reluctant, now that his opportunity had come, to sever those relations that, he now realized, had been decidedly pleasant.

"I'm sure next to what's eatin' you," Burroughs told him on the day Sanderson asked for his "time." "You're yearnin' for a change. It's a thing that gets hold of a man's soul—if he's got one. They ain't no fightin' it. I'm sure appreciatin' what you've done for me, an' if you decide to come back any time, you'll find me a-welcomin' you with open arms, as the sayin' is. You've got a bunch of coin comin'—three thousand. I'm addin' a thousand to that—makin' her good measure. That'll help you to start something."

Sanderson started northeastward without any illusions. A product of the Far Southwest, where the ability to live depended upon those natural, protective instincts and impulses which civilization frowns upon, Sanderson was grimly confident of his accomplishments—which were to draw a gun as quickly as any other man had ever drawn one, to shoot as fast and as accurately as the next man—or a little faster and more accurately; to be alert and self-contained, to talk as little as possible; to listen well, and to deal fairly with his fellow-men.

That philosophy had served Sanderson well. It had made him feared and respected throughout Arizona; it had earned him the sobriquet "Square"—a title which he valued.

Sanderson could not have told, however, just what motive had impelled him to decide to go to the Double A. No doubt the Drifter's story regarding the trouble that was soon to assail Mary Bransford had had its effect, but he preferred to think he had merely grown tired of life at the Pig-Pen—Burrough's ranch—and that the Drifter's story, coming at the instant when the yearning for a change had seized upon him, had decided him.

He had persisted in that thought until after the finding of the letters in William Bransford's pockets; and then, staring down at the man's face, he had realized that he had been deluding himself, and, that he was journeying northeastward merely because he was curious to see the girl whom the Drifter had so vividly described.

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Away back in his mind, too, there might have been a chivalrous desire to help her in the fight that was to come with Alva Dale. He had felt his blood surge hotly at the prospect of a fight, with Mary Bransford as the storm center; a passion to defend her had got into his soul; and a hatred for Alva Dale had gripped him.

Whatever the motive, he had come, and since he had looked down into William Bransford's face, he had become conscious of a mighty satisfaction. The two men who had trailed Bransford had been cold-blooded murderers, and he had avenged Bransford completely. That could not have happened if he had not yielded to the impulse to go to the Double A.

He was glad he had decided to go. He was now the bearer of ill news, but he was convinced that the girl would want to know about her brother—and he must tell her. And now, too, he was convinced that his journey to the Double A had been previously arranged—by Fate, or whatever Providence controls the destinies of humans.

And that conviction helped him to fight down the sense of guilty embarrassment that had afflicted him until now—the knowledge that he was deliberately and unwarrantedly going to the Double A to interfere, to throw himself into a fight with persons with whom he had no previous acquaintance, for no other reason than that his chivalrous instincts had prompted him.

And yet his thoughts were not entirely serious as he rode. The situation had its humorous side.

"Mostly nothin' turns out as folks figure in the beginnin'," he told himself. "Otherwise everything would be cut an' dried, an' there wouldn't be a heap of fun in the world—for butters-in. An' folks which scheme an' plot, tryin' to get things that belong to other folks, would have it too easy. There's got to be folks that wander around, nosin' into places that they shouldn't. Eh, Streak?"

Streak did not answer, and Sanderson rode on, smiling gravely.

He made a dry camp that night in a sea of mesquite at the edge of a sand plain, although, he knew he could not now be far from the Double A range. And in the early light of the morning he found his judgment vindicated, for stretching before him, still in a northeasterly direction, he saw a great, green-brown level sweeping away from his feet and melting into some rimming mountains—a vast, natural basin of gigantic proportions.

Sanderson was almost at the end of his journey, it was early morning, and he was in no hurry. He leisurely prepared his breakfast, sitting on a flat rock as he ate, and scanning the basin.

Mere bigness had never impressed Sanderson; the West had shown him greater vistas than this mammoth basin. And yet his eyes glowed as he looked out and down at the country that lay, slumbering in the pure white light of the dawn.

He saw, dotting the floor of the basin, the roofs of houses. From his height they seemed to be close together, but Sanderson was not misled, and he knew that they were separated by miles of virgin soil—of sagebrush and yucca, and soapweed and other desert weeds that needed not the magic of water to make them live.

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When Sanderson finally mounted Streak, the sun was up. It took Streak two hours to descend the slope leading down into the basin, and when once horse and rider were down, Sanderson dismounted and patted Streak's moist flanks.

"Some drop, eh, Streak?" he said. "But it didn't fool us none. We knowed it was some distance, didn't we? An' they ain't foolin' us about the rest of it, are they? The Drifter said to head toward the Big Peak. The Double A would be right near there—in the foothills. Looks easy, don't it? But I reckon we'll have to hump ourselves to get there by feedin' time, this noon, eh?"

A little later, Streak having rested, Sanderson mounted and rode forward, toward the peak of a majestic mountain that loomed far above them.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH A MAN IS SYMPATHETIC

It was shortly after noon when Sanderson, urging Streak to the crest of an isolated excrescence of earth surrounded by a level of sage and cactus, saw within several hundred yards of him a collection of buildings scattered on a broad plain that extended back several hundred yards farther until it merged into the rock-faced wall of a butte that loomed upward many feet.

Sanderson halted Streak on the hilltop to glance around. The buildings, evidently, belonged to the Double A ranch, and the country was all the Drifter had claimed for it.

The big stretch of plain—in fact, the entire basin—could be made fertile by the judicious use of water. Sanderson was not an engineer, but he had sufficient natural knowledge of land to enable him to distinguish good land from bad. Besides, near Phoenix he had inspected a gigantic irrigation project, and had talked long with the engineer in charge, and he had learned many things that would not have interested the average cowpuncher.

There was a break in the wall of the butte south of the group of buildings, and out of the break Sanderson could see water tumbling and splashing from one rock ledge to another until it rushed down, forming quite a large stream as it struck the level and swirled hurriedly between two sloping banks near the buildings.

From where Sanderson sat on Streak he could look far back into the break in the butte. The break made a sort of gorge, which widened as it receded, and Sanderson suspected the presence of another basin beyond the butte—in fact, the Drifter had told him of the presence of another basin.

“She’d make some lake, if she was bottled up!” was Sanderson’s mental comment after a long examination.

His gaze became centered upon the buildings and the level surrounding them.

The buildings were ordinary, but the country was rugged and picturesque.

Some foothills—which Sanderson had seen from the far side of the basin that morning—rose from the level toward the south, their pine-clad slopes sweeping sharply upward—a series of gigantic land waves that seemed to leap upward and upward toward the higher peaks of some mountains behind them.

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Northward, fringing the edge of the plain that began at the foothills and stretched many miles, were other mountains; eastward the butte extended far, receding, irregular, its jagged walls forming a barrier; southwestward stretched the basin, in a gentle slope that was more noticeable to Sanderson now than it had been while he had been riding during the morning.

The land around the buildings was fertile, for here was water which could be utilized. The land over which Sanderson had been riding all morning, though, was not so fertile; it needed the water that the stream splashing out of the gorge could give it, with proper human manipulation.

All morning Sanderson's thoughts had dwelt upon the serious lack of water in the basin. Now his thoughts grew definitely troubled.

"There's goin' to be hell here—if this thing ain't handled right. The Double A has got lots of water. The other fellows will be wantin' it. They've got to have it."

Sanderson finished his inspection of the place. Then he spoke to Streak, and the big brown horse descended the slope of the hill, struck the level, and cantered slowly toward the ranch buildings near the river.

Sanderson urged the brown horse toward the largest building of the group, and as he rode he straightened in the saddle, rearranged his neckerchief and brushed some of the dust from his clothing—for at this minute his thoughts went to the girl—whom he now knew he had come to see.

Sanderson no longer tried to delude himself. A strange reluctance oppressed him, and a mighty embarrassment seized him; his face grew crimson beneath the coat of tan upon it, and his lungs swelled with a dread eagerness that had gripped him.

"I reckon I'm a damn fool!" he told himself as he forced Streak onward; "I'm comin' here, not knowin' why, but still a-comin'." He grinned, mirthlessly, but went forward.

Heading toward the ranchhouse, he passed a huge building—the stable. Swinging wide around one of its corners, he was about to ride onward toward the ranchhouse, when out of the corners of his eyes he saw some men and horses grouped in front of the stable.

He pulled Streak up with a jerk, swung the animal's head around and faced the group. There were five horses, saddled and bridled, standing in front of the stable. Sanderson's eyes noted that in one swift glance. But it was upon a man that Sanderson's gaze centered as Streak came to a halt.

The man dominated. There were other men standing in front of the stable—and two women. But the man upon whom Sanderson's gaze rested was the compelling figure.

He was big—rugged, muscular, massive. He saw Sanderson at about the instant Sanderson saw him, and he faced the latter, his chin thrusting, his lips pouting, his eyes gleaming with cold belligerence. He wore a gray woolen shirt, open at the throat, revealing a strong, wide chest.

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He was a tawny giant, exuding a force and virility and a compelling magnetism that gripped one instantly. It affected Sanderson; the sight of the man caused Sanderson's eyes to glow with reluctant admiration.

And yet Sanderson disliked the man; he knew instantly that this was Alva Dale, concerning whom the Drifter had spoken; and the glow died out of Sanderson's eyes and was replaced by the steady gleam of premeditated and deliberate hostility.

For an instant there was no word spoken; the glances of the two men met, crossed, and neither man's eyes wavered.

Then the big man spoke, gruffly, shortly, coldly: "What do you want?"

Sanderson smiled faintly. "You runnin' things here?" he said, slowly.

"Hell!" snarled the other, and stepped forward.

"Because if you are," resumed Sanderson, his voice bringing the big man to a halt, "you're the man I'm wantin' to do my gassin' to. If you ain't runnin' things, why, I reckon you ain't in the deal at all."

"Well, I'm runnin' things," sneered the other. "Tell me what you're wantin' or pull your freight out of here, *pronto!*"

"I'm sure some disturbed over my mistake," grinned Sanderson. "You couldn't be anybody but Bransford, or you wouldn't shoot off your gab that reckless. If you're Bransford, I'm apologizin' to you for talkin' back to you. But if you ain't Bransford, get off your hind legs an' talk like a man!"

The big man stiffened, and his eyes glittered malignantly. He moved his feet slightly apart and let his body fall into a crouch. He held that position, though, not moving a finger, when he saw a saturnine smile wreath Sanderson's lips, noted the slight motion with which Sanderson edged Streak around a little, caught the slow, gradual lifting of Sanderson's shoulder—the right; which presaged the drawing of the heavy pistol that swung at Sanderson's right hip.

Both men held their positions for some seconds; and the slow, heavy breathing of the big man indicated his knowledge of the violence that impended—the violence that, plainly, Sanderson would not retreat from.

Then the big man's body began to relax, and a tinge of color came into his face. He grinned, malevolently, with forced lightness.

"Hell," he said; "you're damned particular! I'm runnin' things here, but I ain't Bransford!"

"I was reckonin' you wasn't," said Sanderson, mockingly. He now ignored the big man, and fixed his gaze on one of the women—the one he felt must be Mary Bransford.

He had found time, while talking with the big man, to look twice at the two women—and he had discovered they were not women at all, but girls. More, he had discovered that one of them looked as he had pictured her many times during the days since he had heard of her from the Drifter.

She was standing slightly aside from the men—and from the other girl. She was pale, her eyes were big and fright-laden, and since Sanderson's comings she had been looking at him with an intense, wondering and wistful gaze, her hands clasped over her breast, the fingers working stiffly.

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Sanderson colored as he looked at her; he was wondering what she would say to him if she knew that he had come to the Double A purposely to see her, and that seeing her he was afflicted with a dismayed embarrassment that threatened to render him speechless.

For she more than fulfilled the promise of what he had expected of her. She was slightly above medium height, though not tall—a lissome, graceful girl with direct, frank eyes.

That was all Sanderson noted. Her hair, he saw, of course—it was done up in bulging knots and folds—and was brown, and abundant, and it made him gulp in admiration of it; but he could not have told what her features were like—except that they were what he expected them to be.

“I reckon you’re Mary Bransford, ma’am?” he said to her.

The girl took a step toward him, unclasping her hands.

“Yes,” she said rapidly, “It can’t be that you—that you——”

The big man stepped between the girl and Sanderson, pushing the girl aside and standing before Sanderson. But he spoke to the girl.

“Look here,” he said shortly; “I don’t know what you two are goin’ to palaver about, but whatever it is it’s goin’ to wait until what we set about to do is done.” He looked at Sanderson. “Stranger, we ain’t got no objections to you doin’ all the lookin’ you want to do. But keep your trap shut. Now, Miss Bransford,” he continued, turning to the girl, “we’ll get this trial over with. You say them steers which me an’ my boys brought over an’ put into your corral is Double A steers—that you’re sure the brand is yours—an’ the earmarks?”

“Ye-es,” returned the girl slowly and hesitatingly.

While talking with Sanderson she had unclasped her hands, and now she clasped them again, twining the fingers with a quick, nervous motion. Again her eyes grew wide with fright, and Sanderson saw her looking at the other girl—he saw the other girl stiffen and stand straight, her lips curving scornfully as she returned Miss Bransford’s gaze.

Sanderson’s lips straightened. And now for the first time he gravely inspected the faces in the group near him.

Two men—cowboys—who stood near the big man, were evidently the “boys” referred to by the latter. Their faces were set and expressionless. Between them stood a rugged, well-built man of about twenty-two or three. His hands were tied behind him, a rope was around his neck, the free end coiled in the hands of one of the two men.



The young man's face was sullen, but his head was held very erect, and his eyes were steady and unwavering as he watched the big man.

The girl at whom Miss Bransford was looking stood near the young man. Sanderson saw her turn from Miss Bransford and look at the young man piteously, her lips quivering suspiciously.

There was another man in the group—an under-sized fellow, pale, emaciated, with big, troubled, and perplexed eyes. Sanderson saw that his hands were clenched, and that his thin lips were pressed so tightly together that they were blue and bloodless.

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This man stood slightly apart from the others, as though he had no part in what was going on; though Sanderson could tell from his manner that he was laboring under an intense strain.

Miss Bransford and the big man were the opposing forces in what was transpiring—Sanderson knew that from Miss Bransford's manner of answering the big man's question. Her "yes" had been uttered reluctantly. Her testimony was damaging—she knew it, and her sympathies were with the young man with the rope around his neck.

Sanderson knew nothing of the motives that were actuating the people of this little drama, but he was entirely conscious of the visible forces that were at work.

Plainly, the big man had accused the captive of stealing cattle; he had brought the supposed culprit to face the owner of the stolen stock; he had constituted himself judge and jury, and was determined to hang the young man.

The two men with the big man were noncommittal. The pale, undersized man was a mere onlooker whose sympathies were with the accused. Miss Bransford would have been quite willing to have this young man escape punishment, but she could not deny that the cattle in question belonged to her.

Sanderson was in doubt about the other young woman, though obviously she was closely related to him—a wife, or sister—perhaps a sweetheart.

Sanderson studied the young man's face, comparing it with the big man's, and his lips stiffened. He backed Streak slightly and swung crosswise in the saddle, intense interest seizing him.

The big man grinned, first at Miss Bransford, and then at the other girl.

"I reckon that settles it," he said. "There don't seem to be nothin' more to it. Miss Bransford says the cattle is hers, an' we found them in Ben Nyland's corral. There ain't-----"

"Alva Dale, you are a sneak and a liar!"

This was the girl. She had stepped forward until she was within a short pace from the big man. She stood erect, rigid, her hands clenched at her sides; her chin lifted, her eyes flashing with defiant passion.

Dale smirked at her.

"Peggy Nyland," he said, "you're handin' it to me pretty strong, ain't you? You'd fight for your brother's life, of course. But I represent the law here, an' I've got to do my duty. You won't deny that we found them steers in your brother's corral?"

“No, I can’t deny that!” declared the girl passionately. “You found them there. They were there. But Ben did not put them there. Shall I tell you who did? It was you! I heard a noise in the corral during the night—last night! But I—thought it was just our own cattle. And I did not go out to see.

“Oh, how I wish I had! But Ben didn’t put the Double A cattle in the corral, for Ben was in the house all the time. He went to bed when I did, and I saw him, sleeping in his bunk, when the noise awakened me!”

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The girl stepped closer to Dale, her voice vibrating with scorn and loathing.

"If you didn't put the steers in our corral, you know who did, Alva Dale," she went on. "And you know why they were put there! You didn't do it because you wanted Ben's land—as I've heard you have said; you did it to get Ben out of the way so that you could punish me!"

"If I had told Ben how you have hounded me—how you have insulted me, Ben would have killed you long ago. Oh, I ought to have told him, but I was afraid—afraid to bring more trouble to Ben!"

Dale laughed sneeringly as he watched the young man writhe futilely in the hands of his captors.

"Sounds reasonable—an' dramatic," he said. "It'd do some good, mebbe, if they was any soft-headed ninnies around that would believe it. But the law ain't soft-headed. We found them steers in Ben Nyland's corral—some of them marked with Ben's brand—the Star—blottin' out the Double A. An' Miss Bransford admits the steers are hers. They ain't nothin' more to be said."

"Yes, there is, Dale," said Miss Bransford. "It is quite evident there has been a mistake made. I am willing to believe Peggy Nyland when she says Ben was asleep in the cabin all night—with her. At any rate, I don't want any hanging over a few cattle. I want you to let Ben Nyland go."

Dale wheeled and faced Miss Bransford. His face reddened angrily, but he managed to smile.

"It's too late, Miss Bransford. The evidence is all in. There's got to be rules to govern such cases as this. Because you own the steers is no sign you've got a right to defeat the aims of justice. I'd like mighty well to accommodate you, but I've got my duty to consider, an' I can't let him off. Ben Nyland has got to hang, an' that's all there is to it!"

There came a passionate outcry from Peggy Nyland; and then she had her arms around her brother's neck, sobbing that she would never let him be hanged.

Miss Bransford's eyes were blazing with rage and scorn as they challenged Dale's. She walked close to him and said something in a low tone to him, at which he answered, though less gruffly than before, that it was "no use."

Miss Bransford looked around appealingly; first at the pale, anemic little man with big eyes, who shifted his feet and looked uncomfortable; then her gaze went to Sanderson who, resting his left elbow on the pommel of the saddle, was watching her with squinting, quizzical eyes.

There was an appeal in Miss Bransford's glance that made the blood leap to Sanderson's face. Her eyes were shining with an eloquent yearning that would have caused him to kill Dale—if he had thought killing the man would have been the means of saving Ben Nyland.

And then Mary Bransford was at his side, her hands grasping his, holding them tightly as her gaze sought his and held it.

"Won't you please do something?" she pleaded. "Oh, if it only could be! That's a mystery to you, perhaps, but when I spoke to you before I was going to ask you if—if— But then, of course you couldn't be—or you would have spoken before."

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Sanderson's eyes glowed with a cold fire. He worked his hands free, patted hers reassuringly, and gently pushed her away from Streak.

He swung down from the saddle and walked to Dale. The big man had his back turned to Sanderson, and when Sanderson reached him he leaned over his shoulder and said gently:

"Look here, Dale."

The latter wheeled, recognizing Sanderson's voice and snarling into the latter's face.

"Well?" he demanded.

Sanderson grinned mildly. "I reckon you've got to let Ben Nyland off, Dale—he ain't guilty. Mebbe I ought to have stuck in my gab before, but I was figurin' that mebbe you wouldn't go to crowdin' him so close. Ben didn't steal no steers; he run them into his corral by my orders."

Dale guffawed loudly and stepped back to sneer at Sanderson. But he had noted the steadiness of the latter's eyes and the sneer faded.

"Bah!" he said. "Your orders! An' who in hell are you?"

"I'm Bill Bransford," said Sanderson quietly, and he grinned mirthlessly at Dale over the two or three feet of space that separated them.

CHAPTER V

WATER AND KISSES

For several seconds Dale did not speak. A crimson stain appeared above the collar of his shirt and spread until it covered his face and neck, leaving his cheeks poisonously bloated and his eyes glaring.

But the steady eyes and the cold, deliberate demeanor of Sanderson did much to help Dale regain his self-control—which he did, while Mary Bransford, running forward, tried to throw her arms around Sanderson's neck. She was prevented from accomplishing this design by Sanderson who, while facing Dale, shoved the girl away from him, almost roughly.

"There's time for that after we've settled with Dale," he told the girl gruffly.

Dale had recovered; he sneered. "It's easy enough to make a claim like that, but it's another thing to prove it. How in hell do we know you're Bill Bransford?"



Sanderson's smile was maddening. "I ain't aimin' to prove nothin'—to you!" he said. But he reached into a pocket, drew out the two letters he had taken from the real Bransford's pocket, and passed them back to Mary Bransford, still facing Dale.

He grinned at Dale's face as the latter watched Mary while she read the letters, gathering from the scowl that swept over the other's lips that Mary had accepted them as proof of his identity.

"You'll find the most of that thousand you sent me in my slicker," he told the girl. And while Mary ran to Streak, unstrapped the slicker, tore it open, and secured the money, Sanderson watched Dale's face, grinning mockingly.

"O Will—Will!" cried the girl joyously behind Sanderson.

Sanderson's smile grew. "Seems to prove a heap, don't it?" he said to Dale. "I know a little about law myself. I won't be pressin' no charge against Nyland. Take your rope off him an' turn him free. An' then mebbe you'll be accommodatin' enough to hit the breeze while the hittin's good—for me an' Miss—my sister's sort of figurin' on a reunion—bein' disunited for so long."

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He looked at Dale with cold, unwavering eyes until the latter, sneering, turned and ordered his men to remove the rope from Nyland. With his hands resting idly on his hips he watched Dale and the men ride away. Then he shook hands mechanically with Nyland, permitted Peggy to kiss him—which she did fervently, and led her brother away. Then Sanderson turned, to see Mary smiling and blushing, not more than two or three feet distant.

He stood still, and she stepped slowly toward him, the blush on her face deepening.

“Oh,” she said as she came dose to him and placed her hands on his shoulders, “this seems positively brazen—for you seem like a stranger to me.”

Then she deliberately took both his cheeks in her hands, stood on the tips of her toes and kissed him three or four times, squarely on the lips.

“Why, ma’am—” began Sanderson.

“Mary!” she corrected, shaking him.

“Well, ma’am—Mary, that is—you see I ain’t just——”

“You’re the dearest and best brother that ever lived,” she declared, placing a hand over his mouth, “even though you did stay away for so many years. Not another word now!” she warned as she took him by an arm and led him toward the ranchhouse; “not a word about anything until you’ve eaten and rested. Why, you look tired to death—almost!”

Sanderson wanted to talk; he wanted to tell Mary Bransford that he was not her brother; that he had assumed the role merely for the purpose of defeating Dale’s aim. His sole purpose had been to help Mary Bransford out of a difficult situation; he had acted on impulse—an impulse resulting from the pleading look she had given him, together with the knowledge that she had wanted to save Nyland.

Now that the incident was closed, and Nyland saved, he wanted to make his confession, be forgiven, and received into Mary’s good graces.

He followed the girl into the house, but as he halted for an instant on the threshold, just before entering, he looked hack, to see the little, anemic man standing near the house, looking at him with an odd smile. Sanderson flushed and made a grimace at the little man, whereat the latter’s smile grew broad and eloquent.

“What’s eatin’ him, I wonder?” was Sanderson’s mental comment. “He looked mighty fussed up while Dale was doin’ the talkin’. Likely he’s just tickled—like the rest of them.”

Mary led Sanderson into the sitting-room to a big easy-chair, shoved him into it, and stood behind him, running her fingers through his hair. Meanwhile she talked rapidly,

telling him of the elder Bransford's last moments, of incidents that had occurred during his absence from the ranch; of other incidents that had to do with her life at a school on the coast; of many things of which he was in complete ignorance.

Desperate over his inability to interrupt her flow of talk, conscious of the falseness of his position, squirming under her caresses, and cursing himself heartily for yielding to the absurd impulse that had placed him in so ridiculous a predicament, Sanderson opened his mouth a dozen times to make his confession, but each time closed it again, unsuccessful.

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At last, nerved to the ordeal by the knowledge that each succeeding moment was making his position more difficult, and his ultimate pardon less certain, he wrenched himself free and stood up, his face crimson.

“Look here, ma’am——”

“Mary!” she corrected, shaking a finger at him.

“Mary,” he repeated tonelessly, “now look here,” he went on hoarsely. “I want to tell you that I ain’t the man you take me to be. I’m——”

“Yes, you are,” she insisted, smiling and placing her hands on his shoulders. “You are a real man. I’ll wager Dale thinks so; and Peggy Nyland, and Ben. Now, wait!” she added as he tried to speak. “I want to tell you something. Do you know what would have happened if you had not got here today?”

“I’ll tell you,” she went on again, giving him no opportunity to inject a word. “Dale would have taken the Double A away from me! He told me so! He was over here yesterday, gloating over me. Do you know what he claims? That I am not a Bransford; that I am merely an adopted daughter—not even a legally adopted one; that father just took me, when I was a year old, without going through any legal formalities.

“Dale claims to have proof of that. He won’t tell me where he got it. He has some sort of trumped-up evidence, I suppose, or he would not have talked so confidently. And he is all-powerful in the basin. He is friendly with all the big politicians in the territory, and is ruthless and merciless. I feel that he would have succeeded, if you had not come.

“I know what he wants; he wants the Double A on account of the water. He is prepared to go any length to get it—to commit murder, if necessary. He could take it away from me, for I wouldn’t know how to fight him. But he can’t take it away from you, Will. And he can’t say you have no claim to the Double A, for father willed it to you, and the will has been recorded in the Probate Court in Las Vegas!

“O Will; I am so glad you came,” she went on, stroking and patting his arms. “When I spoke to you the first time, out there by the stable, I was certain of you, though I dreaded to have you speak for fear you would say otherwise. And if it hadn’t been you, I believe I should have died.”

“An’ if you’d find out, now, that I ain’t Will Bransford,” said Sanderson slowly, “what then?”

“That can’t be,” she said, looking him straight in the eyes, and holding his gaze for a long time, while she searched his face for signs of that playful deceit that she expected to see reflected there.

She saw it, evidently, or what was certainly an excellent counterfeit of it—though Sanderson was in no jocular mood, for at that moment he felt himself being drawn further and further into the meshes of the trap he had laid for himself—and she smiled trustfully at him, drawing a deep sigh of satisfaction and laying her head against his shoulder.

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"That can't be," she repeated. "No man could deceive a woman like that!"

Sanderson groaned, mentally. He couldn't confess now and at the same time entertain any hope that she would forgive him.

Nor could he—knowing what he knew now of Dale's plans—brutally tell her the truth and leave her to fight Dale single-handed,

And there was still another consideration to deter him from making a confession. By impersonating her brother he had raised her hopes high. How could he tell her that her brother had been killed, that he had buried him in a desolate section of a far-off desert after taking his papers and his money?

He felt, from her manner when he had tentatively asked her to consider the possibility of his not being her brother, that the truth would kill her, as she had said.

Worse, were he now to inform her of what had happened in the desert, she might not believe him; she might indeed—considering that he already had dealt doubly with her—accuse him of being her brother's murderer!

Again Sanderson groaned in spirit. To confess to her would be to destroy her; to withhold the confession and to continue to impersonate her brother was to act the role of a cad.

Sanderson hesitated between a choice of the two evils, and was lost. For she gave him no time for serious and continued thought. Taking him by an arm she led him into a room off the sitting-room, shoving him through the door laughingly.

"That is to be your room," she said. "I fixed it up for you more than a month ago. You go in there and get some sleep. Sleep until dusk. By that time I'll have supper ready. And then, after supper, there are so many things that I want to say to you. So get a good sleep!"

She closed the door and went out, and Sanderson sank into a chair. Later, he locked the door, pulled the chair over near a window—from which he got a good view of the frowning butte at the edge of the level—and stared out, filled with a sensation of complete disgust.

"Hell," he said, after a time, "I'm sure a triple-plated boxhead, an' no mistake!"

CHAPTER VI

SANDERSON LIES

Sanderson did not sleep. He sat at the window all afternoon, dismally trying to devise way of escape from the dilemma. He did not succeed. He had gone too far now to make a confession sound reasonably convincing; and he could not desert the girl to Dale. That was not to be thought of. And he was certain that if he admitted the deception, the girl would banish him as though he were a pestilence.

He was hopelessly entangled. And yet, continuing to ponder the situation, he saw that he need not completely yield to pessimism. For though circumstances—and his own lack of foresight—had placed him in a contemptible position—he need not act the blackguard. On the contrary, he could admirably assume the role of protector.

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The position would not be without its difficulties, and the deception meant that he could never be to Mary Bransford what he wanted to be to her; but he could at least save the Double A for her. That done, and his confession made, he could go on his way, satisfied that he had at least beaten Dale.

His decision made, Sanderson got up, opened the door a trifle, and looked into the sitting-room. It was almost dusk, and, judging from the sounds that reached his ears from the direction of the kitchen, Mary intended to keep her promise regarding "supper."

Feeling guilty, though grimly determined to continue the deception to the end—whatever the end might be—Sanderson stole through the sitting-room, out through the door leading to the porch, and made his way to a shed lean-to back of the kitchen.

There he found a tin washbasin, some water, and a towel, and for ten minutes he worked with them. Then he discovered a comb, and a broken bit of mirror fixed to the wall of the lean-to, before which he combed his hair and studied his reflection. He noted the unusual flush on his cheeks, but grinned brazenly into the glass.

"I'm sure some flustered," he told his reflection.

Arrayed for a second inspection by Mary Bransford, Sanderson stood for a long time at the door of the lean-to, trying to screw up his courage to the point of confronting the girl.

He succeeded finally, and walked slowly to the outside kitchen door, where he stood, looking in at Mary.

The girl was working over the stove, from which, floating to the doorway where Sanderson stood, came various delicious odors.

Mary was arrayed in a neat-fitting house dress of some soft print material, with a huge apron over it. Her sleeves were rolled slightly above the elbows; her face was flushed, and when she turned and saw Sanderson her eyes grew very bright.

"Oh," she said; "you are up! I was just thinking of calling you!" She ran to him, threw her arms around him, and, in spite of his efforts to evade her, she kissed him first on one cheek and then on the other.

Noting his reluctance she stepped back and looked reprovingly at him.

"You seem so distant, Will. And I am so glad to see you!"

"I ain't used to bein' kissed, I expect."

"But—by your sister!"

He reddened. "I ain't seen you for a long time, you know. Give me time, an' mebbe I'll get used to it."

"I hope so," she smiled. "I should feel lost if I could not kiss my brother. You have washed, too!" she added, noting his glowing face and his freshly combed hair.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mary!" she corrected.

"Mary," grinned Sanderson.

Mary turned to the stove. "You go out and find a chair on the porch," she directed, over her shoulder. "I'll have supper ready in a jiffy. It's too hot for you in here."

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Sanderson obeyed. From the deeply crimson hue of his face it was apparent that the heat of the kitchen had affected him. That, at least, must have been the reason Mary had ordered him away. His face *felt* hot.

He found a chair on the porch, and he sank into it, feeling like a criminal. There was a certain humor in the situation. Sanderson felt it, but could not appreciate it, and he sat, hunched forward, staring glumly into the dusk that had settled over the basin.

He had been sitting on the porch for some minutes when he became aware of a figure near him, and he turned slowly to see the little, anemic man standing not far away.

"Cooling off?" suggested the little man.

Sanderson straightened. "How in hell do you know I'm hot?" he demanded gruffly.

The little man grinned. "There's signs. Your face looks like you'd had it in an oven. Now, don't lose your temper; I didn't mean to offend you."

The little man's voice was placative; his manner gravely ingratiating. Yet Sanderson divined that the other was inwardly laughing at him. Why? Sanderson did not know. He was aware that he must seem awkward in the role of brother, and he suspected that the little man had noticed it; possibly the little man was one of those keen-witted and humorously inclined persons who find amusement in the incongruous.

There was certainly humor in the man's face, in the glint of his eyes, and in the curve of his lips. His face was seamed and wrinkled; his ears were big and prominent, the tips bending outward under the brim of a felt hat that was too large for him; his mouth was large, and Sanderson's impression of it was that it could not be closed far enough to conceal all the teeth, but that the lips were continually trying to stretch far enough to accomplish the feat.

Sanderson was certain it was that continual effort of the muscles of the lips that gave to his mouth its humorous expression.

The man was not over five feet and two or three inches tall, and crowning his slender body was a head that was entirely out of proportion to the rest of him. He was not repulsive-looking, however, and a glance at his eyes convinced Sanderson that anything Providence had taken from his body had been added, by way of compensation, to his intellect.

Sanderson found it hard to resent the man's seeming impertinence. He grinned reluctantly at him.

"Did I tell you you'd hurt my feelin's?" he inquired. "What oven do you think I had my head in?"

“I didn’t say,” grinned the little man. “There’s places that are hotter than an oven. And if a man has never been a wolf with women, it might be expected that he’d feel sort of warm to be kissed and fussed over by a sister he’s not seen for a good many years. He’d seem like a stranger to her—almost.”

Sanderson’s eyes glowed with a new interest in the little man.

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"How did you know I wasn't a wolf with women?"

"Shucks," said the other; "you're bashful, and you don't run to vanity. Any fool could see that."

"I ain't been introduced to you—regular," said Sanderson, "but you seem to be a heap long on common sense, an' I'd be glad to know you. What did you say your name was?"

"Barney Owen."

"What you doin' at the Double A? You ought be herd-ridin' scholars in a district schoolhouse."

"Missed my calling," grinned the other. "I got to know too much to teach school, but didn't know enough to let John Barleycorn alone. I'm a drifter, sort of. Been roaming around the north country. Struck the basin about three weeks ago. Miss Bransford was needin' men—her father—yours, too, of course—having passed out rather sudden. I was wantin' work mighty bad, and Miss Bransford took me on because I was big enough to do the work of half a dozen men."

His face grew grave. Sanderson understood. Miss Bransford had hired Owen out of pity. Sanderson did not answer.

The little man's face worked strangely, and his eyes glowed.

"If you hadn't come when you did, I would have earned my keep, and Alva Dale would be where he wouldn't bother Miss Bransford any more," he said.

Sanderson straightened. "You'd have shot him, you mean?"

Owen did not speak, merely nodding his head.

Sanderson smiled. "Then I'm sort of sorry come when I did. But do you think shootin' Dale would have ended it?"

"No; Dale has friends." Owen leaned toward Sanderson, his face working with passion. "I hate Dale," he said hoarsely. "I hate him worse than I hate any snake that I ever saw. I hadn't been here two days when he sneered at me and called me a freak. I'll kill him—some day. Your coming has merely delayed the time. But before he dies I want to see him beaten at this game he's tryin' to work on Miss Bransford. And I'll kill any man that tries to give Miss Bransford the worst of it."

"You've got a fight on your hands. I know Dale and his gang, and they'll make things mighty interesting for you and Miss Bransford. But I'll help you, if you say the word. I'm not much for looks—as you can see—but I can sling a gun with any man I've ever met.

"I'd have tried to fight Dale alone—for Miss Bransford's sake—but I realize that things are against me. I haven't the size, and I haven't the nerve to take the initiative. Besides, I drink. I get riotously drunk. I can't help it. I can't depend on myself. But I can help you, and I will."

The man's earnestness was genuine, and though Sanderson had little confidence in the other's ability to take a large part in what was to come, he respected the spirit that had prompted the offer. So he reached out and took the man's hand.

"Any man that feels as strongly as you do can do a heap—at anything," he said. "We'll call it a deal. But you're under my orders."

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"Yes," returned Owen, gripping the hand held out to him.

"Will!" came Mary's voice from the kitchen, "supper is ready!"

Owen laughed lowly, dropped Sanderson's hand, and slipped away into the growing darkness.

Sanderson got up and faced the kitchen door, hesitating, reluctant again to face the girl and to continue the deception. Necessity drove him to the door, however, and when he reached it, he saw Mary standing near the center of the kitchen, waiting for him.

"I don't believe you are hungry at all!" she declared, looking keenly at him. "And do you know, I think you blush more easily than any man I ever saw. But don't let that bother you," she added, laughing; "blushes become you. Will," she went on, tenderly pressing his arm as she led him through a door into the dining-room, "you are awfully good-looking!"

"You'll have me gettin' a swelled head if you go to talkin' like that," he said, without looking at her.

"Oh, no; you couldn't be vain if you tried. None of the Bransfords were ever vain—or conceited. But they all have had good appetites," she told him, shaking a finger at him. "And if you don't eat heartily I shall believe your long absence from home has taken some of the Bransford out of you!"

She pulled a chair out for him, and took another at the table opposite him.

Sanderson ate; there was no way out of it, though he felt awkward and uncomfortable. He kept wondering what she would say to him if she knew the truth. It seemed to him that had the girl looked closely at him she might have seen the guilt in his eyes.

But apparently she was not thinking of doubting him—it was that knowledge which made Sanderson realize how contemptible was the part he was playing. She had accepted him on trust, without question, with the implicit and matter-of-fact faith of a child.

He listened in silence while she told him many things about the Bransfords—incidents that had occurred during his supposed absence, intimate little happenings that he had no right to hear. And he sat, silently eating, unable to interrupt, feeling more guilty and despicable all the time.

But he broke in after a time, gruffly:

"What's the trouble between Dale and the Nylands?"

Instantly she stiffened. “I forgot to tell you about that. Ben Nyland is a nester. He has a quarter-section of land on the northwestern edge of the basin. But he hasn’t proved on it. The land adjoins Dale’s. Dale wants it—he has always wanted it. And he means to have it. He also wants Peggy Nyland.

“Dale is a beast! You heard Peggy tell how he has hounded her. It is true; she has told me about it more than once. Dale hasn’t told, of course; but it is my opinion that Dale put the Double A cattle into Ben’s corral so that he could hang Ben. With Ben out of the way he could take the Nyland property—and Peggy, too.”

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"Why did he use Double A cattle?"

Mary paled. "Don't you see the hideous humor of that? He knows Peggy Nyland and I are friends. Dale is ruthless and subtle. Can't you understand how a man of that type would enjoy seeing me send my friend's brother to his death—and the brother innocent?"

"Why didn't you tell Dale the cattle did not belong to you?"

Mary smiled faintly. "I couldn't. To do so would have involved Ben Nyland in more trouble. Dale would have got one of his friends to claim them. And then I could have done nothing—having disclaimed the ownership of the stock. And I—I couldn't lie. And, besides, I kept hoping that something would happen. I had a premonition that something *would* happen. And something did happen—you came!"

"Yes," said Sanderson inanely, "I came."

He drew a large red handkerchief from a pocket and mopped some huge beads of sweat from his face and forehead. When the handkerchief came out a sheet of paper, folded and crumpled, fluttered toward the floor, describing an eccentric circle and landing within a foot of Mary's feet.

The girl saw that Sanderson had not noticed the loss of the paper, and she stooped and recovered it. She held it in a hand while Sanderson continued to wipe the perspiration from his face, and noting that he was busily engaged she smoothed the paper on the table in front of her and peered mischievously at it. And then, her curiosity conquering her, she read, for the writing on the paper was strangely familiar.

Sanderson having restored the handkerchief to its pocket, noticed Mary's start, and saw her look at him, her eyes wide and perplexed.

"Why, Will, where did you get this?" she inquired, sitting very erect.

"Mebbe if you'd tell me what it is I could help you out," he grinned.

"Why, it's a letter father wrote to a man in Tombstone, Arizona. See here! Father's name is signed to it! I saw father write it. Why, I rode over to Dry Bottom and mailed it! This man had written to father a long time before, asking for a job. I have his letter somewhere. It was the oddest letter! It was positively a gem of formality. I can remember every word of it, for I must have read it a dozen times. It ran:

"Dear sir:

"The undersigned has been at the location noted below for a term of years and desires to make a change. If you have an opening for a good all-around man, the undersigned

would be willing to work for you. If you would want a recommendation, you can address Amos Burroughs, of the Pig-Pen Ranch, near Tombstone, where the undersigned is employed.

"Yours truly,

"Deal Sanderson."

Mary leaned forward in her chair and looked at Sanderson with eager, questioning eyes. Sanderson stared vacantly back at her.

She held the letter up to him. "This is father's answer, telling the man to come on. How on earth did you get hold of it?"

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Sanderson had slumped down in his chair. He saw discovery and disgrace in prospect. In the total stoppage of his thoughts no way of escape or evasion suggested itself. At the outset he was to be exposed as a miserable impostor.

He groaned, grinned vacuously at Mary, and again produced the handkerchief, wiping away drops of perspiration that were twice as big as those he had previously mopped off.

Mary continued to stare at him, repeating the question: "How did you get it?"

Sanderson's composure began to return; his grin grew wider and more intelligent, and at the sixth repetition of Mary's question he answered, boldly:

"I wasn't goin' to tell you about that. You see, ma'am——"

"Mary!"

"You see, Mary, I was goin' to fool Brans—dad. I wrote, askin' him for the job, an' I was intendin' to come on, to surprise him. But before I told him who I was, I was goin' to feel him out, an' find out what he thought of me. Then I got your letter, tellin' me he was dead, an' so there wasn't any more use of tryin' to fool him."

"But that name, 'Sanderson?' That isn't your name, Will!"

"It was," he grinned. "When I left home I didn't want anybody to be runnin' into me an' recognizin' me, so I changed it to Sanderson. Deal Sanderson."

The girl's expression changed to delight; she sat erect and clapped her hands.

"Oh," she said, "I wish father was here to listen to this! He thought all along that you were going to turn out bad. If he only knew! Will, you don't mean to tell me that you are the Sanderson that we all know of here—that nearly everybody in the country has heard about; the man who is called 'Square Deal' Sanderson by all his friends—and even by his enemies—because of his determination to do right—and to make everyone else do right too!"

Again Sanderson resorted to the handkerchief.

"I don't reckon they've talked about me that strong," he said.

"But they have! Oh, I'm so happy, Will. Why, when Dale hears about it he'll be positively venomous—and scared. I don't think he will bother the Double A again—after he hears of it!"

But Sanderson merely smirked mirthlessly; he saw no reason for being joyful over the lie he had told. He was getting deeper and deeper into the mire of deceit and prevarication, and there seemed to be no escape.

And now, when he had committed himself, he realized that he might have evaded it all, this last lie at least, by telling Mary that he had picked the note up on the desert, or anywhere, for that matter, and she would have been forced to believe him.

He kept her away from him, fending off her caresses with a pretense of slight indisposition until suddenly panic-stricken over insistence, he told her he was going to bed, bolted into the room, locked the door behind him, and sat long in the darkness and the heat, filling the room with a profane appreciation of himself as a double-dyed fool who could not even lie intelligently.

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CHAPTER VII

KISSES—A MAN REFUSES THEM

There was a kerosene lamp in Sanderson's room, and when, after an hour of gloomy silence in the dark, he got up and lit the lamp, he felt decidedly better. He was undressing, preparing to get into bed, when he was assailed with a thought that brought the perspiration out on him again.

This time it was a cold sweat, and it came with the realization that discovery was again imminent, for if, as Mary had said, she had kept Sanderson's letter to her father, there were in existence two letters—his own and Will Bransford's—inevitably in different handwriting, both of which he had claimed to have written.

Sanderson groaned. The more he lied the deeper he became entangled. He pulled on his trousers, and stood shoeless, gazing desperately around the room.

He simply must destroy that letter, or Mary, comparing it with the letter her brother had written would discover the deception.

It was the first time in Sanderson's life that had ever attempted to deceive anybody, and he was in the grip of a cringing dread.

For the first time since he occupied the room he inspected it, noting its furnishings. His heart thumped wildly with hope while he looked.

It was a woman's room—Mary's, of course. For there were decorations here and there—a delicate piece of crochet work on a dresser; a sewing basket on a stand; a pincushion, a pair of shears; some gaily ornamented pictures on the walls, and—peering behind the dresser—he saw a pair of lady's riding-boots.

He strode to a closet door and threw it open, revealing, hanging innocently on their hooks, a miscellaneous array of skirts, blouses, and dresses.

Mary had surrendered her room to him. Feeling guilty again, and rather conscience-stricken, as though he were committing some sacrilegious action, he went to the dresser and began to search among the effects in the drawers.

They were filled with articles of wearing apparel, delicately fringed things that delight the feminine heart, and keepsakes of all descriptions. Sanderson handled them carefully, but his search was not the less thorough on that account.

And at last, in one of the upper drawers of the dresser, he came upon a packet of letters.

Again his conscience pricked him, but the stern urge of necessity drove him on until he discovered an envelope addressed to the elder Bransford, in his own handwriting, and close to it a letter from Will Bransford to Mary Bransford.

Sanderson looked long at the Bransford letter, considering the situation. He was tempted to destroy that, too, but he reflected, permitting a sentimental thought to deter him.

For Mary undoubtedly treasured that letter, and when the day came that he should tell her the truth, the letter would be the only link that would connect her with the memory of her brother.

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Sanderson could not destroy it. He had already offended Mary Bransford more than he had a right to, and to destroy her brother's letter would be positively heinous.

Besides, unknown to him, there might be more letters about with Will Bransford's signature on them, and it might be well to preserve this particular letter in case he should be called upon to forge Will Bransford's signature.

So he retied the letters in the packet and restored the packet to its place, retaining his own letter to Bransford. Smiling grimly now, he again sought the chair near the window, lit a match, applied the blaze to the letter, and watched the paper burn until nothing remained of it but a crinkly ash. Then he smoked a cigarette and got into bed, feeling more secure.

Determined not to submit to any more of Mary's caresses, and feeling infinitely small and mean over the realization that he had already permitted her to carry her affection too far, he frowned at her when he went into the kitchen after washing the next morning, gruffly replying when she wished him a cheery, "Good morning," and grasping her arms when she attempted to kiss him.

He blushed, though, when her eyes reproached him.

"I ain't used to bein' mushed over," he told her. "We'll get along a heap better if you cut out the kissin'."

"Why, Will!" she said, her lips trembling.

She set them though, instantly, and went about her duties, leaving Sanderson to stand in the center of the room feeling like a brute.

They breakfasted in silence—almost. Sanderson saw her watching him—covert glances that held not a little wonder and disappointment. And then, when the meal was nearly finished, she looked at him with a taunting half-smile.

"Didn't you sleep good, Will?"

Sanderson looked fairly at her. That "Will" was already an irritation to him, for it continually reminded him of the despicable part he was playing. He knew what he was going to say would hurt her, but he was determined to erect between them a barrier that would prevent a repetition of any demonstrations of affection of the brother and sister variety.

He didn't want to let her continue to show affection for him when he knew that, if she knew who he really was, she would feel more like murdering him.



“Look here, Mary,” he said, coldly, “I’ve never cared a heap for the name Bransford. That’s why I changed my name to Sanderson. I never liked to be called ‘Will.’ Hereafter I want you to call me Sanderson—Deal Sanderson. Then mebbe I’ll feel more like myself.”

She did not answer, but her lips straightened and she sat very rigid. It was plain to him that she was very much disappointed in him, and that in her mind was the contrast between her brother of today and her brother of yesterday.

She got up after a time, holding her head high, and left the room, saying as she went out:

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"Very well; your wishes shall be respected. But it seems to me that the name Bransford is one be proud of!"

Sanderson grinned into his plate. He felt more decent now than he had felt since arriving at the Double A. If he could continue to prevent her from showing any affection for him—visible, at least—he would feel that the deception he was practising was less criminal. And when he went away, after settling the differences between Mary Bransford and Dale, he would have less to reproach himself with.

He did not see Mary again that morning. Leaving the dining-room, he went outside, finding Barney Owen in the bunkhouse in the company of several other Double A men.

Owen introduced him to the other men—who had ridden in to the ranchhouse the previous night, and were getting ready to follow the outfit wagon down the river into the basin to where the Double A herd was grazing.

Sanderson watched the men ride away, then he turned to Owen.

"I'm ridin' to Las Vegas, to get a look at the will, an' see what the records have got to say about the title to the Double A. Want to go?"

"Sure," the little man grinned.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PLOTTERS

Riding down the gentle slope of the basin, Alva Dale maintained a sullen silence. He rode far in advance of the two men who accompanied him, not listening to their voices, which occasionally reached him, not seeming to be aware of their presence.

Defeat had always brought bitterness to Dale; his eyes were glowing with a futile rage as he led his men homeward.

Dale's scheme to dispose of Ben Nyland had been carefully planned and deftly carried out. He had meant to hang Nyland, take possession of his property, and force Peggy to accept whatever conditions he cared to impose upon her.

The unlooked-for appearance of Mary Bransford's brother had disturbed his plans. As a matter of fact, the coming of Bill Bransford would make it necessary for Dale to make entirely new plans.

Dale was puzzled. During the elder Bransford's last days, and for a year or more preceding the day of Bransford's death, Dale had professed friendship for him. The

pretense of friendship had resulted profitably for Dale, for it had enabled him to establish an intimacy with Bransford which had made it possible for Dale to learn much of Bransford's personal affairs.

For instance, Dale had discovered that there was in Las Vegas no record of Mary Bransford's birth, and though Bransford had assured him that Mary was his child, the knowledge had served to provide Dale with a weapon which he might have used to advantage—had not Bill Bransford returned in time to defeat him.

Dale had heard the story of the trouble between Bransford and his son, Will; it was the old tale of father and son not agreeing, and of the son leaving home, aggrieved.

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Dale had made it his business to inquire often about the son, and when one day Bransford told him he had received a letter from his boy, Dale betrayed such interest that the elder Bransford had permitted him to read the letter.

That had been about a year before Mary had written the letter that Sanderson had found in one of Will Bransford's pockets. The letter told of the writer's longing to return home. The elder Bransford declared that his heart had not softened toward the boy and that he would not answer him. Leaving Dale, Bransford had dropped the letter, and Dale had picked it up.

Dale still had the letter, and because of his pretended friendship for the father he had been able to insinuate himself into Mary's good graces. He had advised Mary to write to her brother, and he had seen the letter from the younger Bransford in which the latter had told his sister that he would return.

After reading Will Bransford's letter, and learning from Mary that she was sending a thousand dollars to her brother, Dale wrote to a friend in Tucson. Dale's letter accompanied Mary's to the latter town, and the evil-visaged fellow who received it grinned widely in explaining the circumstance to two of his friends.

"We'll git him, sure as shootin'," he said. "A thousand dollars ain't a hell of a lot—but I've put men out of business for less!"

Dale knew the man to whom he had written, and he had received a reply, telling him that the job would be done. And that was why, when Sanderson had calmly announced that he was Will Bransford, Dale had been unwilling to believe his statement.

Dale did not believe, now, that the man who had interfered to save Nyland was Will Bransford. Dale rode slowly homeward, scowling, inwardly fuming with rage, but unable to form any decided plan of action.

It was several miles to the Bar D, Dale's ranch, and when he arrived there he was in an ugly mood. He curtly dismissed the two men who had accompanied him and went into the house. Opening the door of the room he used as an office, he saw a medium-sized man of fifty sitting in a big desk chair, smoking a cigar.

The man smiled at Dale's surprise, but did not offer to get up, merely extending his right hand, which Dale grasped and shook heartily.

"Dave Silverthorn, or I'm a ghost!" ejaculated Dale, grinning. "How in thunder did you get here?"

"Rode," smiled the other, showing a set of white, flashing teeth. "I saw you pass the window. You looked rather glum, and couldn't see my horse, I suppose. Something gone wrong?"

“Everything,” grunted Dale; “that confounded young Bransford has showed up!”

The smile left the other’s face. His eyes glowed and the corners of his mouth took on a cruel droop.

“He has, eh?” he said, slowly. His voice was expressionless. “So that lead has petered out.”

He puffed slowly at his cigar, studying Dale’s face, while the latter related what had occurred.

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"So Nyland is still at large, eh?" he remarked, when Dale had finished. "Why not set a gunman on him?"

Dale scowled. "There ain't a gunman in this section that would take a chance on Nyland—he's lightning!" Dale cursed. "Besides, there ain't no use in goin' after Nyland's place unless we can get the Double A."

"Then there wasn't any use of going after it yesterday, or today, as you did," said the other. "Unless," he added, looking intently at Dale, "the sister has been on your mind some."

Dale reddened.

"I don't mind admittin' she is," he grinned.

"Look out, Dale," warned the other; "there's danger there. Many a big project has been ruined by men dragging a woman into it. You have no right to jeopardize this thing with a love affair. Peggy Nyland is desirable to a man of your intense passion, I suppose; but this project is bigger than any woman's love!"

"Bah!" sneered Dale. "I can 'tend to her without losin' sight of the main object."

"All right, then," laughed the other. "The success of this thing depends largely on you. We can't do a thing with the Legislature; these sagebrush fools are adamant on the question of water-rights, They won't restrict an owner's right and title to possession of all the water on his land.

"And he can dam the stream as much as he pleases, providing he don't cut down the supply that normally flows to his neighbors; and the gorge doesn't supply any water to the basin, so that Bransford would be justified in directing the gorge stream.

"In other words, old Bransford's title to the land that the gorge runs through is unassailable. There is only one way to get at him, and that is in some way to get possession of the title."

"That's tied up tighter than blazes," said Dale. "Record and all are clear. An' there ain't no judge we can get at. But if young Bransford hadn't come——"

"Yes," smiled Silverthorn. "It's too bad. We had a man, ready to come on at the word, to impersonate young Bransford. He would have stayed here long enough to get a clear title to the Double A, and then he would have turned it over to us for a consideration. It rather looks as though we are stumped, eh?"



Dale frowned. Then he got up, went to a drawer in the desk before which Silverthorn sat, and drew out a letter—the letter young Bransford had written to his father about a year before.

“We’ve still got a chance,” he told Silverthorn. And then he told the latter of his suspicions about Sanderson.

Silverthorn’s eyes gleamed. “That’s possible,” he said, “but how are you going to prove it?”

“There’s a way,” returned Dale. He went to the door, and shouted the names of two men, standing in the doorway until they came—the two men who had accompanied him that morning. He spoke to them, briefly:

“You’re ridin’ straight to Tucson as fast as your cayuses can take you. You ought to make it in a week. I’ll give you that long. Find Gary Miller. Tell him I sent you, an’ find out what he knows about young Bill Bransford. Then hit the breeze back. If it takes you more than two weeks I’ll knock your damned heads off!”

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CHAPTER IX

THE LITTLE MAN TALKS

Mary Bransford spent the first day of Sanderson's absence in the isolation of the parlor, with the shades drawn, crying. Her brother had bitterly disappointed her.

He had sent word by one of the men that he was going to Las Vegas to look up the title to the property. She thought he might at least have brought her the message personally.

Mary told herself that she had not been unduly demonstrative, as Sanderson had intimated by his actions. She had merely been glad to see him, as any sister would be glad to see a brother whom she had not seen for many years; and she assured herself that if he loved her as she loved him he would not have resented her display of affection.

That affection, though, troubled Mary. To be sure, she had never had a brother about, to fuss over, and therefore she could not tell just how deeply she should be expected to love the one whom Providence had given her; but she was certain that she did not love him too much.

For Sanderson was worthy of the full measure of any sister's love. Big, handsome, vigorous, with a way about him that any woman must admire, Mary felt he deserved all the affection she could bestow.

Her wonder and perplexity came over a contemplation of the quality of that love. Was it right that she should thrill so delightfully whenever he came near her? And was it entirely proper for her to feel that queer tingle of delight over the strangeness of it all?

And did that strangeness result from the fact that she had not seen him for years; or was there some truth in Dale's assertion that she was merely an adopted daughter, and her love for Sanderson not merely the love of a sister for a brother, but the love of a woman for a man?

Had Sanderson taken that view of it? She thought he had; for she had told him about Dale's assertion, and his constraint had begun shortly after.

She did not blame him a great deal—after she had thought it over. He had done the manly thing, she divined, in not taking advantage of the situation, and she believed she loved him more than ever because of his attitude. But she felt that she had lost something, and the second day had gone before she succeeded in resigning herself to the new state of affairs.

Nothing happened. Dale did not come near the ranchhouse. Mary rode over to the Nyland ranch and had a long talk with Peggy, and Peggy told her that she had not seen Dale.

Ben Nyland had driven the Double A cattle over to their own range, and so far as he was concerned the incident with Dale was closed. But, Peggy told Mary, Ben was bitterly resentful, and had sworn that if Dale bothered Peggy any more he would kill him.

Mary, however, was not greatly interested in Peggy's recital. She sat on a chair in the kitchen of the Nyland cabin, listening to Peggy, but making no replies. And it was not until she was ready to go that Mary revealed the real reason for her visit—and then she did not reveal it to Peggy, but to her own heart.

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For she reddened when she asked the question: "I wonder if you feel about Ben as I feel about my brother—that when you kiss him you are kissing a strange man?"

Peggy laughed. "You would feel that way, of course. For your brother is almost a stranger to you."

"And do you kiss Ben often?" asked Mary.

"Ben doesn't like it," smiled Peggy. "He is like most other men—he likes to kiss the daughters of other men, but he gets sulky and balky when I want to kiss him. So I don't try very often. Your brother is a fine, big fellow, but you will find before you have been around him very long that he wants to do his kissing away from home."

Mary laughed, and blushed again. "I have already discovered that," she said. "But, Peggy," she added seriously, "I love him so much that believe I should be jealous if I thought he kissed another girl!"

Mary rode homeward, rather comforted over her visit. And during the remaining days of Sanderson's absence she succeeded in convincing herself that Sanderson's attitude toward her was the usual attitude of brothers toward sisters, and that she had nothing of which to complain.

On the seventh day Sanderson and Owen returned.

Mary saw them ride in and she ran to the door and waved a hand to them. Owen flourished his hat at her, but Sanderson only grinned.

When Sanderson came in Mary did not attempt to kiss him, but she wanted to when he seized her hand and squeezed it warmly. For it seemed to her that he was troubled over something.

She watched him narrowly for signs that would tell her of the nature of the trouble, but when he went to bed she had learned nothing.

At breakfast the next morning she asked him what he had discovered at Las Vegas. He looked straight at her.

"There is no record of your birth," he said.

She paled. "Then Dale has grounds for his suspicion," she said in a weak voice.

"Because your birth was not recorded is no sign you are not a Bransford," he said. "I'll tell you this," he added gruffly: "as a sister you suit me from the ground up; an' I'll stick to you until hell freezes over!"

Not until that instant did she realize that she had entertained a fear that Sanderson would believe as Dale believed, and in an excess of joy over the discovery that he did believe in her she got up, ran around the table, seized Sanderson by the shoulders and laid her cheek against his.

"You're a dear," she said, "and I don't care whether you like it or not, I am going to kiss you!"

"Just once," he said, blushing.

She kissed him, and then leaned back, looking at him reprovingly.

"You haven't returned a kiss I have given you!" she said. "And I want you to!"

"All right," he agreed, and this time the warmth of his response made her draw a long, deep breath.

Sanderson made his escape as soon as he decently could, and walked to a corner of the pasture fence where he stood, one arm resting on the top rail, his gaze on the basin.

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At the court in Las Vegas he had discovered that Bransford had made a will, bequeathing the ranch to his son. The document had been recorded only a few months before Bransford died, showing that he had at last forgiven the boy.

Sanderson had intended to take possession of the ranch, in an effort to forestall any scheme Dale might have, and while in Las Vegas he had applied to the court for permission to have the title transferred. And then he had been told it would be necessary for him to file an affidavit and proof establishing his identity.

With Barney Owen looking on Sanderson was compelled to defer signing the affidavit, for Sanderson remembered the letter from young Bransford, bearing the younger Bransford's signature. The letter was still in the dresser drawer in his room, and he would have to have it beside him while he signed Bransford's name to the affidavit in order to imitate Bransford's handwriting successfully. Therefore he asked permission to take the affidavit home.

Pocketing the paper, after receiving the necessary permission, Sanderson caught Owen looking at him with a smile. He scowled at the little man.

"What's eatin' you?" he demanded.

"Curiosity," said the other. "Don't tell me you're too bashful to sign your name in public."

They were mounting their horses when the little man spoke, and Sanderson grinned coldly at him.

"You're a whole lot longer on talk than I like any of my friends to be," he said.

"Then I'll cut out gassing promiscuous," grinned the latter.

Sanderson was troubled over the situation. To successfully keep Dale from attacking his title to the ranch he must sign the affidavit and return it to the court. He must imitate Will Bransford's signature to prevent Mary Bransford from suspecting the deception—for at any time she might decide to go to Las Vegas to look over the records there.

More, he must practice writing Bransford's signature until he could imitate it without having to look at the original.

Determined to go to work at the deception instantly, Sanderson returned to the ranchhouse, slipped into his room and locked the door, opened the drawer and took out the package of letters.

The Bransford letter was missing! Half a dozen times he thumbed the letters in the packages over before he would admit that the one for which he was seeking was not there.

He stood for a time looking at the package of letters, bitterly accusing himself. It was his own fault if the whole structure of deception tumbled about his ears, for he should have taken the letter when he had had an opportunity.

Mary Bransford had it, of course. The other letters, he supposed, she cared less for than the one written by her brother.

For the twentieth time since his arrival at the ranch, Sanderson had an impulse to ride away and leave Mary Bransford to fight the thing out herself. But, as before, he fought down the impulse.

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This time—so imbued was he with determination to heap confusion upon Alva Dale's head—he stood in the center of the room, grinning saturninely, fully resolved that if it must be he would make a complete confession to the girl and stay at the Double A to fight Dale no matter what Mary thought of him.

He might have gone to Mary, to ask her what had become of the letter. He could have invented some pretext. But he would not; he would not have her think he had been examining her letters. One thing he could do without confessing that he had been prying—and he did it.

At dinner he remarked casually to Mary:

"I reckon you don't think enough of my letters put them away as keepsakes?"

"Sanderson's or Bransford's?" she returned, looking at him with a smile.

"Both," he grinned.

"Well," she said, "I did keep both. But, as I told you before, I had the Sanderson letter somewhere. I have been looking for it, but have not been able to find it."

Sanderson grinned faintly and wondered what she would say if she knew what care he had taken to burn the Sanderson letter.

"The letter you wrote as yourself—the Bransford letter—I have. It was among a lot of others in the drawer of the dresser in your room. I was looking them over while you were gone, and I took it."

Sanderson had a hard time to keep the eagerness out of his voice, but he did so:

"You got it handy?"

She looked straight at him. "That is the oddest thing," she said seriously. "I took it from there to keep it safe, and I have mislaid it again, for I can't find it anywhere."

There was no guile in her eyes—Sanderson was certain of that. And he hoped the letter would stay mislaid. He grinned.

"Well, I was only curious," he said. "Don't bother to look for it."

He felt better when he went out of the house and walked toward the corral fence. He felt more secure and capable. Beginning with the following day, he meant to take charge of the ranch and run it as he knew it should be run.

He had not been at the Double A long, but he had seen signs of shiftlessness here and there. He had no doubt that since Bransford's death the men had taken advantage of the absence of authority to relax, and the ranch had suffered. He would soon bring them back to a state of efficiency.

He heard a step behind him, and looking over his shoulder he saw the little man approaching.

The little man joined Sanderson, not speaking as he climbed the fence at a point near by and sat on the top rail, idly swinging his legs.

Sanderson had conceived a liking for Owen. There was something about the little man that invited it. He was little, and manly despite his bodily defects. But there was a suggestion of effeminacy mingling with the manliness of him that aroused the protective instinct in Sanderson.

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In a big man the suggestion of effeminacy would have been disgusting, and Sanderson's first action as owner of the ranch would have been to discharge such a man instantly. But in Sanderson's heart had come a spirit of tolerance toward the little man, for he felt that the effeminacy had resulted from his afflictions.

He was a querulous semi-invalid, trying bravely to imitate his vigorous and healthy friends.

"Thinking it over?" he queried, looking down at Sanderson.

"Thinkin' what over?"

"Well, just things," grinned the little man. "For one thing, I suppose you are trying to decide why you didn't sign your name—over in Las Vegas."

Sanderson grinned mildly, but did not answer. He felt more at ease now, and the little man's impertinences did not bother him so much as formerly. He looked up, however, startled, when Owen said slowly:

"Do you want me to tell you why you didn't sign Will Bransford's name to the affidavit?"

Sanderson's eyes did not waver as they met Owen's.

"Tell me," he said evenly.

"Because you are not Will Bransford," said the little man.

Sanderson did not move; nor did he remove his gaze from the face of the little man. He was not conscious of any emotion whatever. For now that he had determined to stay at the Double A no matter what happened, discovery did not alarm him. He grinned at the little man, deliberately, with a taunting smile that the other could not fail to understand.

"You're a wise guy, eh?" he said. "Well, spring it. I'm anxious to know how you got next to me."

"You ain't sore, then?"

"Not, none."

"I was hoping you wouldn't be," eagerly said the little man, "for I don't want you to hit the breeze just now. I know you are not Will Bransford because I know Bransford intimately. I was his chum for several years. He could drink as much as I. He was lazy and shiftless, but I liked him. We were together in Tucson—and in other places in Arizona. Texas, too. We never amounted to much. Do you need to know any more? I can tell you."

“Tell me what?”

“More,” grinned the other man, “about yourself. You are Sanderson—Deal Sanderson—nicknamed Square Deal Sanderson. I saw you one day in Tombstone; you were pointed out to me, and the minute I laid my eyes on you the day Dale tried to hang Nyland, I knew you.”

Sanderson smiled. “Why didn’t you tell Mary?”

The little man’s face grew grave. “Because I didn’t want to queer your game. You saved Nyland—an innocent man. Knowing your reputation for fairness, I was convinced that you didn’t come here to deceive anybody.”

“But I did deceive somebody,” said Sanderson. “Not you, accordin’ to what you’ve been tellin’ me, but Mary Bransford. She thinks I am her brother, an’ I’ve let her go on thinkin’ it.”

“Why?” asked the little man.

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Sanderson gravely appraised the other. "There ain't no use of holdin' out anything on you," he said. His lips straightened and his eyes bored into the little man's. There was a light in his own that made the little man stiffen. And Sanderson's voice was cold and earnest.

"I'm puttin' you wise to why I've not told her," he went on. "But if you ever open your yap far enough to whisper a word of it to her I'm wringin' your neck, *pronto!* That goes!"

He told Owen the story from the beginning—about the Drifter, his letter to the elder Bransford, how he had killed the two men who had murdered Will Bransford, and how, on the impulse of the moment, he had impersonated Mary's brother.

"What are you figuring to do now?" questioned the little man when Sanderson finished.

"I'm tellin' her right now," declared Sanderson. "She'll salivate me, most likely, for me lettin' her kiss me an' fuss over me. But I ain't carin' a heap. I ain't never been no hand at deceivin' no one—I ain't foxy enough. There's been times since I've been here when I've been scared to open my mouth for fear my damned heart would jump out. I reckon she'll just naturally kill me when she finds it out, but I don't seem to care a heap whether she does or not."

The little man narrowed his eyes at Sanderson.

"You're deeply in love with her, I suppose?"

Sanderson flushed; then his gaze grew steady and cold. "Up till now you've minded your own business," he said. "If you'll keep on mindin' it, we'll——"

"Of course," grinned Owen. "You couldn't help loving her—I love her, too. You say you're going to tell her. Don't do it. Why should you? Don't you see that if you told her that her brother had been murdered she'd never get over it? She's that kind. And you know what Dale's scheme was, don't you? Has she told you?" At Sanderson's nod, Owen went on:

"If you were to let it be known that you are not Will Bransford, Dale would get the property as sure as shooting. I know his plan. I overheard him and a man named Dave Silverthorn talking it over one night when I was prowling around Dale's house. The window of Dale's office was wide open, and I was crouching outside.

"They've got a man ready to come on here to impersonate Bransford. They would prove his claim and after he was established he would sell out to them. They have forged papers showing that Mary is an adopted daughter—though not legally. Don't you see that if you don't go on letting everybody think you are Bransford, Mary will lose the ranch?"

Sanderson shook his head. "I'd be gettin' deeper an' deeper into it all the time—in love an' in trouble. An' when she'd find out how I'd fooled her all the time she'd hate me."

"Not if you save the ranch for her," argued the little man. "She'd feel badly about her brother, maybe, but she'd forgive you if you stayed and beat Dale at his own game."

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Sanderson did not answer. The little man climbed down from the fence and moved close to him, talking earnestly, and at last Sanderson grinned down at him.

"I'm doing it," he said. "I'll stay. I reckon I was figurin' on it all the time."

CHAPTER X

PLAIN TALK

Barney Owen had told Sanderson of his hatred for Alva Dale, but he had not told Sanderson many other things. He had not told the true story of how he came to be employed at the Double A—how Mary had come upon him one day at a shallow crossing of the river, far down in the basin.

Owen was flat on his stomach at the edge of the water, scooping it up with eager handfuls to quench a thirst that had endured for days. He had been so weak that he could not stand when she found him, and in some way she got him on his horse and brought him to the ranchhouse, there to nurse him until he recovered his strength.

It had been while she was caring for him that she had told him about her fear of Dale, and thereafter—as soon as he was able to ride again—Owen took it upon himself to watch Dale.

In spite of his exceeding slenderness, Owen seemed to possess the endurance and stamina of a larger and more physically perfect man. For though he was always seen about the ranchhouse during the day—helping at odd jobs and appearing to be busy nearly all the time—each succeeding night found him stealthily mounting his horse to ride to the Bar D, there to watch Dale's movements.

He had not been at the Bar D since the night before the day on which he had left with Sanderson to go to Las Vegas, but on the second night following his return—soon after dark—he went to the stable, threw saddle and bridle on his horse, and vanished into the shadows of the basin.

Later, moving carefully, he appeared at the edge of a tree clump near the Bar D corral. He saw a light in one of the windows of the house—Dale's office—and he left his horse in the shadows and stole forward. There were two men in the office with Dale. Owen saw them and heard their voices as he crept to a point under the window in the dense blackness of the night.

The men Dale had sent to Tucson had not required the full two weeks for the trip; they had made it in ten days, and their faces, as they sat before Dale in the office, showed the effects of their haste. Yet they grinned at Dale as they talked, glowing with pride

over their achievement, but the word they brought to Dale did not please him, and he sat glaring at them until they finished.

“Gary Miller ain’t been heard of for a month, eh?” he said. “You say you heard he started this way? Then where in hell is he?”

Neither of the men could answer that question and Dale dismissed them. Then he walked to a door, opened it, and called to someone in another room. Dave Silverthorn entered the office, and for more than an hour the two talked, their conversation being punctuated with futile queries and profanity.

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At ten o'clock the next morning Dale appeared at the Double A ranchhouse. Apparently he was willing to forgive and forget, for he grinned at Owen, who was watching him from the door of the bunkhouse, and he politely doffed his hat to Mary Bransford, who met him at the door of the ranchhouse.

"Well, Miss Mary," he said, "how does it feel to have a brother again?"

"It's rather satisfying, Dale," smiled the girl. "Won't you get off your horse?"

The girl's lips were stiff with dread anticipation and dislike. Dale's manner did not mislead her; his forced geniality, his gruff heartiness, his huge smile, were all insincere, masking evil. He seemed to her like a big, tawny, grinning beast, and her heart thumped with trepidation as she looked at him.

"How's Nyland?" he asked, smiling hugely. "That was a narrow squeak—now, wasn't it? For I found that Ben Nyland didn't brand them cattle at all—it was another man, living down the basin. That nester near Colby's. He done it. But he sloped before we could get a rope on him. Had a grudge against Nyland, I reckon. Sorry it happened."

Thus he attempted to smooth the matter over. But he saw that Mary did not believe him, and his grin grew broader.

"Where's brother Will this mornin', Mary?" he said.

Sanderson appeared in the doorway behind Mary.

"You could see him if you was half lookin'," he said slowly.

"So I could," guffawed Dale. "But if there's a pretty girl around——"

"You come here on business, Dale?" interrupted Sanderson. "Because if you did," he went on before Dale could answer, "I'd be glad to get it over."

"Meanin' that you don't want me to be hangin' around here no longer than is necessary, eh?" said Dale.

"You've said a heap," drawled Sanderson.

"Well, it won't take a long time," Dale returned. "It's just this. I've got word from Las Vegas that you've swore to an affidavit sayin' that you're Will Bransford. That's all right—I ain't got nothin' to say about that. But there's a law about brands.

"Your dad registered his brand—the Double A. But that don't let you out. Accordin' to the law you've got to do your registerin' same as though the brand had never been

registered before. Bein' the only law around here—me bein' a deputy sheriff—I've got to look out for that end of it.

"An' so, if you'll just sign this here blank, with your name and address, specifyin' your brand, why, we'll call it all settled."

And he held out a legal-looking paper toward Sanderson.

Sanderson's lips straightened, for as his eyes met Dale's he saw the latter's glint with a cold cunning. For an instant Sanderson meditated, refusing to accept the paper, divining that Dale was concealing his real purpose; but glancing sidewise he caught a swift wink from Owen, who had drawn near and was standing beside a porch column. And he saw Owen distinctly jerk his head toward the house.

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Sanderson stepped forward and took the paper from Dale's hand. Then he abruptly strode toward the house, telling Dale to wait.

Sanderson halted in the middle of the sitting-room as Owen entered the room through, a rear door. Barney Owen was grinning.

"Wants your signature, does he?" said Owen. He whispered rapidly to Sanderson, and the latter's face grew pale and grim as he listened. When Owen had finished he grinned.

"Now we'll give him Will Bransford's signature—just as he used to write it. I've seen it more times than any other man ever saw it, and I can duplicate it to a flourish. Give me the paper!"

He sat down at a table, where there was a pen and a bottle of ink and wrote boldly: "Will Bransford." With a grin he passed the paper back.

Sanderson stared, then a smile wreathed his lips, for the signature was seemingly a duplicate of that which had been written at the bottom of the letter Will Bransford had written to his father.

On his way to return the paper to Dale, Sanderson paused to listen again to Owen, who whispered to him. Sanderson stiffened, looked hard at Owen, and then grinned with straight lips. In less than no time he was out of the house and confronting Dale.

He watched while the latter looked at the signature; he saw the expression of disappointment that swept over Dale's face. Then Sanderson spoke coldly:

"Right and proper, eh, Dale? Now I'll trouble you for that letter that my dad dropped about a year ago—the one you picked up. It was a letter from me, an' dad had let you read it. Fork it over, or I'll bore you an' take it from your clothes!"

CHAPTER XI

THE ULTIMATUM

Dale's face whitened; for a moment he sat rigid, staring, his eyes boring into Sanderson's. Then he reached into a pocket, drew out a dirty envelope, and threw it at Sanderson's feet.

"You're a damned smart boy, ain't you, Bransford?" he sneered. "But I'm out to get you—remember that!"

"And you remember this, Dale!"

Sanderson was at the head of the horse Dale rode. His eyes were blazing with suppressed fury, brought on by the other's threat. "There's goin' to be a new deal in the basin. From now on I'm runnin' things—an' they're runnin' square! I ain't got any use for any law but this!" He tapped the butt of his six-shooter significantly. "An' if you go to gettin' mixed up with the Double A or the Nyland ranch you'll get it—plenty!"

Dale grinned, hideously. Then he kicked his horse in the ribs and rode away.

Mary Bransford had not moved from her position on the porch. Sanderson watched Dale ride away, then he smiled at Mary and entered the house. Mary followed him. She saw Owen standing in the sitting-room, and her face showed her surprise.

Sanderson explained. "Owen an' me framed up on Dale," he said. "You saw it work."

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"You'll be careful, won't you, Will?" she said.

"Deal," smilingly insisted Sanderson.

"Deal," she repeated, giving him a look that made him blush. Then she went into one of the other rooms, and Sanderson and Owen went outside. At the corner of the stable Sanderson halted and faced Owen.

"You've got some explainin' to do," he said. "How did you know Dale had a letter from Will Bransford to his father; an' how did you know that Dale wanted me to write my name on that brand-registering blank so he could compare it with Will Bransford's name on the letter?"

"Will Bransford told me he wrote such a letter; he showed me a letter from his dad which told how he had dropped Will's letter and how Dale had picked it up. Dale thought old Bransford hadn't seen him pick up the letter—but Bransford did see him. And last night I was snooping around over at the Bar D and I overheard Dale and Silverthorn cooking up this deal."

Sanderson grinned with relief. "Well," he said, "that name-signing deal sure had me considerable fussed up." He told Owen of his mental torture following the discovery of the letter that had disappeared from the dresser drawer. "We've got to run together from now on," he told Owen. "I'll be Bransford an' you'll be Bransford's name. Mebbe between us we'll make a whole man."

Over at the Bar D, Dale was scowling at Silverthorn.

"He ain't Will Bransford," Dale declared. "He signed his name all O.K. an' regular, just the same as it was on the letter. But just the same he ain't a Bransford. There ain't no Bransford ever had an eye in him like he's got. He's a damned iceberg for nerve, an' there's more fight in him than there is in a bunch of wildcats—if you get him started!"

"Just the same," smiled Silverthorn, silkily, "we'll get the Double A. Look here—" And the two bent their heads together over Dale's desk.

CHAPTER XII

DALE MOVES

A passionate hatred of Alva Dale was slowly gripping Sanderson. It had been aroused on that first day of his meeting with the man, when he had seen Dale standing in front of the stable, bullying Mary Bransford and Peggy Nyland and her brother. At that time, however, the emotion Sanderson felt had been merely dislike—as Sanderson had always disliked men who attempted to bully others.

Sanderson's hatred of Dale was beginning to dominate him; it was overwhelming all other emotions. It dulled his sense of guilt for the part he was playing in deceiving Mary Bransford; it made him feel in a measure justified in continuing to deceive her.

For he divined that without his help Mary would lose the Double A.

Sanderson had always loved a fight, and the prospect of bringing defeat and confusion upon Dale was one that made his pulses leap with delight.

He got up on the morning following Dale's visit, tingling with eagerness. And yet there was no sign of emotion in his face when he sat with Mary Bransford at breakfast, and he did not even look at her when he left the house, mounted his horse, and rode up the gorge that split the butte at the southern end of the range.

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All morning he prowled over the table-land, paying a great deal of attention to the depth of the gorge, estimating its capacity for holding water, scanning the far reaches of the big basin carefully, and noting the location of the buildings dotting it.

Shortly after noon he rode back to the house and came upon Mary in the kitchen.

"I've put off askin' until now," he said while eating the food that Mary placed before him. "How much money did dad leave?"

"Not much," she said. "He was never very prosperous. It took a great deal to send me to school, and the thousand I sent you I saved myself out of the allowance he gave me. I think there are three thousand dollars to father's credit at the bank in Okar."

"Where's Okar?"

She looked quickly at him. "Don't you remember Okar? That little town just beyond the mouth of the basin? Why, you've been there a good many times, Will, on errands for father. There wasn't much to Okar when you were here—just a few shanties and a store. Surely you remember!"

Sanderson flushed. "I reckon I do remember, now that you speak of it," he lied. "But I don't think Okar has grown much."

"Okar has grown to be an important town—for this locality," Mary smiled. "You see, the railroad has made it grow. It is now quite large, and has a bank and a dozen or more stores. It is a depot for supplies for a big section, and the railroad company has built large corrals there. A man named Silverthorn—and Alva Dale—are the rulers of Okar, now."

"Who is Silverthorn?"

"He is connected with the railroad company—a promoter, or something of that character. He is trying to make a boom town of Okar. He has bought a great deal of land in the basin."

"You know what he wants the land for?" Sanderson smiled at her.

"For speculation purposes, I suppose. If he could get water——"

"You've figured it out," said Sanderson. "But he won't get water. The water belongs to the Double A—to me an' to you. An' we're goin' to sell it ourselves."

"You mean——" began Mary.

"That we're going to build an irrigation dam—with all the fixin's. You and me."

The girl sat erect, her eyes luminous and eager. “Do you think we can do it?” she whispered.

“Do you think you could trust me with the three thousand you said dad left? An’ would you be willin’ to mortgage the Double A—if we needed more money?”

“Why,” she declared, breathlessly, “the Double A is yours—to do with as you see fit. If you want to try—and you think there is a chance to win—why, why—go to it!”

“You’re a brick!” grinned Sanderson. “We’ll start the ball to rollin’ right away.”

Sanderson could not escape the vigorous hug she gave him, but he did manage to evade her lips, and he went out of the house blushing and grinning.

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It was late in the afternoon when he got to Okar. Barney Owen was with him. The two rode into town, dismounted at a hitching rail in front of a building across the front of which was a sign:

The Okar hotel

Okar was flourishing—as Mary Bransford said. At its northwestern corner the basin widened, spreading between the shoulders of two mountains and meeting a vast stretch of level land that seemed to be endless.

Okar lay at the foot of the mountain that lifted its bald knob at the eastern side of the basin's mouth. Two glittering lines of steel that came from out of the obscurity of distance eastward skirted Okar's buildings and passed westward into an obscurity equally distant.

The country around Okar was devoted to cattle. Sanderson's practiced eye told him that. The rich grassland that spread from Okar's confines was the force that had brought the town into being, and the railroad would make Okar permanent.

Okar did not look permanent, however. It was of the type of the average cow-town of the western plains—artificial and crude. Its buildings were of frame, hurriedly knocked together, representing the haste of a people in whom the pioneer instinct was strong and compelling—who cared nothing for appearances, but who fought mightily for wealth and progress.

Upon Okar was the stamp of newness, and in its atmosphere was the eagerness and the fervor of commercialism. Okar was the trade mart of a section of country larger than some of the Old World states.

Fringing the hitching rails in front of its buildings were various vehicles—the heavy wagons of Mexican freighters, the light buckboard of the cattleman, and the prairie schooner of the homesteader. Mingling with the vehicles were the cow-ponies of horsemen who had ridden into town on various errands; and in the company corrals were many cattle awaiting shipment.

Sanderson stood beside his horse at the hitching rail for a look at Okar.

There was one street—wide and dust-windrowed, with two narrow board walks skirting it. The buildings—mostly of one story—did not interest Sanderson, for he had seen their kind many times, and his interest centered upon the people.

"Different from Tombstone," he told Owen as the two entered the hotel. "Tombstone is cattle—Okar is cattle and business. I sort of like cattle better."

Owen grinned. "Cattle are too slow for some of Okar's men," he said. "There's men here that figure on making a killing every day—financially. Gamblers winning big stakes, supply dealers charging twenty times the value of their stuff; a banker wanting enormous interest on his money; the railroad company gobbling everything in sight—and Silverthorn and Dale framing up to take all the land and the water-rights. See that short, fat man playing cards with the little one at that table?"

He indicated a table near the rear of the barroom, visible through an archway that opened from the room in which a clerk with a thin, narrow face and an alert eye presided at a rough desk.

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"That's Maison—Tom Maison, Okar's banker. They tell me he'd skin his grandmother if he thought he could make a dollar out of the deal." Owen grinned. "He's the man you're figuring to borrow money from—to build your dam."

"I'll talk with him tomorrow," said Sanderson.

In their room Sanderson removed some of the stains of travel. Then, telling Owen he would see him at dusk, he went out into the street.

Okar was buzzing with life and humming with activity when Sanderson started down the board walk. In Okar was typified the spirit of the West that was to be—the intense hustle and movement that were to make the town as large and as powerful as many of its sister cities.

Threading his way through the crowd on the board walk, Sanderson collided with a man. He grinned, not looking at the other, apologized, and was proceeding on his way, when he chanced to look toward the doorway of the building he was passing.

Alva Dale was standing just inside the doorway, watching him, and as Sanderson's gaze met his Dale grinned sneeringly.

Sanderson's lips twitched with contempt. His own smile matched Dale's in the quality of its hostility.

Sanderson was about to pass on when someone struck him heavily between the shoulders. He staggered and lurched against the rough board front of the building going almost to his knees.

When he could steady himself he wheeled, his hand at his hip. Standing near him, grinning maliciously, was the man with whom he had collided.

In the man's right hand was a pistol.

"Bump into me, will you—you locoed shorthorn!" sneered the man as Sanderson turned. He cursed profanely, incoherently. But he did not shoot.

The weapon in his hand began to sag curiously, the fingers holding it slowly slipping from the stock. And the man's face—thin and seamed—became chalklike beneath the tan upon it. His eyes, furtive and wolfish, bulged with astonishment and recognition, and his mouth opened vacuously.

"Deal Sanderson!" he said, weakly. "Good Lord! I didn't git a good look at yon! I'm in the wrong pew, Deal, an' I sure don't want none of your game!"

“Dal Colton,” said Sanderson. His voice was cold and even as he watched the other sheathe his gun. “Didn’t know me, eh? But you was figurin’ on pluggin’ me.”

He walked close to the man and stuck his face close to the other, his lips in a straight line. He knew Colton to be one of the most conscienceless “killers” in the section of the country near Tombstone.

“Who was you lookin’ for, then?” demanded Sanderson.

“Not you—that’s a cinch!” grinned the other, fidgeting nervously under Sanderson’s gaze. He whispered to Sanderson, for in the latter’s eyes he saw signs of a cold resolve to sift the matter to the bottom:

“Look here, Square; I sure don’t want none of your game. Things has been goin’ sorta offish for me for a while, an’ so when I meets a guy a while ago who tells me to ‘git’ a guy named Will Bransford—pointin’ you out to me when your back was turned—I takes him up. I wasn’t figurin’——”

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"Who told you to get Bransford?" demanded Sanderson.

"A guy named Dale," whispered Colton.

Sanderson turned swiftly. He saw Dale still standing in the doorway. Dale was grinning coldly, and Sanderson knew he suspected what had been whispered by Colton. But before Sanderson could move, Dale's voice was raised loudly and authoritatively:

"Arrest that man—quick!"

A man behind Sanderson lunged forward, twisting Sanderson around with the impetus of the movement. Off his balance, Sanderson saw three or four other men dive toward Colton. He saw Colton reach for the weapon he had previously sheathed; saw the weapon knocked from his hand.

Four men seized Colton, and he struggled helplessly in their grasp as he was dragged away, his face working malignantly as he looked back at Dale.

"Double-crossed!" he yelled; "you damned, grinnin' coyote!"

A crowd had gathered; Sanderson shouldered his way toward Dale and faced him. Sanderson's face was white with rage, but his voice was cold and steady as he stood before Dale.

"So that's the way you work, is it, Dale? I'll give you what you was goin' to pay Colton, if you'll pull your gun right now!"

Dale's smile was maddeningly insolent.

"Bah!" he said, "I'm an officer of the law. There are a dozen of my men right behind you! Pull your gun! I'd like nothing better than to have an excuse to perforate you! Sanderson, eh?" he laughed. "Well, I've heard of you. Square Deal, eh? And here you are, masqueradin' as Will Bransford! That's goin' to be quite an interestin' situation at the Double A when things get to goin', eh?"

He laughed again, raucously, and turned his back to Sanderson, disappearing into the store.

Sanderson glanced behind him. Several men were watching him, their faces set and determined. Sanderson grinned at them and continued his interrupted walk down the street.

But something had been added to his hatred of Alva Dale—the knowledge that Dale would not scruple to murder him on any pretext. Sanderson's grin grew wider as he

walked, for he knew of several men who had harbored such evil intentions against him, and they——

But Dale was a stronger antagonist, and he had power and authority behind him. Still, his spirit undaunted, Sanderson's grin grew wider, though perhaps more grim. It was entirely worth while, now, the deceiving of the woman he had hoped to protect; it wasn't her fight, but his. And he would make the fight a good one.

CHAPTER XIII

A PLOT THAT WORKED

Sanderson left the board walk and cut through a yard to the railroad. He followed the rails until he reached the station. To his question the station agent informed him that Dave Silverthorn might be found in his office on the second floor of the building.

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Sanderson went up. A sign on a glass door bore Silverthorn's name. Sanderson entered without knocking.

Silverthorn was seated at a desk in a far corner of the room. He looked up as Sanderson opened the door, and said shortly:

"Well—what is it?"

Sanderson crossed the room and halted beside the desk. For an instant neither man spoke. Sanderson saw a man of medium height with a rather well-rounded stomach, sloping shoulders, and a sleek, well-fed appearance. His cheeks were full and florid, his lips large and loose; his eyes cold, calculating, and hard.

Silverthorn saw a lean-faced, broad-shouldered young man with a strong chin, a firm mouth, and an eye that fixed him with a steady, unwavering interest.

By the gleam in Sanderson's eyes Silverthorn divined that he was in the presence of a strong, opposing force, and he drew a slow, deep breath.

"Well?" he said, again.

"You're Dave Silverthorn?"

The other nodded. "What can I do for you?" he questioned.

"You can listen while I talk," said Sanderson.

"I'm Will Bransford, of the Double A. I have heard from several sources that you an' Alva Dale are after the title to the Double A. You want the water-rights. You can't have them. An' the title to the Double A stays with me. Understand that? I am goin' to hold on to the property.

"I've heard you can juggle the law—that's your business. But you can't juggle the law enough to horn in on the Double A. If you do, I'm comin' for you with a law of my own!" He tapped his gun bolster significantly.

"That's all," he concluded. "Are you sure you understand?"

"Perfectly," answered Silverthorn. He was smiling mirthlessly, his face blotched and bloated with mingled fear and rage. "But I'll have you understand this: I am not afraid of your threats. You can't bully me. The S. and M. Railroad has dealt with your kind on more than one occasion. There is an opportunity here to develop a large section of land, and my company means to do it. We mean to be fair, however. We'll buy your title to the Double A. How much do you want for it?"

Sanderson grinned. "The Double A is not for sale. I wouldn't sell it to you for a million! You cheap crooks think that all you have to do is to take anything you want. I just stopped in to tell you that I'm wise to your game, an' that the kind of law I represent ain't cluttered up with angles an' technical processes. She runs straight to a square deal all around. That's all, Mr. Silverthorn."

He turned and went out, closing the door behind him.

He had not intended to have his talk with Tom Maison, Okar's banker, until the following morning. But upon returning to Okar's street he saw Maison ahead of him on the sidewalk. He followed the banker, saw him enter the front door of the bank building, and a few minutes later he was sitting opposite Maison at a table in the banker's private room.

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Maison was short and pudgy, short of breath, with a pasty complexion.

"Will Bransford, eh?" he said, looking sharply at Sanderson over the table. "H'm. You don't look much like your father."

"Nor I don't act like him, either," smiled Sanderson. "For instance," he went on at the banker's quick look, "dad was slow; he wasn't alive to his opportunities. How long has it been since the railroad came to Okar?"

"Five years."

"Then dad was five years slower than he ought to have been. He ought to have seen what water would do to the basin. He didn't—left that for me."

"Meaning what?" asked Maison, as Sanderson paused.

"Meanin' that I want to turn the Double A water into the basin. That's what I came here to see you for. I want to mortgage the Double A to the limit; I want to build a dam, irrigation canals, locks, an' everything that goes with it. It will take a heap of money."

Maison reflected. "And you want me to supply it," he said. "Yes, that project will require a large sum. H'm! It is—er—do you purpose to try to handle the project yourself, Mr. Bransford?"

"Me an' Mary Bransford. I'll hire an engineer."

Maison's cheeks reddened a trifle. He seemed to lose interest slightly.

"Don't you think it is rather too big a thing for one man to handle—aided by a woman?" He smiled blandly at Sanderson. "I have thought of the water situation in the basin. It is my opinion that it might be worked out successfully.

"Why not organize a company—say a company composed of influential and powerful men like Silverthorn and Dale and—er—myself. We could issue stock, you know. Each would take a certain number of shares—paying you for them, of course, and leaving you in possession of a large block of it—say—forty per cent. We could organize, elect officers——"

"An' freeze me out," smiled Sanderson.

Maison sat erect and gazed haughtily at his visitor.

"No one has ever questioned my honesty," he declared.

Sanderson smiled at him. "Nor I don't. But I want to play her a lone hand."

"I am afraid I wouldn't be interested in that sort of project," said Maison.

The thought that Maison *would* be interested—not publicly, but privately—made Sanderson grin. The grin angered Maison; he arose smiling coldly.

"I am sorry to have taken your time, Mr. Bransford," he said, dismissing his visitor.

Sanderson did not give up. "My father left some money in your bank," he said; "I'll take it."

"Certainly," said the banker. He got a withdrawal blank and laid it before Sanderson.

"The amount is three thousand two hundred," he said. "Just fill that out and sign your name and you can have the money."

Sanderson did not sign; he sat, looking at the blank, suddenly afflicted with the knowledge that once more the troublesome "Bransford" signature had placed him in a dilemma.

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Undoubtedly Maison, Silverthorn, and Dale were confederates in this matter, and Dale's insistence that he sign the register claim was a mere subterfuge to obtain a copy of the Bransford signature in order to make trouble for him. It occurred to Sanderson that the men suspected him, and he grinned coldly as he raised his eyes to Maison.

Maison was watching him, keenly; and his flush when he saw Sanderson looking at him convinced the latter that his suspicions were not without foundation.

If Sanderson could have known that he had hardly left the hotel when a man whispered to Maison; and that Maison had said to the man: "All right, I'll go down and wait for him," Sanderson could not have more accurately interpreted Maison's flush.

Sanderson's grin grew grim. "It's a frame-up," he told himself. His grin grew saturnine. He got up, folded the withdrawal blank and stuck it in a pocket.

"I'm leavin' the money here tonight," he said. "For a man that ain't been to town in a long while, there'd be too many temptations yankin' at me."

He went out, leaving Maison to watch him from a window, a flush of chagrin on his face.

Sanderson walked down the street toward the hotel. He would have Owen sign the withdrawal blank before morning—that would defeat Maison's plan to gain evidence of the impersonation.

Sanderson had not been gone from Silverthorn's office more than five minutes when Dale entered. Silverthorn was sitting at his desk scowling, his face pale with big, heavy lines in it showing the strain of his interview with Sanderson.

"Bransford's been here!" guessed Dale, looking at Silverthorn.

Silverthorn nodded, cursing.

"You don't need to feel conceited," laughed Dale; "he's been to see me, too."

Dale related what had happened on the street some time before, and Silverthorn's scowl deepened.

"There are times when you don't seem to be able to think at all, Dale!" he declared.

"After this, when you decide to do a thing, see me first—or Maison. The last thing we want to happen right now is to have this fake Bransford killed."

"Why?"

"I've just got word from Las Vegas that he's submitted his affidavit establishing his identity, and that the court has accepted it. That settles the matter until—or unless—we

can get evidence to the contrary. And if he dies without us getting that evidence we are through.”

“Him dyin’ would make things sure for us,” contended Dale. “Mary Bransford wouldn’t have any claim—us havin’ proof that she ain’t a Bransford.”

“This fellow is no fool,” declared Silverthorn. “Suppose he’s wise to us, which he might be, and he has willed the property to the girl. Where would we be, not being able to prove that he isn’t Will Bransford?”

Dale meditated. Then he made a wry face. “That’s right,” he finally admitted. He made a gesture of futility. “I reckon I’ll let you do the plannin’ after this.”

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"All right," said Silverthorn, mollified. "Have you set Morley on Barney Owen?"

"Owen was goin' right strong a few minutes after this Bransford guy left him," grinned Dale.

"All right," said Silverthorn, "go ahead the way we planned it. But don't have our friend killed."

When Sanderson entered the hotel the clerk was alone in the office pondering over the register.

Dusk had fallen, and the light in the office was rather dim. Through the archway connecting the office with the saloon came a broad beam of light from a number of kerosene lamps. From beyond the archway issued the buzz of voices and the clink of glasses; peering through the opening Sanderson could see that the barroom was crowded.

Sanderson mounted the stairs leading from the office. When he had left Owen, the latter had told Sanderson that it was his intention to spend the time until the return of his friend in reading.

Owen, however, was not in the room. Sanderson descended the stairs, walked to the archway that led into the saloon, and looked inside. In a rear corner of the barroom he saw Owen, seated at a table with several other men. Owen's face was flushed; he was talking loudly and extravagantly.

Sanderson remembered what Owen had told him concerning his appetite for strong liquor, he remembered, too, that Owen was in possession of a secret which, if divulged, would deliver Mary Bransford into the hands of her enemies.

Sanderson's blood rioted with rage and disgust. He crossed the barroom and stood behind Owen. The latter did not see him. One of the men with Owen did see Sanderson, though, and he looked up impudently, and smilingly pushed a filled glass of amber-colored liquor toward Owen.

"You ain't half drinkin', Owen," he said.

Sanderson reached over, took the glass, threw its contents on the floor and grasped Owen by the shoulder. His gaze met the tempter's, coldly.

"My friend ain't drinkin' no more tonight," he declared.

The tempter sneered, his body stiffening.

“He ain’t, eh?” he grinned, insolently. “I reckon you don’t know him; he likes whisky as a fish likes water.”

Several men in the vicinity guffawed loudly.

Owen was drunk. His hair was rumpled, his face was flushed, and his eyes were bleared and wide with an unreasoning, belligerent light as he got up, swaying unsteadily, and looked at Sanderson.

“Not drink any more?” he demanded loudly. “Who says I can’t? I’ve got lots of money, and there’s lots of booze here. Who says I can’t drink any more?”

And now, for the first time, he seemed to realize that Sanderson stood before him. But the knowledge appeared merely to increase his belligerence to an insane fury. He broke from Sanderson’s restraining grasp and stood off, reeling, looking at Sanderson with the grin of a satyr.

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"Look who's telling me I can't drink any more!" he taunted, so that nearly every man in the room turned to look at him, "It's my guardian angel gentlemen—Will Bransford, of the Double A! Will Bransford—ha, ha, ha! Will Bransford! Come an' look at him, gentlemen! Says I can't drink any more booze. He's running the Double A, Bransford is. There's a lot I could tell you about Bransford—a whole lot! He ain't——"

His maudlin talk broke off short, for Sanderson had stepped to his side and placed a hand over his mouth. Owen struggled, broke away, and shouted:

"Damn you, let me alone! I'm going to tell these people who you are. You're——"

Again his talk was stilled. This time the method was swift and certain. Sanderson took another step toward him and struck. His fist landed on Owen's jaw, resounding with a vicious smack! in the sudden silence that had fallen, and Owen crumpled and sank to the floor in an inert heap.

Sanderson was bending over him, preparing to carry him to his room, when there came an interruption. A big man, with a drawn six-shooter, stepped to Sanderson's side. A dozen more shoved forward and stood near him, the crowd moving back, Sanderson sensed the movement and stood erect, leaving Owen still on the floor. One look at the hostile faces around him convinced Sanderson that the men were there by design.

He grinned mirthlessly into the face of the man with the drawn pistol.

"Frame-up, eh?" he said. "What's the game?"

"You're wanted for drawin' a gun on Dave Silverthorn—in his office. I'm a deputy sheriff, an' I've got a warrant for you. Want to see it?"

Sanderson did not answer. Here was a manifestation of Dale's power and cupidity.

The charge was a mere subterfuge, designed to deprive him of his liberty. Sanderson had no intention of submitting.

The deputy saw resistance in the gleam of Sanderson's eyes, and he spoke sharply, warningly:

"Don't try any funny business; I've a dozen men here!"

Sanderson laughed in his face. He lunged forward, striking bitterly with the movement. The deputy's body doubled forward—Sanderson's fist had been driven into his stomach. His gun clattered to the floor; he reached out, trying to grasp Sanderson, who evaded him and struck upward viciously.

The deputy slid to the floor, and Sanderson stood beside the table, his gun menacing the deputy's followers.

Sanderson had worked fast. Possibly the deputy's men had anticipated no resistance from Sanderson, or they had been stunned with the rapidity with which he had placed their leader out of action.

Not one of them had drawn a weapon. They watched Sanderson silently as he began to back away from them, still covering them with his pistol.

Sanderson had decided to desert Owen; the man had proved a traitor, and could not expect any consideration. Owen might talk—Sanderson expected he would talk; but he did not intend to jeopardize his liberty by staying to find out.

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He stepped backward cautiously, for he saw certain of the men begin to move restlessly. He cautioned them, swinging the muzzle of his pistol back and forth, the crowd behind him splitting apart as he retreated.

He had gone a dozen steps when someone tripped him. He fell backward, landing on his shoulders, his right elbow striking hard on the board floor and knocking the pistol out of his hand.

He saw the men surge forward, and he made a desperate effort to get to his feet. But he did not succeed. He was on his knees when several men, throwing themselves at him, landed on top of him. Their combined weight crushed him to the floor, but he squirmed out of the mass and got to his feet, striking at the faces he saw around him, worrying the men hither and yon, dragging them with him as he reeled under savage blows that were rained on him.

He had torn himself almost free; one man still clung to him, and he was trying to shake the fellow off, that he might hit him effectively, when a great weight seemed to fall on his head, blackness surrounded him, and he pitched face down on the floor.

CHAPTER XIV

TEE VOICE OF THE COYOTE

When Sanderson regained consciousness he was lying on his back on a board floor. His head seemed to have been smashed, he was dizzy and weak, but he sat up and looked around him.

Then he grinned wanly.

He was in jail. A heavy, barred door was in front of him; turning his head he saw an iron-grated window behind him. Door and window were set in heavy stone walls; two other stone walls, with a narrow iron cot set against one of them, rose blankly on either side.

Sanderson got up, reeling, and went to the window. Darkness had come; he could see Okar's lights flickering and winking at him from the buildings that skirted the street. Various sounds reached his ears—Okar's citizens were enjoying themselves.

Sanderson did not watch the lights long. He walked to the cot, seated himself on its edge, rested his elbows on his knees and his chin in the upturned palms of his hands and reflected on what had occurred to him.

Remembering the four thousand dollars in bills of large denomination that Burroughs had paid him when leaving the Pig-Pen, his hand went to the money belt around his waist.

Belt and money were gone!

Sanderson got up again, walked to the door and called.

A heavy-featured man slouched down the corridor and halted near the door.

“Awake, eh?” he grinned. “Dale sure did hand it to you—now, didn’t he? Well,” he added as Sanderson’s lips straightened at his words, “what’s eatin’ you?”

“I had a belt with some money in it—four thousand. What’s become of it?”

“Four thousand!” the man jeered. “That bump on the head is still affectin’ you, I reckon. Four thousand—shucks!” He laughed. “Well, I ain’t seen it—if that’s any consolation to you. If you’d had it when you come here I’d sure seen it.”

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"Who brought me here?"

"Dale and his first deputy—the guy you poked in the stummick, over in the Okar Hotel. They tell me you fi't like hell! What's Dale got ag'in' you? Be sure was some het up about you."

Sanderson did not answer. He turned his back to the jailer and walked to the cot, again sitting on its edge. He heard the jailer sniff contemptuously, but he paid no attention to him.

Prominent in Sanderson's thoughts was the realization that Dale had taken his money. He knew that was the last of it—Dale would not admit taking it. Sanderson had intended to use the four thousand on the Double A irrigation project. The sum, together with the three thousand he meant to draw from the Okar bank, would have been enough to make a decent start.

Sanderson had some bitter thoughts as he sat on the edge of the cot, all of them centering around Dale, Silverthorn, Maison, Owen, Mary Bransford, and himself. He realized that he had been defeated in the first clash with the forces opposed to him, that Owen had turned traitor, that Mary Bransford's position now was more precarious than it had been before his coming, and that he had to deal with resourceful, desperate, and unscrupulous men.

And yet, sitting there at the edge of the cot, Sanderson grinned. The grin did not make his face attractive, for it reflected something of the cold, bitter humor and savage passion that had gripped his soul.

At noon the next day Sanderson, looking out of the window of his cell; heard a sound at the door. He turned, to see Silverthorn standing in the corridor.

Silverthorn smiled blandly at him.

"Over it, I see," he said. "They used you rather roughly, eh? Well, they tell me you made them step some."

Sanderson deliberately turned his back and continued to look out of the window.

"On your dignity, eh?" sneered Silverthorn. "Well, let me tell you something. We've heard a lot about you—from Dal Colton and Barney Owen. Morley—one of our men—got Owen soused last night, as per orders, and Owen spilled his knowledge of you all over the town. It's pretty well known, now, that you are Deal Sanderson, from down Tombstone way.

"I don't know what your game was, but I think it's pretty well queered by now. I suppose you had some idea of impersonating Bransford, hoping to get a slice of the property. I don't blame you for trying. It was up to us to see that you didn't get away with it.

"But we don't want to play hog. If you'll admit before a notary that you are not Will Bransford we'll hand you back the four thousand Dale took from you, give you ten thousand in addition and safe conduct out of the county. That strike you?"

Sanderson did not answer.

Silverthorn's face reddened. "You're a damned fool!" he sneered, venomously. "We'll keep you in jail here for a thousand years, if necessary. We'll do worse!

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“Look here!” he suddenly said. But Sanderson did not turn. Silverthorn rattled a paper.

“Here’s a withdrawal slip on the Okar bank, calling for three thousand two hundred dollars, signed by Will Bransford. Barney Owen drew the money last night and blew it in gambling and drinking. He says he’s been signing Bransford’s name—forging it—at your orders. The signature he put on this paper is a dead ringer for the one on the registry blank you gave Dale.

“Dale saw Owen sign that. That’s why he knew you are not Will Bransford. Understand? Maison will swear you signed the withdrawal slip and got the money. We’ll prove that you are not Bransford, and you’ll go to the Las Vegas pen for twenty years! Now, let’s talk business!”

Sanderson turned. There was a mirthless grin on his face. He spoke loudly, calling the jailer.

When the latter appeared in the corridor beside Silverthorn, Sanderson addressed him without looking at the other:

“You ain’t on your job a heap, are you? There’s a locoed coyote barkin’ at me through the door, there. Run him out, will you—he’s disturbin’ me plenty.”

He turned from the door, stretched himself on the cot, and with his face to the wall listened while Silverthorn cursed.

CHAPTER XV

DALE PAYS A VISIT

Shortly after midnight Sanderson was sound asleep on the cot in the cell when a strange, scraping noise awakened him. He lay still for a long time, listening, until he discovered that the sound came from the window. Then he sat up stealthily and looked around to see, framed in the starlit gloom of the night, the face of Barney Owen, staring in through the window at him.

The sight of Owen enraged Sanderson, but his curiosity drove him to the window.

The little man was hanging to the iron bars; his neck muscles were straining, his face was red and his eyes bright.

“Don’t talk, now!” he warned. “The boss of the dump is awake and he’ll hear. He’s in his room; there’s nobody else around. I wanted to tell you that I’m going to knock him silly and get you out of this!”

“Why?” mocked Sanderson, lowly.

Owen’s face grew redder. “Oh, I know I’ve got something coming, but I’m going to get you out all the same. I’ve got our horses and guns. Be ready!”

He slipped down. Sanderson could hear his feet thud faintly on the sand outside.

Sanderson got into his clothes and stood at the cell door, waiting. For a long time he heard no sound, but presently he caught the clank of a door, followed by a swift step, and Owen stood in the corridor before the cell door, a bunch of keys in his hand.

There was no word spoken. Owen unlocked the door, Sanderson slipped out, Owen passed him the six-shooter he had lost in the barroom of the Okar Hotel, and the two slipped noiselessly down the corridor.

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A minute later they were mounting the horses that Owen had brought, and shortly afterward they were moving like shadows away from the outskirts of Okar.

Not until they were well out in the big basin did either of them speak. And then Sanderson said, shortly:

"Silverthorn was tellin' me you gassed everything. Are you feelin' better over it?"

Owen's head bent over his horse's mane; his chin was on his chest when he answered:

"Come and kill me."

"Hell!" exploded Sanderson, disgustedly. "If there was anything comin' to you killin' would be too good for you. You ain't done anything to me, you sufferin' fool—not a thing! What you've done you've done to Mary Bransford. When you see Dale an' Silverthorn grabbin' the Double A, an' Mary Bransford ridin' away, homeless—you'll have feelin's of remorse, mebbe—if you've got any man in you at all!"

Owen writhed and groaned.

"It was the whisky—the cursed whisky!" he whispered. "I can't let it alone—I love it! And once I get a taste of it, I'm gone—I'm a stark, staring lunatic!"

"I'd swear to that," grimly agreed Sanderson.

"I didn't mean to say a word to anybody," wailed the little man. "Do you think I'd do anything to harm Mary Bransford—after what she did for me? But I did—I must have done it. Dale said I did, Silverthorn said I did, and you say I did. But I don't remember. Silverthorn said I signed a receipt for some money from the Okar bank—three thousand, odd. I don't remember. Oh, but I'm—"

"Calling yourself names won't get you back to where you was before you made a fool of yourself," Sanderson told him, pityingly. "An' me tellin' you what I think of you won't relieve my feelin's a whole lot, for there ain't words enough layin' around loose.

"What I want to know is this: did you go clean loco, or do you remember anything that happened to you? Do you know who got the money you drew from the bank?"

"Dale," answered Owen. "He had that, for I remember him counting it in the back room of the hotel. There was more, too; I heard him telling Silverthorn there was about seven thousand in all. Silverthorn wanted him to put it all back in the bank, but Dale said there was just enough for him to meet his pay-roll—that he owed his men a lot of back pay. He took it with him."

"My four thousand," said Sanderson, shortly.

“Yours?” Owen paled.

“Dale lifted my money belt,” Sanderson returned. “I was wondering what he did with it. So that’s what.”

He relapsed into a grim silence, and Owen did not speak again.

They rode several miles in that fashion—Owen keeping his horse slightly behind Sanderson’s, his gaze on the other’s face, his own white with remorse and anxiety.

At last he heard Sanderson laugh, and the sound of it made him grit his teeth in impotent agony.

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"Sanderson," he said, gulping, "I'm sorry."

"Sure," returned the other. "If I hadn't wised up to that quite a spell ago, you'd be back on the trail, waitin' for some coyote to come along an' get his supper."

They rode in silence for a long time. They came to the gentle slope of the basin and began to climb it.

A dozen times Owen rode close to Sanderson, his lips trembling over unuttered words, but each time he dropped back without speaking. His eyes, fixed worshipfully on the back of the big, silent man ahead of him, were glowing with anxiety and wonder.

In the ghostly darkness of the time before the gray forerunner of the dawn appears on the horizon they came in sight of the Double A ranchhouse.

Sanderson was still leading. The ranchhouse burst upon his vision as his horse topped a rise that had obscured his view of the ranchhouse, and he saw it, clearly outlined.

Riding down the slope of the rise he smiled. For there was a light in one of the ranchhouse windows. Mary had left it burn on his account, he divined.

He halted and allowed Owen to come near him.

"Mary ain't to hear about this deal tonight," he told the little man. "Not a peep—understand?"

Without waiting for an answer he rode onward.

Thinking that, perhaps, in spite of the burning lamp Mary might be sleeping, Sanderson cautiously dismounted at the corral gates, and, leaving Owen to put his own horse away, he walked toward the house, stealthily, for he did not wish to awaken the girl.

Halfway across the ranchhouse yard, Sanderson saw a shadow cross the light in the window. Again he grinned, thinking Mary had not gone to bed after all.

But, going forward more unconcernedly, Sanderson's smile faded and was succeeded by a savage frown. For in the shadow formed by the little "L" at the junction of the house and porch, he saw a horse saddled and bridled.

Suddenly alert, and yielding to the savage rage that gripped him, Sanderson stole softly forward and looked closely at the animal. He recognized it instantly as Dale's, and in the instant, his face pale, his eyes blazing with passion, he was on the porch, peering through one of the darkened windows.

Inside he saw Dale and Mary Bransford. They were in the sitting-room. Dale was sitting in a big chair, smoking a cigar, one arm carelessly thrown over the back of the chair, his legs crossed, his attitude that of the master.

Standing perhaps a dozen feet from him was Mary Bransford.

The girl's eyes were wide with fright and astonishment, disbelief, incredulity—and several other emotions that Sanderson could not analyze. He did not try. One look at her sufficed to tell him that Dale was baiting her, tantalizing her, mocking her, and Sanderson's hatred for the man grew in intensity until it threatened to overwhelm him.

There was in his mind an impulse to burst into the house and kill Dale where he sat. It was the primitive lust to destroy an unprincipled rival that had seized Sanderson, for he saw in Dale's eyes the bold passion of the woman hunter.

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However, Sanderson conquered the impulse. He fought it with the marvelous self-control and implacable determination that had made him feared and respected wherever men knew him, and in the end the faint, stiff grin on his face indicated that whatever he did would be done with deliberation.

This was an instance where the eavesdropper had some justification for his work, and Sanderson listened.

He heard Dale laugh—the sound of it made Sanderson’s lips twitch queerly. He saw Mary cringe from Dale and press her hands over her breast. Dale’s voice carried clearly to Sanderson.

“Ha, ha!” he said. “So *that* hurts, eh? Well, here’s more of the same kind. We got Barney Owen drunk last sight, and he admitted that he’d signed all of Sanderson’s papers—the papers that were supposed to have been signed by your brother. Why didn’t Sanderson sign them? Why? Because Sanderson couldn’t do it.

“Owen, who knew your brother in Arizona, signed them, because he knew how to imitate your brother’s writing. Get that! Owen signed a bank receipt for the money old Bransford had in the bank. Owen got it and gave it to me. He was so drunk he didn’t know what he was doing, but he could imitate your brother’s writing, all right.”

“You’ve got the money?” gasped the girl.

Again Dale laughed, mockingly. “Yep,” he said, “I’ve got it. Three thousand two hundred. And I’ve got four thousand that belongs to that four-flusher, Square Deal. Seven thousand.” He laughed again.

“Where is Sanderson?” questioned the girl.

“In jail, over in Okar.” Dale paused long enough to enjoy the girl’s distress. Then he continued: “Owen is in jail, too, by this time. Silverthorn and Maison are not taking any chances on letting him go around loose.”

“Sanderson in jail!” gasped Mary. She seemed to droop; she staggered to a chair and sank into it, still looking at Dale, despair in her eyes.

Dale got up and walked to a point directly in front of her, looking down at her, triumphantly.

“That’s what,” he said. “In jail. Moreover, that’s where they’ll stay until this thing is settled. We mean to have the Double A. The sooner you realize that, the easier it will be for you.



“I’m offering you a way out of it—an easy way. That guy, Sanderson, ain’t on the level. He’s been working you, making a monkey of you—fooling you. He wants the Double A for himself. He’s been hanging around here, passing himself off as your brother, aiming to get on the good side of you—getting you to love him good and hard. Then mebbe he’d tell you, thinking that you’d forgive him. But mebbe that wasn’t his game at all. Mebbe he’d figured to grab the ranch and turn you out.

“Now, I’m offering you a whole lot. Mebbe you’ve thought I was sweet on that Nyland girl. Get that out of your mind. I was only fooling with her—like any man fools with a girl. I want her ranch—that’s all. But I don’t care a damn about the Double A, I want you. I’ve had my eye on you right along. Mebbe it won’t be marriage right away, but _____”

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"Alva Dale!"

The girl was on her feet, her eyes blazing.

Dale did not retreat from her; he stood smiling at her, his face wreathed in a huge grin. He was enjoying the girl.

Sanderson slipped along the wall of the house and opened the door. It creaked loudly on its hinges with the movement, causing both Dale and the girl to turn and face it.

Mary Bransford stood rigid as she saw Sanderson standing in the doorway, a flush sweeping swiftly over her face. There was relief in her eyes.

Astonishment and stark, naked fear were in Dale's eyes. He shrank back a step, and looked swiftly at Sanderson's right hand, and when he saw that it held a six-shooter he raised both his own hands, shoulder-high, the palms toward Sanderson.

"So you know it means shootin', eh?" said Sanderson grimly as he stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him, slamming it shut with his left hand.

"Well, shootin' goes." There was the cold calm of decision in his manner; his eyes were ablaze with the accumulated hate and rage that had been aroused over what he had heard. The grin that he showed to Dale drew his lips into two straight, stiff lines.

"I reckon you think you've earned your red shirt, Dale," he said, "for tellin' tales out of school. Well, you'll get it. There's just one thing will save your miserable hide. You got that seven thousand on you?"

Dale hesitated, then nodded.

Sanderson spoke to Mary Bransford without removing his gaze from Dale:

"Get pen, ink, an' paper."

The girl moved quickly into another room, returning almost instantly with the articles requested.

"Sit down an' write what I tell you to," directed Sanderson.

Dale dropped into a chair beside a center-table, took up the pen, poised it over the paper, and looked at Sanderson.

"I am hereby returning to Deal Sanderson the seven thousand two hundred dollars I stole from, him," directed Sanderson. "I am doing this of my own accord—no one is forcin' me," went on Sanderson. "I want to add that I hereby swear that the charge of

drawin' a gun on Silverthorn was a frame-up, me an' Silverthorn an' Maison bein' the guilty parties," finished Sanderson.

"Now," he added, when Dale had written as directed, "sign it."

Dale signed and stood up, his face aflame with rage.

"I'll take the money—now," said Sanderson.

Dale produced it from various pockets, laying it on the table. He said nothing. Mary Bransford stood a little distance away, watching silently.

"Count it, Miss Bransford," said Sanderson when Dale had disgorged the money.

The two men stood silent as the girl fingered the bills. At last she looked at Sanderson and nodded.

The latter grinned. "Everything's regular, now," he said. He looked at Mary. "Do you want him killed, ma'am? He'd be a lot better off dead. You'd be better off, too. This kind of a skunk is always around, botherin' women—when there ain't no men around."

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Mary shook her head with a decisive negative.

"Then he won't die, right now," said Sanderson. "He'll pull his freight away from the Double A, though, ma 'am. An' he'll never come back."

He was talking to Dale through the girl, and Dale watched him, scowling.

"If he does come back, you'll tell me, won't you, ma'am? An' then there'll never be an Alva Dale to bother you again—or to go around robbin' honest men, an' tryin' to get them mixed up with the law."

And now he turned from the girl and spoke to Dale:

"You go right back to Okar an' tell Maison an' Silverthorn what has happened here tonight. Show them how the fear of God has got into your heart an' made you yearn to practice the principles of a square deal. Tell them that they'd better get to goin' straight, too, for if they don't there's a guy which was named after a square deal that is goin' to snuff them off this hemisphere middlin' rapid. That's all. You'd better hit the breeze right back to Okar an' spread the good news."

He stood, a grim smile on his face, watching Dale as the latter walked to the door. When Dale stepped out on the porch Sanderson followed him, still regarding the movements of the other coldly and alertly.

Mary heard them—their steps on the boards of the porch; she heard the saddle leather creak as Dale climbed on his horse; she heard the sound of the hoofbeats as the horse clattered out of the ranchhouse yard.

And then for several minutes she stood near the little table in the room, listening vainly for some sound that would tell her of the presence of Sanderson on the porch. None came.

At last, when she began to feel certain that he had gone to the bunkhouse, she heard a step on the porch and saw Sanderson standing in the doorway.

He grinned at her, meeting her gaze fairly.

"Dale told you a heap of truth, ma'am," he said. "I feel more like a man tonight than I've felt for a good many days—an' nights."

"Then it was true—as Dale said—that you are not my brother?" said the girl. She was trying to make her voice sound severe, but only succeeded in making it quaver.

"I ain't your brother."

“And you came here to try to take the ranch away from me—to steal it?”

He flushed. “You’ve got four thousand of my money there, ma’am. You’re to keep it. Mebbe that will help to show what my intentions were. About the rest—your brother an’ all—I’ll have to tell you. It’s a thing you ought to know, an’ I don’t know what’s been keepin’ me from tellin’ you all along.

“Mebbe it was because I was scared you’d take it hard. But since these sneaks have got to waggin’ their tongues it’ll have to be told. If you sit down by the table there, I’ll tell you why I done what I did.”

She took a chair beside the table and faced him, and, standing before her, speaking very gently, but frankly, he related what had occurred to him in the desert. She took it calmly, though there were times when her eyes glowed with a light that told of deep emotion. But she soon became resigned to the death of her brother and was able to listen to Sanderson’s story of his motive in deceiving her.

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When he related his emotion during their first meeting—when he had told Dale that he was her brother, after yielding to the appeal in her eyes—she smiled.

“There was some excuse for it, after all,” she declared.

“An’ you ain’t blamin’ me—so much?” he asked.

“No,” she said. She blushed as she thought of the times she had kissed him. He was thinking of her kisses, too, and as their eyes met, each knew what the other was thinking about. Sanderson smiled at her and her eyes dropped.

“It wasn’t a square deal for me to take them, then, ma’am,” he told her. “But I’m goin’ to stay around here an’ fight Dale an’ his friends to a finish. That is, if you want me to stay. I’d like a straight answer. I ain’t hangin’ around where I ain’t wanted.”

Her eyes glowed as she looked at him.

“You’ll have to stay, now,” she said. “Will is dead, and you will have to stay here and brazen it out. They’d take the Double A from me surely, if you were to desert me. You will have to stay and insist that you are my brother!”

“That’s a contract,” he agreed. “But”—he looked at her, a flush on his face—“goin’ back to them kisses. It wasn’t a square deal. But I’m hopin’ that a day will come——”

She got up, her face very red. “It is nearly morning,” she interrupted.

“Yes,” he smiled; “things are only beginnin’.”

“You are impudent—and imprudent,” she said, looking straight at him.

“An’ hopeful,” he answered, meeting her eyes.

Fifteen minutes later, stretched out on his bed, Sanderson saw the dawn breaking in the east. It reminded him of the morning he had seen the two riders above him on the edge of the arroyo. As on that other morning, he lay and watched the coming of the dawn. And when later he heard Mary moving about in the kitchen he got up, not having slept a wink, and went out to her.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked.

“How could I,” he asked, “with a new day dawnin’ for me?”

CHAPTER XVI

THE HAND OF THE ENEMY

When in the bunkhouse the next morning Sanderson informed Barney Owen of what had occurred during the night, the latter looked fixedly at Sanderson.

"So she didn't take it hard," he said.

"Was you expectin' her to? For a brother that she hadn't seen in a dozen years—an' which she knows in her secret heart wasn't any good?" retorted Sanderson. "Shootin' your face off in Okar—or anywhere else—don't go any more," added Sanderson. "She's pretendin', publicly, that I'm her brother."

"I'm through talking," declared Owen.

"Or livin'. It's one or the other," warned Sanderson.

Sanderson took the seven thousand dollars that Mary gave him, rode to Lazette—a town fifty miles eastward from the basin—and deposited the money in a bank there. Then he rode eastward still farther and in another town discovered a young engineer with a grievance against his employers.

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The result of this discovery was that on the following morning the young engineer and Sanderson journeyed westward to the basin, arriving at the Double A late in the afternoon of the next day.

On the edge of the plateau after the engineer and, Sanderson had spent three or four days prowling through the basin and the gorge, the engineer spoke convincingly:

"It's the easiest thing in the world! A big flume to the point I showed you, a big main ditch and several laterals will do the trick. I'm with you to the finish!"

Sanderson smiled at the engineer's glowing enthusiasm and told him of the opposition he would meet in developing the project.

"There'll be a heap of schemin', an' mebbe shootin', Williams," Sanderson told him. "Puttin' through this deal won't be any pussy-kitten affair."

"So much the better," laughed the engineer; "I'm fed up on soft snaps and longing for action."

The engineer was thirty; big, square-shouldered, lithe, and capable. He had a strong face and a level, steady eye.

"If you mean business, let's get acquainted," he said. "My front name is Kent."

"Well, Kent, let's get busy," smiled Sanderson. "You go to work on your estimates, order your material, hire your men. I'll see how bad the people in the basin want the water they've been expectin'."

Kent Williams took up his quarters in the bunkhouse and immediately began work, though before he could do much he rode to Okar, telegraphed to Dry Bottom, the town which had been the scene of his previous activity, and awaited the arrival of several capable-looking young men.

In company with the latter he returned to the Double A, and for many days thereafter he and his men ran the transit and drove stakes in the basin and along the gorge.

Sanderson spent much of his time talking with the cattlemen in the basin. They were all eager to have water brought to their ranches, for it would save them the long trip to the river, which was inaccessible in many places, and they welcomed the new project.

One of the men—a newcomer to the basin—voiced the general sentiment.

"We want water, an' we don't give a damn who brings it here. First come, first served!"

The big problem to Sanderson, however, was the question of money. He was aware that a vast sum would be required. Nearly all the money he possessed would be sunk in the preliminary work, and he knew that if the work was to go on he must borrow money.

He couldn't get money in Okar, he knew that.

He rode to Lazette and talked with a banker there. The latter was interested, but unwilling to lend.

"The Okar Basin," he said. "Yes, I've heard about it. Great prospects there. But I've been told that Silverthorn and Maison are going to put it through, and until I hear from them, I shouldn't like to interfere."

"That gang won't touch the Double A water!" declared Sanderson. "I'll see the basin scorched to a cinder before I'll let them in on the deal!"

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The banker smiled. "You are entitled to the water, of course; and I admire your grit. But those men are powerful. I have to depend on them a great deal. So you can see that I couldn't do anything without first consulting them."

Sanderson left Lazette in disgust. It was not until after he had tried in Dry Bottom and Las Vegas that he realized how subtle and far-reaching was the power and influence of the financial rulers of Okar.

"We should like to let you have the money," the Las Vegas banker told him. "But, unfortunately, a loan to you would conflict with our interests in Okar. We know the big men in Okar have been considering the water question in the basin, and we should not like to antagonize them."

The trip consumed two weeks, and Sanderson returned to the Double A to discover that during his absence very little work had been done.

"It looks like we're up against it," Williams informed him when pressed for an explanation. "We can't get a pound of material. I went personally to Okar and was told by Silverthorn that the railroad would accept no material consigned to the Double A ranch."

"Pretty raw," was Sanderson's only comment.

"Raw? It's rotten!" declared Williams. "There's plenty of the kind of material we want in Lazette. To get it here would mean a fifty-mile haul. I can get teams and wagons in Lazette," he added, an eager note in his voice.

"Go to it," said Sanderson.

Williams smiled admiringly. "You're game, Mr. Man," he said; "it's a pleasure to work for you!"

However, it was not courage that impelled Sanderson to accept the hazard and expense of the fifty-mile haul. In his mind during the days he had been trying to borrow money had been a picture of the defeat that was ahead of him if he did not succeed; he could imagine the malicious satisfaction with which his three enemies would discuss his failure.

Inwardly, Sanderson was writhing with impatience and consumed with an eagerness to get into personal contact with his enemies, the passion to triumph had gripped his soul, and a contempt for the sort of law in which Okar dealt had grown upon him until the contemplation of it had aroused in him a savage humor.

Okar's law was not law at all; it was a convenience under which his three enemies could assail the property rights of others.

Outwardly, Sanderson was a smiling optimist. To Mary Bransford he confided that all was going well.

Neither had broached the subject of Sanderson's impersonation since the night of Dale's visit. It was a matter which certain thoughts made embarrassing for Mary, and Sanderson was satisfied to keep silent.

But on the day that Williams left the Double A for Lazette, Mary's curiosity could not be denied. She had conquered that constraint which had resulted from the revelation of Sanderson's identity, and had asked him to ride to the top of the gorge, telling him she wanted him to explain the proposed system of irrigation.



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"It is desperately hard to get any information out of Williams," she told Sanderson; "he simply won't talk about the work."

"Meanin' that he'll talk rapid enough about other things, eh?" Sanderson returned. He looked slyly at Mary.

"What other things are there for him to talk about?"

"A man could find a heap of things to talk about—to a woman. He might talk about himself—or the woman," suggested Sanderson, grinning.

She gave him a knowing look. "Oh," she said, reddening. "Yes," she added, smiling faintly, "now that you speak of it, I remember he did talk quite a little. He is a very interesting man."

"Good-looking too," said Sanderson; "an' smart. He saw the prospects of this thing right off."

"Didn't you see them?" she questioned quickly.

"Oh, that," he said, flushing. "If the Drifter hadn't told me mebbe I wouldn't have seen."

"You have always been around cattle, I suppose?" she asked.

"Raised with them," smiled Sanderson.

Thus she directed the conversation to the subject about which she had wanted to inquire—his past life. Her questions were clever; they were suggestions to which he could do nothing except to return direct replies. And she got out of him much of his history, discovering that he had sound moral views, and a philosophy of which the salient principle was the scriptural injunction: "Do unto others as ye would that others should do unto you."

Upon that principle he had founded his character. His reputation had grown out of an adamant adherence to it. Looking at him now she felt the strength of him, his intense devotion to his ideals; the earnestness of him.

Curiously, she had felt those things during the time she had thought of him as her brother, and had been conscious of the lure of him. It gave her a queer thrill to stand beside him now, knowing that she had kissed him; that he had had an opportunity to take advantage of the situation, and had not done so.

He had acted the gentleman; he was a gentleman. That was why she was able to talk with him now. If he had not treated her as he had treated her his presence at the Double A would have been intolerable.

There was deep respect for women in Sanderson, she knew. Also, despite his bold, frank glances—which was merely the manhood of him challenging her and taking note of her charms—there was a hesitating bashfulness about the man, as though he was not quite certain of the impression he was creating in her mind.

That knowledge pleased Mary; it convinced her of his entire worthiness; it gave her power over him—and that power thrilled her.

As her brother, he had been an interesting figure, though his manner had repelled her. And she had been conscious of a subtle pleasure that was not all sisterly when she had been near him. She knew, now, that the sensation had been instinctive, and she wondered if she could have felt toward her brother as she felt toward this man.

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However, this new situation had removed the diffidence that had affected her; their relations were less matter of fact and more romantic, and she felt toward him as any woman feels who knows an admirer pursues her—breathless with the wonder of it, but holding aloof, tantalizing, whimsical, and uncertain of herself.

She looked at him challengingly, mockery in her eyes.

“So you came here because the Drifter told you there would be trouble—and a woman. How perfectly delightful!”

He sensed her mood and responded to it.

“It’s sure delightful. But it ain’t unusual. I’ve always heard that trouble will be lurkin’ around where there’s a woman.”

“But you would not say that a woman is not worth the trouble she causes?” she countered.

“A man is willin’ to take her—trouble an’ all,” he responded, looking straight at her.

“Yes—if he can get her!” she shot back at him.

“Mostly every woman gets married to a man. I’ve got as good a chance as any other man.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you’re talkin’ to me about it,” he grinned. “If you wasn’t considerin’ me you wouldn’t argue with me about it; you’d turn me down cold an’ forget it.”

“I suppose when a man is big and romantic-looking——”

“Oh, shucks, ma’am; you’ll be havin’ me gettin’ a swelled head.”

“He thinks that all he has to do is to look his best.”

“I expect I’ve looked my worst since I’ve been here. I ain’t had a chance to do any moonin’ at you.”

“I don’t like men that ‘moon,’” she declared.

“That’s the reason I didn’t do it,” he said.

She laughed. “Now, tell me,” she asked, “how you got your name, ‘Deal.’ It had something to do with cards, I suppose?”

“With weight,” he said, looking soberly at her. “When I was born my dad looked at me sort of nonplussed. I was that big. ‘There’s a deal of him,’ he told my mother. An’ the name stuck. That ain’t a lot mysterious.”

“It was a convenient name to attach the ‘Square’ to,” she said.

“I’ve earned it,” he said earnestly. “An’ I’ve had a mighty hard time provin’ my right to wear it. There’s men that will tempt you out of pure deviltry, an’ others that will try to shoot such a fancy out of your system. But I didn’t wear the ‘Square’ because I wanted to—folks hung it onto me without me askin’. That’s one reason I left Tombstone; I’d got tired of posin’ as an angel.”

He saw her face grow thoughtful and a haunting expression come into her eyes.

“You haven’t told me how he looked,” she said.

Sanderson lied. He couldn’t tell her of the dissipation he had seen in her brother’s face, nor of the evilness that had been stamped there. He drew a glowing picture of the man he had buried, and told her that had he lived her brother would have done her credit.

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But Sanderson suffered no remorse over the lie. For he saw her eyes glow with pride, and he knew that the picture he had drawn would be the ideal of her memory for the future.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TRAIL HERD

Kent Williams went to Lazette, and Sanderson spent the interval during his departure and return in visiting the cattlemen and settlers in the basin. The result of these visits was a sheaf of contracts for water, the charge based on acreage, that reposed in Sanderson's pockets. According to the terms of the contracts signed by the residents of the basin, Sanderson was to furnish water within one year.

The length of time, Sanderson decided, would tell the story of his success or failure. If he failed he would lose nothing, because of having the contracts with the settlers, and if he won the contracts would be valid.

Sanderson was determined to win. When after an absence of a week Williams returned, to announce that he had made arrangements for the material necessary to make a "regular" start, and that he had hired men and teams to transport the material, Sanderson's determination became grim. For Williams told him that he had "gone the limit," which meant that every cent to Sanderson's credit in the Lazette bank had been pledged to pay for the material the engineer had ordered.

"We're going to rush things from now on," Williams told Sanderson. "Next week we'll need ten thousand dollars, at least."

Sanderson went into the house and had a long talk with Mary Bransford. Coming out, he went to the corral, saddled Streak, and rode to Okar.

Shortly he was sitting at a desk opposite a little man who was the resident buyer for an eastern live-stock company.

"The Double A has three thousand head of cattle," Sanderson told the little man. "They've had good grass and plenty of water. They're fat, an' are good beef cattle. Thirty-three dollars is the market price. What will you give for them, delivered to your corral here?"

The resident buyer looked uncomfortable. "I've had orders not to buy any more cattle for a time."

"Whose orders?" demanded Sanderson.

The resident buyer's face flushed and he looked more uncomfortable.

"My firm's orders!" he snapped.

Sanderson laughed grimly; he saw guilt in the resident buyer's eyes.

"Silverthorn's orders," he said shortly. At the other's emphatic negative Sanderson laughed again. "Maison's, then. Sure—Maison's," he added, as the other's flush deepened.

Sanderson got up. "Don't take it so hard," he advised the resident buyer. "I ain't goin' to bite you. What I'm wonderin' is, did Maison give you that order personally, or did you get it from your boss."

The buyer shifted uneasily in his chair, and did not look at Sanderson.

"Well," said the latter, "it don't make a heap of difference. Good-bye," he said, as he went out. "If you get to feelin' mighty small an' mean you can remember that you're only one of the pack of coyotes that's makin' this town a disgrace to a dog kennel."

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Sanderson returned to the Double A and found Mary in the house.

"No go," he informed her. "Maison an' Silverthorn an' Dale have anticipated that move. We don't sell any cattle in Okar."

The girl's disappointment was deep.

"I suppose we may as well give up," she said.

Sanderson lifted her face to his.

"If you're goin' to talk that way I ain't goin' to love you like I thought I was," he grinned. "An' I'm sure wantin' to."

"I don't want to give up," she said.

"Meanin'?"

"Meaning that I'd like to have you beat those men. Oh, the miserable schemers! They will go to any length to defeat you."

He laughed lowly and vibrantly. "Well, they'll certainly have to travel *some*," he said. "About as fast as the man will have to travel that takes you away from me."

"Is victory that dear to you?" she asked.

"I won't take one without the other," he told her his eyes glowing. "If I don't beat Silverthorn and the others, an' keep the Double A for you, why I——"

"You'll win!" she said.

"You are hopin' I will?" he grinned. "Well," he added, as she averted her eyes, "there'll come a time when we'll talk real serious about that. I'm goin' to tell the range boss to get ready for a drive to Las Vegas."

"That is a hundred and seventy-five miles!" gasped the girl.

"I've followed a trail herd two thousand," grinned Sanderson.

"You mean that you will go yourself—with the outfit?"

"Sure."

Sanderson went out, mounted Streak, and found the range boss—Eli Carter. Carter and the men were ordered to round up all the Double A cattle and get ready to drive them to Las Vegas. Sanderson told Carter he would accompany the outfit.

Cutting across the basin toward the ranchhouse, he saw another horseman riding fast to intercept him, and he swerved Streak and headed toward the other.

The rider was Williams, and when Sanderson got close enough to see his face he noted that the engineer was pale and excited.

CHAPTER XVIII

CHECKED BY THE SYSTEM

The engineer waved a yellow paper at Sanderson and shouted:

"I just got this. I made a hit with the Okar agent last week, and he sent a man over with it. That's a damned scoundrelly bunch that's working against you! Do you know what they've done?"

Sanderson said nothing, and the engineer resumed, explosively:

"They've tied up your money at the Lazette bank! My material men won't send a pound of stuff to me until they get the cash! We're stopped—dead still!"

He passed a telegram to Sanderson, who read:

Bank here refuses to honor Sanderson's check. Claim money belongs to Bransford estate. Legal tangle. Must have cash or won't send material.



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The Brander company.

A flicker of Sanderson's eyelids was all the emotion he betrayed to Williams. The latter looked at him admiringly.

"By George," he said, "you take it like a major! In your shoes I'd get off my nag and claw up the scenery!"

Sanderson smiled. After telling the engineer to do as much as he could without the material, he rode on.

He had betrayed no emotion in the presence of Williams, but he was seething with passion.

Late the next afternoon he joined Carter and the outfit. The men had made good use of their time, and when Sanderson arrived, the entire herd of cattle was massed on a broad level near the river. They were milling impatiently, for the round-up had just been completed, and they were nervous over the unusual activity.

The cowboys, bronzed, lean, and capable, were guarding the herd, riding slowly around the fringe of tossing horns, tired, dusty, but singing their quaint songs.

Carter had sent the cook back to the ranchhouse during the afternoon to obtain supplies; and now the chuck wagon, with bulging sides, was standing near a fire at which the cook himself was preparing supper.

Carter grinned as Sanderson rode up.

"All ready!" he declared. "We sure did hump ourselves!"

Around the camp fire that night Sanderson was moody and taciturn. He had stretched out on his blanket and lay listening to the men until one by one they dropped off to sleep.

Sanderson's thoughts were bitter. He felt the constricting influence of his enemies; he was like the herd of cattle that his men had rounded up that day, for little by little Silverthorn, Dale, and Maison were cutting down his area of freedom and of action, were hampering him on all sides, and driving him to a point where he would discover resistance to be practically useless.

He had thought in the beginning that he could devise some way to escape the meshes of the net that was being thrown around him, but he was beginning to realize that he had underestimated the power and the resources of his enemies.

Maison and Silverthorn he knew were mere tentacles of the capital they represented; it was their business to reach out, searching for victims, in order to draw them in and drain from them the last vestige of wealth.

And Sanderson had no doubt that they did that work impersonally and without feeling, not caring, and perhaps not understanding the tortures of a system—of a soulless organization seeking only financial gain.

Dale, however, was intensely human and individualistic. He was not as subtle nor as smooth as his confederates. And money was not the only incentive which would drive him to commit crime. He was a gross sensualist, unprincipled and ruthless, and Sanderson's hatred of him was beginning to overshadow every other consideration.

Sanderson went to sleep with his bitter thoughts, which were tempered with a memory of the gentle girl at whom the evil agencies of his enemies were directed. They were eager to get possession of Mary Bransford's property, but their real fight would be, and was, against him.

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But it was Mary Bransford that he was fighting for, and if he could get the herd of cattle to Las Vegas and dispose of them, he would be provided with money enough to defeat his enemies. But money he must have.

At breakfast the next morning Carter selected the outfit for the drive. He named half a dozen men, who were variously known as Buck, Andy, Bud, Soapy, Sogun, and the Kid. These men were experienced trail-herd men, and Carter had confidence in them.

Their faces, as they prepared for the trip, revealed their joy and pride over their selection, while the others, disappointment in their eyes, plainly envied their fellow-companions.

But Sanderson lightened their disappointment by entrusting them with a new responsibility.

"You fellows go back to the Double A an' hang around," he told them. "I don't care whether you do a lick of work or not. Stick close to the house an' keep an eye on Mary Bransford. If Dale, or any of his gang, come nosin' around, bore them, plenty! If any harm comes to Mary Bransford while I'm gone, I'll salivate you guys!"

Shortly after breakfast the herd was on the move. The cowboys started them westward slowly, for trail cattle do not travel fast, urging them on with voice and quirt until the line stretched out into a sinuously weaving band a mile long.

They reached the edge of the big level after a time, and filed through a narrow pass that led upward to a table-land. Again, after a time, they took a descending trail, which brought them down upon a big plain of grassland that extended many miles in all directions. Fringing the plain on the north was a range of hills that swept back to the mountains that guarded the neck of the big basin at Okar.

There was timber on the hills, and the sky line was ragged with boulders. And so Sanderson and his men, glancing northward many times during the morning, did not see a rider who made his way through the hills.

During the previous afternoon the rider had sat on his horse in the dim haze of distance, watching the Double A outfit round up its cattle; and during the night he had stood on guard, watching the men around the camp fire.

He had seen most of the Double A men return toward the ranchhouse after the trail crew had been selected; he had followed the progress of the herd during the morning.

At noon he halted in a screen of timber and grinned felinely.

"They're off, for certain," he said aloud.

Late that afternoon the man was in Okar, talking with Dale and Silverthorn and Maison.

“What you’ve been expectin’ has happened,” he told them. “Sanderson, Carter, an’ six men are on the move with a trail herd. They’re headed straight on for Las Vegas.”

Silverthorn rubbed the palms of his hands together, Maison smirked, and Dale’s eyes glowed with satisfaction.

Dale got up and looked at the man who had brought the information.

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"All right, Morley," he said with a grin. "Get going; we'll meet up with Sanderson at Devil's Hole."

CHAPTER XIX

A QUESTION OF BRANDS

Trailing a herd of cattle through a strange wild country is no sinecure. There was not a man in the Double A outfit who expected an easy time in trailing the herd to Las Vegas, for it was a rough, grim country, and the men were experienced.

Wild cattle are not tractable; they have an irritating habit of obstinately insisting on finding their own trail, and of persisting in vagaries that are the despair of their escort.

The Double A herd was no exception. On a broad level they behaved fairly well, though always requiring the attention of the men; but in the broken sections of country through which they passed, heart-breaking effort was required of the men to keep them headed in the right direction.

The men of the outfit had little sleep during the first two days of the drive. Nights found them hot, tired, and dusty, but with no prospect of an uninterrupted sleep. Still there was no complaint.

On the third night, the herd having been driven about forty miles, the men began to show the effects of their sleepless vigil.

They had bedded the herd down on a level between some hills, near a rocky ford over which the waters of a little stream trickled.

Buck and Andy were on their ponies, slowly circling the herd, singing to the cattle, talking to them, using all their art and persuasion to induce the herd to cease the restless "milling" that had begun with the effort to halt for the night.

Around the camp fire, which had been built at the cook's orders, were Sanderson, Carter, Bud, Sogun, Soapy, and the Kid. Carter stood at a little distance from the fire, watching the herd.

"That's a damned nervous bunch we've got, boys," he called to the other men. "I don't know when I've seen a flightier lot. It wouldn't take much to start 'em!"

"We'll have our troubles gettin' them through Devil's Hole," declared Soapy. Soapy, so called because of his aversion to the valuable toilet preparation so necessary to cleanliness, had a bland, ingenuous face and perplexed, inquiring eyes. He was a

capable man, however, despite his pet aversion, and there was concern in his voice when he spoke.

“That’s why I wasn’t in no hurry to push them too far tonight,” declared Carter. “I don’t want to get anywhere near Devil’s Hole in the darkness, an’ I want that place quite some miles away when I camp. I seen a herd stride that quicksand on a run once, an’ they wasn’t enough of them left to make a good stew.

“If my judgment ain’t wrong, an’ we can keep them steppin’ pretty lively in the mornin’, we’ll get to Devil’s Hole just about noon tomorrow. Then we can ease them through, an’ the rest ain’t worth talkin’ about.”

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"Devil's Hole is the only trail?" inquired Sanderson.

Carter nodded. The others confirmed the nod. But Carter's desire for an early start the next morning was denied. Bud and Sogun were on guard duty on the morning shift, with the other men at breakfast, when a dozen horsemen appeared from the morning haze westward and headed directly for the camp fire.

"Visitors," announced Soapy, who was first to see the riders.

The Double A men got to their feet to receive the strangers. Sanderson stepped out from the group slightly, and the horsemen came to a halt near him. A big man, plainly the leader of the strangers, dismounted and approached Sanderson.

The man radiated authority. There was a belligerent gleam in his eyes as he looked Sanderson over, an inspection that caused Sanderson's face to redden, so insolent was it. Behind him the big man's companions watched, their faces expressionless, their eyes alert.

"Who's runnin' this outfit?" demanded the man.

"You're talkin' at the boss," said Sanderson.

"I'm the sheriff of Colfax County," said the other, shortly. "There's been a complaint made about you. Bill Lester, of the Bar X, says you've been pickin' up his cattle, crossin' his range, yesterday."

This incident had happened before, both to Sanderson and to Carter. They had insisted on the right of inspection themselves, when strange herds had been driven through their ranges.

"We want to look your stock over," said the sheriff.

The request was reasonable, and Sanderson smiled.

"That's goin' to hold us up a spell," he returned; "an' we was figurin' on makin' Devil's Hole before dark. Hop in an' do your inspectin'."

The big man motioned to his followers and the latter spurred to the herd, the other being the last to leave the camp fire.

For two hours the strangers threaded and weaved their horses through the mass of cattle, while Sanderson and his men, impatient to begin the morning drive, rode around the outskirts and watched them.

"They're takin' a mighty good look," commented Carter at the end of the two hours.

Sanderson's face was set in a frown; he saw that the men were working very slowly, and were conferring together longer than seemed necessary.

At the end of three hours Carter spoke to Sanderson, his voice hoarse with rage:

"They're holdin' us up purposely. I'll be damned if I'm goin' to stand for it!"

"Easy there!" cautioned Sanderson. "I've never seen a sheriff that was long on speed. They'll be showin' their hand pretty soon."

Half an hour later the sheriff spurred his horse out of the press and approached Sanderson. His face was grave. His men rode up also, and halted their horses near him. The Double A men had advanced and stood behind Sanderson and Carter.

"There's somethin' wrong here!" he declared, scowling at Sanderson. "It ain't the first time this dodge has been worked. A man gets up a brand that's mighty like the brand on the range he's goin' to drive through, an' he picks up cattle an' claims they're his. You claim your brand is the Double A." He dismounted and with a branch of chaparral drew a design in the sand.

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"This is the way you make your brand," he said, and he pointed out the Double A brand:

[Illustration: Double A and Bar X brands.]

"That's an 'A' lookin' at it straight up an' from the right side, like this, just reversin' it. But when you turn it this way, it's the Bar X:

"An' there's a bunch of your steers with the brand on them that way. I'll have to take charge of the herd until the thing is cleared up!"

Sanderson's lips took on a straight line; the color left his face.

Here was authority—that law with which he had unaccountably clashed on several occasions during his stay at the Double A. Yet he knew that—as on those other occasions—the law was operating to the benefit of his enemies.

However, he did not now suspect Silverthorn and the others of setting the law upon him. The Double A men might have been careless with their branding, and it was unfortunate that he had been forced by the closing of the Okar market to drive his cattle over a range upon which were cattle bearing a brand so startlingly similar to his.

His men were silent, watching him with set faces. He knew they would stand behind him in any trouble that might occur. And yet he hesitated, for he did not wish to force trouble.

"How many Bar X cattle do you think are in the herd?" he asked.

"Mebbe a hundred—mebbe more."

"How long will it take you to get Bill Lester here to prove his stock?"

The big man laughed. "That's a question. Bill left last night for Frisco; I reckon mebbe he'll be gone a month—mebbe more."

The color surged back into Sanderson's face. He stiffened.

"An' you expect to hold my herd here until Lester gets back?" he said, slowly.

"Yep," said the other, shortly.

"You can't do it!" declared Sanderson. "I know the law, an' you can't hold a man's cattle that long without becomin' liable for damages."

"We'll be liable," grinned the sheriff. "Before Bill left last night he made out a bond for ninety thousand dollars—just what your cattle are worth at the market price. If there's any damages comin' to you you'll get them out of that."

"It's a frame-up," growled Carter, at Sanderson's side. "It proves itself. This guy, Lester, makes out a bond before we're within two days' drive of his bailiwick. He's had information about us, an' is plannin' to hold us up. You know what for. Silverthorn an' the bunch has got a finger in the pie."

That suspicion had also become a conviction to Sanderson. And yet, in the person of the sheriff and his men, there was the law blocking his progress toward the money he needed for the irrigation project.

"Do you think one hundred and fifty heads will cover the suspected stock?" he questioned.

"I'd put it at two hundred," returned the sheriff.

"All right, then," said Sanderson slowly; "take your men an' cut out the two hundred you think belong to Lester. I'll stop on the way back an' have it out with you."

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The sheriff grinned. "That'll be square enough," he agreed. He turned to the men who had come with him. "You boys cut out them cattle that we looked at, an' head them toward the Bar X." When the men had gone he turned to Sanderson.

"I want you men to know that I'm actin' under orders. I don't know what's eatin' Bill Lester—that ain't my business. But when I'm ordered to do anything in my line of duty, why, it's got to be done. Your friend has gassed some about a man named Silverthorn bein' at the bottom of this thing. Mebbe he is—I ain't got no means of knowin'. It appears to me that Bill ain't got no call to hog your whole bunch, though, for I've never knowed Bill to raise more than fifteen hundred head of cattle in one season. I'm takin' a chance on two hundred coverin' his claims."

It was after noon when the sheriff and his men started westward with the suspected stock.

Carter, fuming with rage, watched them go. Then he turned to Sanderson.

"Hell an' damnation! We'll hit Devil's Hole about dusk—if we start now. What'll we do?"

"Start," said Sanderson. "If we hang around here for another day they'll trump up another fake charge an' clean us out!"

The country through which they were forced to travel during the afternoon was broken and rugged, and the progress of the herd was slow. However, according to Carter, they made good time considering the drawbacks they encountered, and late afternoon found them within a few miles of the dreaded Devil's Hole.

Carter counseled a halt until morning, and Sanderson yielded. After a camping ground had been selected Carter and Sanderson rode ahead to inspect Devil's Hole.

The place was well named. It was a natural basin between some jagged and impassable foothills, running between a gorge at each end. Both ends of the basin constricted sharply at the gorges, resembling a wide, narrow-necked bottle.

A thin stream of water flowed on each side of a hard, rock trail that ran straight through the center of the basin, and on both sides of the trail a black bog of quicksand spread, covering the entire surface of the land.

Halfway through the basin, Sanderson halted Streak on the narrow trail and looked at the treacherous sand.

"I've seen quicksand, *an'* quicksand," he declared, "but this is the bogs of the lot. If any steers get bogged down in there they wouldn't be able to bellow more than once before they'd sink out of sight!"

"There's a heap of them in there," remarked Carter.

It was an eery place, and the echo of their voices resounded with ever-increasing faintness.

"I never go through this damned hell-hole without gettin' the creeps," declared Carter. "An' I've got nerve enough, too, usually. There's somethin' about the place that suggests the cattle an' men it's swallowed.

"Do you see that flat section there?" he indicated a spot about a hundred yards wide and half as long, which looked like hard, baked earth, black and dead. "That's where that herd I was tellin' you about went in. The next morning you couldn't see hide nor hair of them.

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"It's a fooler for distance, too," he went on, "it's more than a mile to that little spot of rock, that projectin' up, over there. College professors have been here, lookin' at it, an' they say the thing is fed from underground rivers, or springs, or somethin' that they can't even guess.

"One of them was tellin' Boss Edwards, over on the Cimarron, that that rock point that you see projectin' up was the peak of a mountain, an' that this narrow trail we're on is the back of a ridge that used to stick up high an' mighty above a lot of other things.

"I can't make it out, an' I don't try; it's here, an' that's all there is to it. An' I ain't hangin' around it any longer than I have to."

"A stampede—" began Sanderson.

"Gentlemen, shut up!" interrupted Carter. "If any cattle ever come through here, stampedin', that herd wouldn't have enough left of it to supply a road runner's breakfast!"

They returned to the camp, silent and anxious.

CHAPTER XX

DEVIL'S HOLE

Sanderson took his turn standing watch with the other men. The boss of a trail herd cannot be a shirker, and Sanderson did his full share of the work.

Tonight he had the midnight shift. At two o'clock he would ride back to camp, awaken his successor, and turn in to sleep until morning.

Because of the proximity of the herd to Devil's Hole an extra man had been told off for the nightwatch, and Soapy and the Kid were doing duty with Sanderson.

Riding in a big circle, his horse walking, Sanderson could see the dying embers of the camp fire glowing like a big firefly in the distance. A line of trees fringing the banks of the river near the camp made a dark background for the tiny, leaping sparks that were shot up out of the fire, and the branches waving in the hazy light from countless coldly glittering stars were weird and foreboding.

Across the river the ragged edges of the rock buttes that flanked the water loomed somberly; beyond them the peaks of some mountains, miles distant, glowed with the subdued radiance of a moon that was just rising.

Back in the direction from which the herd had come the ridges and depressions stretched, in irregular corrugations, as far as Sanderson could see. Southward were more mountains, dark and mysterious.

Riding his monotonous circles, Sanderson looked at his watch, his face close to it, for the light from the star-haze was very dim. He was on the far side of the herd, toward Devil's Hole, and he was chanting the refrain from a simple cowboy song as he looked at the watch.

The hands of the timepiece pointed to "one." Thus he still had an hour to stand watch before awakening the nest man. He placed the watch in a pocket, shook the reins over Streak's neck and spoke to him.

"Seems like old times to be ridin' night-watch, eh, Streak?" he said.

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The words had hardly escaped his lips when there arose a commotion from the edge of the herd nearest the corrugated land that lay between the herd and the trail back to the Double A.

On a ridge near the cattle a huge, black, grotesque shape was clearly outlined. It was waving to and fro, as though it were some giant-winged monster of the night trying to rise from the earth. Sanderson could hear the flapping noise it made; it carried to him with the sharp resonance of a pistol shot.

"Damnation!" he heard himself say. "Some damned fool is wavin' a tarp!"

He jerked Streak up shortly, intending to ride for the point where the tarpaulin was being waved before it was too late. But as he wheeled Streak he realized that the havoc had been wrought, for the cattle nearest him were on their feet, snorting with fright—a sensation that had been communicated to them by contact with their fellows in the mass.

At the point where the commotion had occurred was confusion. Sanderson saw steers rising on their hind legs, throwing their forelegs high in the air; they were bellowing their fright and charging against the steers nearest them, frenziedly trying to escape the danger that seemed to menace them.

Sanderson groaned, for the entire herd was on the move! Near at hand a dozen steers shot out of the press and lumbered past him, paying no attention to his shouts. He fired his pistol in the face of one, and though the animal tried to turn back, frightened by the flash, the press of numbers behind it, already moving forward, forced it again to wheel and break for freedom.

Sanderson heard the sounds of pistol shots from the direction of the camp fire; he heard other shots from the direction of the back trail; he saw the forms of men on horses darting here and there on the opposite side of the herd from where he rode.

From the left side of the herd came another rider—Soapy. He tore ahead of the vanguard of running steers, shooting his pistol in their faces, shouting profanely at them, lashing them with his quirt.

A first batch slipped by him. He spurred his horse close to Sanderson—who was trying to head off still others of the herd that were determined to follow the first—and cursed loudly:

"Who in hell waved that tarp?"

Sanderson had no time to answer. A score of steers bolted straight for him, and he groaned again when he saw that the whole herd was rushing forward in a mass. A common impulse moved them; they were frenzied with fright and terror.

It was not the first stampede that Sanderson had been in, and he knew its dangers. Yet he grimly fought with the cattle, Streak leaping here and there in answer to the knee-pressure of his master, horse and rider looking like knight and steed of some fabled romance, embattled with a huge monster with thousands of legs.

Sanderson caught a glimpse of several riders tearing toward him from the direction of the camp, and he knew that Carter and the others were trying to reach him in the hope of being able to stem the torrent of rushing cattle.

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But the movement had already gone too far, and the speed of the frenzied steers was equal to the best running that Streak could do.

Sanderson saw that all effort to stop them would be hopeless, and aware of the danger of remaining at the head of the flying mass, he veered Streak off, heading him toward the side, out of the press.

As he rode he caught a glimpse of Soapy. The latter had the same notion that was in Sanderson's mind, for he was leaning over his pony's mane, riding hard to get out of the path taken by the herd.

Sanderson pulled Streak up slightly, watching Soapy until he was certain the latter would reach the edge, then he gave Streak the reins again.

The pause, though, robbed Sanderson of his chance to escape. He had been cutting across the head of the herd at a long angle when watching Soapy, and had been traveling with the cattle also; and now he saw that the big level was behind him, that he and the cattle were in an ever-narrowing valley which led directly into the neck of Devil's Hole.

Sanderson now gave up all hope of reaching the side, and devoted his attention to straight, hard riding. There were a few steers ahead of him, and he had a faint hope that if he could get ahead of them he might be able to direct their course through Devil's Hole and thus avert the calamity that threatened.

Grimly, silently, riding as he had never ridden before, he urged Streak forward. One by one he passed the steers in his path, and just before he reached the entrance to Devil's Hole he passed the foremost steer.

Glancing back as Streak thundered through the neck of the Hole, Sanderson saw Soapy coming, not more than a hundred yards behind. Soapy had succeeded in getting clear of the great body of steers, but there were a few still running ahead of him, and he was riding desperately to pass them.

Just as Sanderson looked back he saw Soapy's horse stumble. He recovered, ran a few steps and stumbled again. This time he went to one knee. He tried desperately to rise, fell again, and went down, neighing shrilly in terror.

Sanderson groaned and tried to pull Streak up. But the animal refused to heed the pull on the reins and plunged forward, unheeding.

There would have been no opportunity to save Soapy, even if Streak had obeyed his master. The first few steers at the head of the mass swerved around the fallen man and his horse, for they could see him.

The thousands behind, though, running blindly, in the grip of the nameless terror that had seized them, saw nothing, heeded nothing, and they swept, in a smother of dust, straight over the spot where Soapy and his horse had been.

White-lipped, catching his breath in gasps over the horror, Sanderson again turned his back to the herd and raced on. The same accident might happen to him, but there was no time to pick and choose his trail.

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Behind him, with the thundering noise of a devastating avalanche, the herd came as though nothing had happened. The late moon that had been touching the peaks of the far mountains now lifted a rim over them, flooding the world with a soft radiance. Sanderson had reached the center of the trail, through Devil's Hole, before he again looked back.

What he saw caused him to pull Streak up with a jerk. The head of the herd had burst through the entrance to the Hole, and, opening fanlike, had gone headlong into the quicksand.

Fascinated with the magnitude of the catastrophe, Sanderson paid no attention to the few steers that went past him, snorting wildly; he sat rigid on his horse and watched the destruction of the herd.

A great mass of steers had gone into the quicksand at the very edge of the Hole; they formed a foothold for many others that, forced on by the impetus of the entire mass, crushed them down, trampled them further into the sand, and plunged ahead to their own destruction.

It was a continually recurring incident. Maddened, senseless, unreasoning in their panic, the mass behind came on, a sea of tossing horns, a maelstrom of swirling, blinding dust and heaving bodies into the mire; the struggling, enmeshed bodies of the vanguard forming a living floor, over which each newcomer swept to oblivion.

Feeling his utter helplessness, Sanderson continued to watch. There was nothing he could do; he was like a mere atom of sand on a seashore, with the storm waves beating over him.

The scene continued a little longer. Sanderson saw none of the men of the outfit. The dust died down, settling like a pall over the neck of the Hole. A few steers, chancing to come straight ahead through the neck of the Hole, and thus striking the hard, narrow trail that ran through the center, continued to pass Sanderson. They were still in the grip of a frenzy; and at the far end of the Hole he saw a number of them bogged down. They had not learned the lesson of the first entrance.

At length it seemed to be over. Sanderson saw one steer, evidently with some conception of the calamity penetrating its consciousness, standing near him on the trail, moving its head from side to side and snorting as it looked at its unfortunate fellows. The animal seemed to be unaware of Sanderson's presence until Streak moved uneasily.

Then the steer turned to Sanderson, its red eyes ablaze. As though it blamed him for the catastrophe, it charged him. Sanderson drew his pistol and shot it, with Streak rearing and plunging.

Roars of terror and bellows of despair assailed Sanderson's ears from all directions. Groans, almost human, came from the mired mass on both sides of the trail. Hundreds of the cattle had already sunk from sight, hundreds were sucked partly down, and other hundreds—thousands, it seemed—were struggling in plain view, with only portions of their bodies under.

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Still others—the last to pour through the throat of the gorge—were clambering out, using the sinking bodies of others to assist them; Sanderson could see a few more choking the far end of the Hole.

How many had escaped he did not know, nor care. The dramatic finish of Soapy was vivid, and concern for the other members of the outfit was uppermost in his mind.

He rode the back trail slowly. The destruction of his herd had not occupied ten minutes, it seemed. Dazed with the suddenness of it, and with a knowledge of what portended, he came to the spot where Soapy's horse had stumbled and looked upon what was left of the man. His face dead white, his hands trembling, he spread his blanket over the spot. He had formed an affection for Soapy.

Mounting Streak, he resumed his ride toward the camp. A dead silence filled the wide level from which the stampede had started—a silence except for the faint bellowing that still reached his ears from the direction of the Hole.

Half a mile from where he had found the pitiable remnants of Soapy he came upon Carter. The range boss was lying prone on his back, his body apparently unmarred. His horse was standing near him, grazing. Carter had not been in the path of the herd.

What, then, had happened to him?

Sanderson dismounted and went to his knees beside the man. At first he could see no sign of anything that might have caused death—for Carter was undoubtedly dead—and already stiffening! Then he saw a red patch staining the man's shirt, and he examined it. Carter had been shot. Sanderson stood up and looked around. There was no one in sight. He mounted Streak and began to ride toward the camp, for he felt that Carter's death had resulted from an accident. One explanation was that a stray bullet had killed Carter—in the excitement of a stampede the men were apt to shoot wildly at refractory steers.

But the theory of accident did not abide. Halfway between Carter and the camp Sanderson came upon Bud. Bud was lying in a huddled heap. He had been shot from behind. Later, continuing his ride to camp, Sanderson came upon the other men.

He found the Kid and the cook near the chuck wagon, Sogun and Andy were lying near the fire, whose last faint embers were sputtering feebly; Buck was some distance away, but he, too, was dead!

Sanderson went from one to the other of the men, to make a final examination. Bending over Sogun, he heard the latter groan, and in an instant Sanderson was racing to the river for water.

He bathed Sogun's wound—which was low on the left side, under the heart, and, after working over him for five or ten minutes, giving him whisky from a flask he found in the chuck wagon, and talking to the man in an effort to force him into consciousness, he was rewarded by seeing Sogun open his eyes.

Sogun looked perplexedly at Sanderson, whose face was close.

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There was recognition in Sogun's eyes—the calm of reason was swimming in them.

He half smiled. "So you wriggled out of it, boss, eh? It was a clean-up, for sure. I seen them get the other boys. I emptied my gun, an' was fillin' her again when they got me."

"Who?" demanded Sanderson sharply.

"Dale an' his gang. They was a bunch of them—twenty, mebbe. I heard them while I was layin' here. They thought they'd croaked me, an' they wasn't botherin' with me.

"One of them waved a blanket—or a tarp. I couldn't get what it was. Anyway, they waved somethin' an' got the herd started. I heard them talkin' about seein' Soapy go under, right at the start. An' you. Dale said he saw you go down, an' it wasn't no use to look for you. They sure played hell, boss."

Sanderson did not answer.

"If you'd lift my head a little higher, boss, I'd feel easier, mebbe," Sogun smiled feebly. "An' if it ain't too much trouble I'd like a little more of that water—I'm powerful thirsty."

Sanderson went to the river, and when he returned Sogun was stretched out on his back, his face upturned with a faint smile upon it.

Sanderson knelt beside him, lifted his head and spoke to him. But Sogun did not answer.

Sanderson rose and stood with bowed head for a long time, looking down at Sogun. Then he mounted Streak and headed him into the moonlit space that lay between the camp and the Double A ranchhouse.

It was noon the next day when Sanderson returned with a dozen Double A men. After they had labored for two hours the men mounted their horses and began the return trip, one of them driving the chuck wagon.

All of the men were bitter against Dale for what had happened, and several of them were for instant reprisal.

But Sanderson stared grimly at them.

"There ain't any witnesses," he said, "not a damned one! My word don't go in Okar. Besides, it's my game, an' I'm goin' to play her a lone hand—as far as Dale is concerned."

"You goin' to round up what's left of the cattle?" asked a puncher.



Sanderson answered shortly: "Not any. There wasn't enough left to make a fuss about, an' Dale can have them."

CHAPTER XXI

A MAN BORROWS MONEY

The incident of Devil's Hole had changed the character of the fighting between Sanderson and Dale. Dale and his fellow-conspirators had deserted that law upon which, until the incident of Devil's Hole, they had depended. They had resorted to savagery, to murder; they had committed themselves to a course that left Sanderson no choice except to imitate them.

And Sanderson was willing. More, he was anxious. He had respected the law; and still respected it. But he had never respected the law represented by his three enemies. He was determined to avenge the murder of his men, but in his own time and in his own way.

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His soul was in the grip of a mighty rage against Dale and the others; he longed to come into personal contact with them—to feel them writhe and squirm in his clutch. And had he been the free agent he had always been until his coming to the Double A he would have gone straight to Okar, thus yielding to the blood lust that swelled his veins.

But he could not permit his inclinations to ruin the girl he had promised to protect. He could kill Dale, Silverthorn, and Maison quite easily. But he would have no defense for the deed, and the law would force him to desert Mary Bransford.

For an entire day following the return of himself and his men from the scene of the stampede Sanderson fought a terrific mental battle. He said nothing to Mary Bransford, after giving her the few bare facts that described the destruction of the herd. But the girl watched him anxiously, suspecting something of the grim thoughts that tortured him, and at dinner she spoke to him.

“Deal,” she said, “don’t be rash. Those men have done a lawless thing, but they still have the power to invoke the law against you.”

“I ain’t goin’ to be lawless—yet,” he grinned.

But Sanderson was yielding to an impulse that had assailed him. His manner betrayed him to Owen, at least, who spoke to Mary about it.

“He’s framing up something—or he’s got it framed up and is ready to act,” he told the girl. “He has got that calm during the past few hours that I feel like I’m in the presence of an iceberg when I’m near him.”

Whatever was on Sanderson’s mind he kept to himself. But late that night, when the ranchhouse was dark, and a look through one of the windows of the bunkhouse showed Sanderson there were only two men awake—and they playing cards sleepily—he threw saddle and bridle on Streak and rode away into the inky darkness of the basin.

Shortly after dusk on the same night Silverthorn, Dale, and Maison were sitting at a table in Maison’s private office in the bank building. They, too, were playing cards.

But their thoughts were not on the cards. Elation filled their hearts.

Dale was dealing, but it was plain that he took no interest in the game. At last, with a gesture of disgust, he threw the cards face up on the table and smiled at the others.

“What’s the use?” he said. “I keep thinking of what happened at Devil’s Hole. We ought to have been sure that we finished the job, an’ we would have been sure if we hadn’t known that that damned Colfax sheriff was hanging around somewhere.



“He took two hundred head from Sanderson—when he ought to have taken the whole damn herd—which he’d orders to do. And then, instead of driving them direct to Lester’s he made camp just on the other side of Devil’s Hole—three or four miles, Morley said. I don’t know what for, except that maybe he’s decided to give Sanderson the steers he’d taken from him—the damned fool! You’ve got to break him, Maison, for disobeying orders!”

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"I'll attend to him," said Maison.

"That's the reason we didn't go through Devil's Hole to see what had become of Sanderson," resumed Dale. "We was afraid of running into the sheriff, and him, being the kind of a fool he is, would likely have wanted to know what had happened. I thought it better to sneak off without letting him see us than to do any explaining."

Silverthorn looked at his watch. "Morley and the others ought to be here pretty soon," he said.

"They're late as it is," grumbled Dale. "I ought to have gone myself."

They resumed their card-playing. An hour or so later there came a knock on the door of the bank—a back door—and Dale opened it to admit Morley—the big man who had drawn a pistol on Sanderson when he had tried to take Barney Owen out of the City Hotel barroom.

Morley was alone. He stepped inside without invitation and grinned at the others.

"There's no sign of Sanderson. Someone had been there an' planted the guys we salivated—an' the guy which went down in the run. We seen his horse layin' there, cut to ribbons. It's likely Sanderson went into the sand ahead of the herd—they was crowdin' him pretty close when we seen them runnin'."

"You say them guys was planted?" said Dale. "Then Sanderson got out of it. He would—if anyone could, for he was riding like a devil on a cyclone when I saw him. He's got back, and took his men to Devil's Hole."

Maison laughed. "We'll say he got out of it. What of it? He's broke. And if the damned court would get a move on with that evidence we've sent over to prove that he isn't a Bransford, we'd have the Double A inside of a week!"

Dale got up, grinning and looking at his watch.

"Well, gentlemen, I'm hitting the breeze to the Bar D for some sleep. See you tomorrow."

Dale went out and mounted his horse. But he did not go straight home, as he had declared he would. After striking the neck of the basin he swerved his horse and rode northeastward toward Ben Nyland's cabin.

For he had heard that day in Okar that Ben Nyland had taken a train eastward that morning, to return on the afternoon of the day following. And during the time Dale had been talking with Maison; and Silverthorn, and playing cards with them, he thought often of Peggy Nyland.

Silverthorn and Morley did not remain long in Maison's private room in the bank building.

Morley had promised to play cards with some of his men in the City Hotel barroom, and he joined them there, while Silverthorn went to his rooms in the upper story of the station.

After the departure of the others, Maison sat for a long time at the table in the private room, making figures on paper.

Maison had exacted from the world all the luxuries he thought his pampered body desired. His financial career would not have borne investigation, but Maison's operations had been so smooth and subtle that he had left no point at which an enemy could begin an investigation.

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But years of questionable practice had had an inevitable effect upon Maison. Outwardly, he had hardened, but only Maison knew of the many devils his conscience created for him.

Continued communion with the devils of conscience had made a coward of Maison. When at last he got up from the table he glanced apprehensively around the room; and after he had put out the light and climbed the stairs to his rooms above the bank, he was trembling.

Maison had often dealt crookedly with his fellow-men, but never, until the incident of Devil's Hole, had he deliberately planned murder. Thus tonight Maison's conscience had more ghastly evidence to confront him with, and conscience is a pitiless retributive agent.

Maison poured himself a generous drink of whisky from a bottle on a sideboard before he got into bed, but the story told him by Dale and the others of the terrible scene at Devil's Hole—remained so startlingly vivid in his thoughts that whisky could not dim it.

He groaned and pulled the covers over his head, squirming and twisting, for the night was warm and there was little air stirring.

After a while Maison sat up. It seemed to him that he had been in bed for an age, though actually the time was not longer than an hour.

It had been late when he had left the room downstairs. And now he listened for sounds that would tell him that Okar's citizens were still busy with their pleasures.

But no sound came from the street. Maison yearned for company, for he felt unaccountably depressed and morbid. It was as though some danger impended and instinct was warning him of it.

But in the dead silence of Okar there was no suggestion of sound. It must have been in the ghostly hours between midnight and the dawn—though a cold terror that had gripped Maison would not let him get up to look at the clock that ticked monotonously on the sideboard.

He lay, clammy with sweat, every sense strained and acute, listening. For, from continued contemplation of imaginary dangers he had worked himself into a frenzy which would have turned into a conviction of real danger at the slightest sound near him.

He expected sound to come; he waited for it, his ears attuned, his senses alert.

And at last sound came.

It was a mere creak—such a sound as a foot might make on a stairway. And it seemed to have come from the stairs leading to Maison's rooms.

He did not hear it again, though, and he might have fought off the new terror that was gripping him, if at that instant he had not remembered that when leaving the lower room he had forgotten to lock the rear door—the door through which Morley had entered earlier in the evening; the door through which Silverthorn had departed.

He had not locked that door, and that noise on the stairs might have been made by some night prowler.

Aroused to desperation by his fears he started to get out of bed with the intention of getting the revolver that lay in a drawer in the sideboard.

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His feet were on the floor as he sat on the edge of the bed preparatory to standing, when he saw the door at the head of the stairs slowly swing open and a figure of a man appear in the opening.

The light in the room was faint—a mere luminous star-mist—hut Maison could see clearly the man’s face. He stiffened, his hands gripping the bedclothing, as he muttered hoarsely:

“Sanderson!”

Sanderson stepped into the room and closed the door. The heavy six-shooter in his hand was at his hip, the long barrel horizontal, the big muzzle gaping forebodingly into Maison’s face. There was a cold, mirthless grin on Sanderson’s face, but it seemed to Maison that the grin was the wanton expression of murder lust.

He knew, without Sanderson telling him, that if he moved, or made the slightest outcry, Sanderson would kill him.

Therefore he made neither move nor sound, but sat there, rigid and gasping for breath, awaiting the other’s pleasure.

Sanderson came close to him, speaking in a vibrant whisper:

“Anyone in the house with you? If you speak above a whisper I’ll blow you apart!”

“I’m alone!” gasped Maison.

Sanderson laughed lowly. “You must have known I was comin’. Did you expect me? Well—” when Maison did not answer—“you left the rear door open. Obligated to you.

“You know what I came for? No?” His voice was still low and vibrant. “I came to talk over what happened at Devil’s Hole.”

Maison’s eyes bulged with horror.

“I see you know about it, all right. I’m glad of that. Seven men murdered; three thousand head of cattle gone. Mebbe they didn’t all go into the quicksand—I don’t know. What I do know is this: they’ve got to be paid for—men an’ cattle. Understand? Cattle an’ men.”

The cold emphasis he laid on the “and” made a shiver run over the banker.

“Money will pay for cattle,” went on Sanderson. “I’ll collect a man for every man you killed at Devil’s Hole.”

He laughed in feline humor when Maison squirmed at the words.

“You think your life is more valuable than the life of any one of the men you killed at Devil’s Hole, eh? Soapy was worth a hundred like you! An’ Sogun—an’ all the rest! Understand? They were real men, doin’ some good in the world. I’m tellin’ you this so you’ll know that I don’t think you amount to a hell of a lot, an’ that I wouldn’t suffer a heap with remorse if you’d open your trap for one little peep an’ I’d have to blow your guts out!”

A devil of conscience had finally visited Maison—a devil in the flesh. For all the violent passions were aflame in Sanderson’s face, repressed but needing only provocation to loose them.

Maison knew what impended. But he succeeded in speaking, though the words caught, stranglingly, in his throat:

“W-what do you—want?”

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"Ninety thousand dollars. The market price for three thousand head of cattle."

"There isn't that much in the vaults!" protested Maison in a gasping whisper. "We never keep that amount of money on hand."

He would have said more, but he saw Sanderson's grin become bitter; saw the arm holding the six-shooter stiffen suggestively.

Maison raised his hands in horror.

"Wait!" he said, pleadingly. "I'll see. Good God, man, keep the muzzle of that gun away!"

"Ninety thousand will do it," Sanderson grimly told him, "ninety thousand. No less. You can ask that God you call on so reckless to have ninety thousand in the vault when you go to look for it, right away.

"Get up an' dress!" he commanded.

He stood silently watching the banker as the latter got into his clothing. Then, with a wave of his gun in the direction of the stairs he ordered Maison to precede him. He kept close to the banker in the darkness of the rooms through which they passed, and finally when they reached the little room into which opened the big doors of the vault—embedded in solid masonry—Sanderson again spoke:

"I want it in bills of large denomination." The banker was on his knees before the doors, working at the combination, and he looked around in silent objection at Sanderson's voice.

"Big ones, I said," repeated the latter. "You've got them. I was in Silverthorn's rooms some hours ago, lookin' over his books an' things. I saw a note there, showin' that he'd deposited fifty thousand here the day before yesterday. The note said it was cash. You'll have forty thousand more. If you ain't got it you'll wish you had."

Maison had it. He drew it out in packages—saffron-hued notes that he passed back to Sanderson reluctantly. When he had passed back the exact amount he looked around.

Sanderson ordered him to close the doors, and with the banker preceding him they returned to the upper room, where Sanderson distributed the money over his person securely, the banker watching him.

When Sanderson had finished, he again spoke. There was elation in his eyes, but they still were aflame with the threat of death and violence.

“Who’s the biggest an’ most honest man in town?” he said, “the one man that the folks here always think of when they’re in trouble an’ want a square deal? Every town always has such a man. Who is he?”

“Judge Graney,” said Maison.

“All right,” declared Sanderson. “We’ll go see Judge Graney. You’re goin’ to lead me to the place where he lives. We’re goin’ to have him witness that you’ve paid me ninety thousand dollars for the stock you destroyed—my cattle. He’s goin’ to be all the law I’m goin’ to depend on—in this case. After a while—if you sneaks go too strong—I’ll let loose a little of my own law—the kind I’ve showed you tonight.

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"You're goin' to Judge Graney's place, an' you're goin' to sign a paper showin' you paid me the money for my cattle. You ain't goin' to make any noise on the way, or to Judge Graney. You're goin' to do the talkin' an' tell Graney that you want him to witness the deal. An' you're goin' to do it without him gettin' wise that I'm forcin' you. You'll have to do some actin', an' if you fall down on this job you'll never have to act again! Get goin'!"

Maison was careful not to make any noise as he went down the stairs; he was equally careful when he reached the street.

In a short time, Sanderson walking close behind him, he halted at a door of a private dwelling. He knocked on the door, and a short, squat man appeared in the opening, holding a kerosene lamp in one hand and a six-shooter in the other.

He recognized Maison instantly and politely asked him and his visitor inside. There Maison stated his business, and the judge, though revealing some surprise that so big a transaction should be concluded at so uncommon an hour, attested the paper made out by Maison, and signed the receipt for ninety thousand dollars written by Sanderson and given to the banker. Then, still followed by Sanderson, the banker went out.

There was no word spoken by either of the men until they again reached the bank building. Then it was Sanderson who spoke.

"That's all, Maison," he said. "Talk, if you must—mebbe it'll keep you from explodin'. But if there's any more meddlin' with my affairs—by you—I'm comin' for you again. An' the next time it'll be to make you pay for my men!"

He slipped behind the bank building and was gone. A little later, still standing where Sanderson had left him, he saw the Double A man riding swiftly across country toward the neck of the basin.

Maison went slowly upstairs, lighted a lamp, and looked at his reflection in a glass. He sighed, blew out the light, got into bed and stretched out in relief, feeling that he had got out of the affair cheaply enough, considering all things.

And remembering what Sanderson had told him about returning, he determined that if Judge Graney said nothing of the occurrence he would never mention it. For he did not want Sanderson to pay him another visit.

CHAPTER XXII

A MAN FROM THE ABYSS

At about the time Sanderson was entering Okar, Alva Dale was letting himself into the door of his office at the Bar D ranchhouse. Dale's thoughts, because of the sensuous

longing with which he had always looked upon Peggy Nyland, had become abysmal. Silverthorn had warned him that the dragging of a woman into the plot would be fatal to their aims, but Dale had paid no heed to Silverthorn. During the day he had kept thinking of the girl until now he could no longer restrain himself. His face was bestial with passion as he entered his office.

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Inside the office he lighted a lamp and seated himself at his desk. There, with a pair of shears and a piece of black cloth, he fashioned a mask. He donned the mask and peered at himself in a mirror, grinning with satisfaction over the reflection. Had he not known himself for Alva Dale he would have been fooled by the covering.

Working swiftly, he changed his clothes. Then, after again looking at his reflection, he put out the light, stepped outside, locked the door, and mounted his horse.

Riding a ridge above a shallow arroyo he came upon a little level near a grove of cottonwood trees. He circled one side of the grove, and in a clearing he saw the Nyland cabin.

He had visited the cabin before, but never had he felt about it as he felt at this moment. There had always been the presence of Ben Nyland to dampen the romantic thoughts that had beset him—for there had been a time when—if Peggy Nyland had been willing—he would have married her.

That time had passed. Dale grinned wickedly as he dismounted and walked forward.

There was no light showing in any of the windows, and Dale stepped stealthily to the rear door and knocked.

There was no answer; and Dale repeated the blows. Then he grinned With delight as he heard Peggy's voice, high-pitched and startled, saying:

"Who's there?"

"It's me—Sanderson," he returned. "I've come for you!"

"What for?" This time there was alarm in the girl's voice, and Dale heard her walk across the floor and halt at the door. He mentally visualized her, standing there, one ear against the panel.

"Didn't they tell you?" he said in a hoarse voice, into which he succeeded in getting much pretended anger. "Why, I sent a man over here with word."

"Word about what?"

Dale heard the girl fumbling at the fastenings of the door, and he knew that his imitation of Sanderson's voice had deceived her.

"Word that Ben was hurt," he lied. "The east train hit him as it was pullin' in. He's bad off, but the doc says he'll come around if he gets good nursin', an' that's why I've come _____"



While he was talking the door burst open and Peggy appeared in the opening, her eyes wide with concern and eagerness.

She had heard Dale's first knock on the door, and knowing it was someone for her—perhaps Ben returning—she had begun to dress, finishing—except for her shoes and stockings—by the time she opened the door.

In the dim light she did not at first see the mask on Dale's face, and she was insistently demanding to be told just where Ben's injuries were, when she detected the fraud.

Then she gasped and stepped back, trying to close the door. She would have succeeded had not Dale thrust a foot into the aperture.

She stamped at his foot with her bare one ineffectually. Dale laughed at her futile efforts to keep him from opening the door. He struck an arm through the aperture, leaned his weight against the door, and pushed it open.

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She was at the other side of the room when he entered, having dodged behind a table. He made a rush for her, but she evaded him, keeping the table between them.

There was no word said. The girl's breath was coming in great gasps from the fright and shock she had received, but Dale's was shrill and laboring from the strength of his passions.

Reason left him as they circled around the table, and with a curse he overturned it so that it rolled and crashed out of the way, leaving her with no obstacle behind which to find shelter.

She ran toward the door, but Dale caught her at the threshold. She twisted and squirmed in his grasp, scratching him and clawing at his face in an access of terror, and one hand finally caught the black mask covering and tore it from his face.

"Alva Dale!" she shrieked. "Oh, you beast!"

Fighting with redoubled fury she forced him against one of the door jambs, still scratching and clawing. Dale grasped one hand, but the free one reached his face, the fingers sinking into the flesh and making a deep gash in his cheek.

The pain made a demon of Dale, and he struck her. She fell, soundlessly, her head striking the edge of a chair with a deadening, thudding crash.

Standing in the doorway looking down at her, the faint, outdoor light shining on her face and revealing its ghastly whiteness, Dale suffered a quick reaction. He had not meant to strike so hard, he told himself; he hoped he had not killed her.

Kneeling beside her he felt her pulse and her head. The flesh under his hand was cold as marble; the pulse—if there was any—was not perceptible. Dale examined the back of her head, where it had struck the chair. He got up, his face ashen and convulsed with horror.

"Good Lord!" he muttered hoarsely, "she's dead—or dying. I've done it now!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GUNMAN

Dale's first decision was to leave Peggy in the cabin. But she might recover, and she had recognized him. Ben Nyland would exact stern vengeance for the outrage.

Dale stood for some seconds in the doorway, his brain working rapidly. Then he leaped inside the cabin, took the girl up in his arms, carried her to his horse, mounted, and with the limp, sagging body in his arms rode into the night.

Reaction, also, was working on Banker Maison. Though more than an hour had passed since he had got into bed, following the departure of his nocturnal visitor, he had not slept a wink. His brain revolving the incidents of the night—it had been a positive panorama of vivid horrors.

The first gray streak of dawn was splitting the horizon when he gave it up, clambered out of bed and poured a generous drink from the bottle on the sideboard.

“God, a man needs something like this to brace him up after such a night!” he declared.

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He took a second drink from the bottle, and a third. In the act of pouring a fourth he heard a sound at the back door, and with a gulp of terror he remembered that he had again forgotten to lock it.

Sanderson undoubtedly was returning!

Again Maison's body became clammy with a cold sweat. He stood in the room near the sideboard, tremblingly listening. For again there was a step on the stairs.

When he saw the door begin to open his knees knocked together, but there entered, not the dread apparition he expected, but Alva Dale, with the limp form of a woman in his arms!

The sudden breaking of the tension, and astonishment over what he saw, made Maison's voice hoarse.

"What's up now?" he demanded.

"Hell!" muttered Dale. He told Maison the whole story—with some reservations.

"I was sparkin' her—like I've been doin' for a long time. We had a tiff over—over somethin'—an' I pushed her. She fell over, hittin' her head."

"You damned fool!" snapped Maison. Dale was not Sanderson, and Maison felt the authority of his position. "This is Peggy Nyland, isn't it? She's the girl Silverthorn was telling me about—that you're sweet on. You damned fool. Can't you let the women alone when we're in a deal like this! You'll ruin the whole thing! Get her out of here!"

Dale eyed the other sullenly, his face bloating with rage.

"Look here, Maison; you quit your infernal yappin'. She stays here. I thought at first I'd killed her an' I was goin' to plant her. But she's been groanin' a little while I've been comin' here, an' there's a chance for her. Go get the doctor."

"What about her brother?" demanded Maison. "He's a shark with a gun, they tell me, an' a tiger when he's aroused. If he finds out about this he'll kill both of us."

Dale grinned saturninely. "I'll take care of the brother," he said. "You get the doc—an' be damned quick about it!"

Maison went out, and in five minutes returned with the doctor. The latter worked for more than an hour with Peggy, and at last succeeded in reviving her.

But though Peggy opened her eyes, there was no light of reason in them—only the vacuous, unseeing stare of a dulled and apathetic brain.

“She’s got an awful whack,” said the doctor. “It’s cracked her skull. It’ll be weeks before she gets over it—if she ever does. I’ll come and see her tomorrow.”

The doctor came the next day—in the morning. He found the patient no better. A woman, hired by Dale, was caring for the girl.

Also, in the morning, Dale paid a visit. His visit was to Dal Colton, the man Dale had employed to kill Sanderson, and who had so signally failed.

The scene of the meeting between Dale and Colton was in the rear room of the City Hotel.

“Look here,” said Dale. “This deal can’t be no whizzer like you run in on Sanderson. He’s got to be dropped, or things are goin’ to happen to all of us. His name’s Nyland—Ben Nyland. You know him?”

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Colton nodded. "Plenty. He's a fast man with a gun. I'll have to get him when he ain't lookin'. You'll get me clear?"

"No one will know about it," declared Dale. "You go out to his ranch an' lay for him. He'll be in on the afternoon train. When he comes into the door of his house, nail him. That's easy."

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCERNING A WOMAN

Day was breaking when Sanderson rode in to the Double A corral and dismounted. Several of the men of the outfit were astir, and he called to one of them, and told the man to care for his horse. He grinned around at them all, and then went into the house.

Mary Bransford was not yet up. The door that Sanderson had gone out of the night before was still unlocked. He opened it and entered, passing through the sitting-room and halting in the kitchen. He had noted that the door to Mary's room was closed.

Sanderson's dominant emotion was that of grim satisfaction. He had compelled Maison to disgorge the money without jeopardizing his own liberty. Judge Graney's word would suffice to prove his case should Maison proceed against him.

But Sanderson had little fear that Maison would attempt reprisal. If he had judged the man correctly, Maison would not talk, even to Silverthorn.

Sanderson cared very little if he did talk. He had reached the point where the killing of his enemies would come easy to him. They had chosen lawlessness, and he could wage that kind of warfare as well as they. He had shown them that he could.

He disclosed the visible proof of his ability. One by one he drew the packages of currency from various pockets, tossing them at random on the kitchen table. He was standing at the table, counting the bills in one of the packages, when he heard a sound behind him. He wheeled, to confront Mary Bransford.

She was dressed, but her face was as yet unwashed, and her hair uncombed. She stood in the doorway between the dining-room and the kitchen, looking at Sanderson in sleepy-eyed bewilderment.

"I saw you riding in," she said. "Where on earth have you been at this hour? You came from the direction of Okar."

"Business," he grinned.

“Business! Why, what kind of business could take you to Okar during the night?”

“If you could get the sleep out of your eyes,” he suggested, “mebbe you could see. It’s the kind of business that all the world is interested in—gettin’ the money.”

And then she saw the packages of bills. She rubbed her eyes as though in doubt of the accuracy of her vision; they grew wide and bright with astonishment and wonder, and she gave a little, breathless gasp as she ran forward to the table and looked down at the mound of wealth.

And then, convinced that her senses had not played her a trick, her face whitened, she drew a long breath, and turned to Sanderson, grasping the lapels of his coat and holding them tightly.

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"Sanderson," she said in an awed voice, "what have you done? Where did you get that money?"

He told her, and her eyes dilated. "What a reckless thing to do!" she said. "They might have killed you!"

"Maison was havin' thoughts the other way round," he grinned. "He was mighty glad I didn't make him pay for the men he killed."

"They'll be after you—they'll kill you for that!" she told him.

"Shucks," he laughed. He showed her the document written and signed by Maison, and attested by Judge Graney:

This is to certify that I have tonight paid to Deal Sanderson the sum of ninety thousand dollars for three thousand head of cattle received to my full satisfaction.

"There ain't no comeback to that!" exulted Sanderson. "Now we'll start buildin' that dam. Mebbe, though," he added, grinning at her, "if you knew where a mighty hungry man could find a good cook that would be willin' to rustle some grub, there'd be——"

She laughed. "Right away!" she said, and went outside to perform her ablutions.

Sanderson, while she was outside, counted out ten thousand dollars and put it into a pocket. Then he piled the remainder of the money neatly on the table. When Mary came in, her face glowing, her hair freshly combed, he stood and looked at her with admiration in his eyes, and a great longing in his heart.

"I've dreamed of seein' you that way," he said.

"As your cook?" she demanded, reddening.

"A man's grub would taste a heap better if his wife did the cookin'," he said, his face sober.

"Why—why—" she said; "do you mean——"

"I wouldn't be finicky if—if my wife was doin' my cookin'," he declared, his own face crimson. "I wouldn't kick if she gave me the same kind of grub every mornin'—if it was she I've wanted."

"Why, Sanderson! Is this——"

"It's a proposal, ma'am. I can't say what I want to say—what I've figured on sayin' to you. I don't seem to be able to find the words I wanted to use. But you'll understand, ma'am."

"That you want a cook more than you want a—a wife? Oh, Sanderson!" she mocked.

She knew that it was bashfulness that had caused him to mention the cooking; that he had introduced the subject merely for the purpose of making an oblique start; but she could not resist the temptation to taunt him.

She looked furtively at him to see how deeply she had hurt him, but was surprised to see him grinning widely.

"Women ain't so wise as they pretend to be," he said. "There's grub, an' grub. An' what kind of grub is it that a man in love wants most?"

She caught his meaning, now, and blushed rosy red, drooping her eyes from his.

"That wasn't fair, Sanderson," she said lowly. "Besides, a man can't live on kisses."

"I know a man who can," he smiled, his eyes eager and glowing, now that he saw she was not going to repel him; "that is," he added lowly, "if he could find a cook that would give them to him whenever he wanted them. But it would take a lot of them, an' they'd have to be given with the cook's consent. Do you think you could——"

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He paused and looked at her, for her eyes were shining and her lips were pursed in a way that left no doubt of the invitation.

“Why, Mary!” he said, as he caught her in his arms.

For a time the money lay on the table unnoticed and forgotten, and there was an eloquent silence in the kitchen.

A little later, Barney Owen, passing close to the kitchen window—having seen the men caring for Sanderson’s horse, and learning from them that Sanderson had come in early after having apparently been out all night—heard Sanderson’s voice issuing from the kitchen:

“There’s a difference in kisses; them that you gave me when you thought I was your brother wasn’t half so thrillin’ as——”

Owen stiffened and stood rigid, his face whitening.

And then again he heard Sanderson’s voice:

“There’s a judge in Okar—Judge Graney. An’ if you’d consider gettin’ married today, ma’am, why——”

“Why, Sanderson!” came Mary’s voice in mild reproof.

“Well, then,” sounded Sanderson’s voice, full of resignation this time; “have it your way; I don’t want to hurry you.”

“Hurry me? Oh, no!” laughed the girl in gentle mockery. Whereat they both laughed. The sound of it must have pleased Owen, for he, too, laughed as he left the window and went toward the bunkhouse.

An hour later Sanderson emerged from the house, threw saddle and bridle on Streak, and rode out into the basin to a camp where he found Kent Williams and his men. He gave the engineer the package of bills he had taken from the table.

“Here is ten thousand dollars,” he said. “You take your men, ride over to Lazette, get your supplies, an’ hustle them right back here. It ain’t likely there’ll be any more trouble, but we ain’t takin’ any chances. My men ain’t got any more cattle to bother with, an’ they’ll go with you an’ your men to Lazette, an’ come back with the wagons to see that they ain’t interfered with. Start as soon as you can get ready.”

“Within an hour the engineer, his men, and the men of the Double A outfit were on the move. Barney Owen did not go. He sat on one of the top rails of the corral fence, alternately watching the men of the outfit as they faded into the vast space toward

Lazette, and Mary Bransford and Sanderson, as they stood on the porch, close together, likewise watching the men.

“I’d say—if anyone was to ask me—that there is a brother who seems to have been forgotten,” said Owen with a curious smile.

CHAPTER XXV

A MAN IS AROUSED

The coming of the dawn and the comforting contact with other human beings, brought Banker Maison relief from the terrifying fear that had gripped him during the night. He became almost courageous after breakfast, and began to think that perhaps he had yielded too readily to Sanderson’s demands.

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As the hours passed and the memory of the night's horror grew more distant, he began to feel indignant over the treatment accorded him by Sanderson. Later the indignation grew to a deep and consuming rage, and he entertained thoughts of his power and influence and of the comparative unimportance of the grim-faced man who had robbed him.

Robbed him—that was it! Sanderson had robbed him!

The more Maison's thoughts dwelt upon the occurrence the deeper grew his rage. He even condoned Dale's action in bringing the Nyland girl to his rooms. Dale was his friend, and he would protect him!

Perhaps Maison did not reflect that his greed was attempting to justify him; that back of his growing championship of Dale was his eagerness to get possession of the Nyland property; and that behind his rage over Sanderson's visit was the bitter thought that Sanderson had compelled him to pay for the destroyed and stolen steers.

Maison did not consider that phase of the question. Or if he did consider it he did not permit that consideration to influence his actions. For within two hours after breakfast he had sent a messenger for Silverthorn and Dale, and fifteen minutes later he was telling them the story of the night's happenings.

Silverthorn's face grew purple with rage during the recital. At its conclusion he got up, dark purpose glinting in his eyes.

"We've got to put Sanderson out of the way, and do it quickly!" he declared. "And we've got to get that money back. Dale, you're a deputy sheriff. Damn the law! This isn't a matter for court action—that damned Graney wouldn't give us a warrant for Sanderson now, no matter what we told him! We've got to take the law into our own hands. We'll see if this man can come in here, rob a bank, and get away without being punished!"

At the end of a fifteen-minute talk, Dale slipped out of the rear door of the bank and sought the street. In the City Hotel he whispered to several men, who sauntered out of the building singly, mounted their horses, and rode toward the neck of the basin. In another saloon Dale whispered to several other men, who followed the first ones.

Dale's search continued for some little time, and he kept a continuous stream of riders heading toward the neck of the basin. And then, when he had spoken to as many as he thought he needed, he mounted his own horse and, rode away.

Sanderson and Mary Bransford had not yet settled the question regarding the disposal of the money Sanderson had received from Banker Maison. They sat on the edge of the porch, talking about it. From a window of the bunkhouse Barney Owen watched them, a pleased smile on his face.

"It's yours," Sanderson told the girl. "An' we ain't trustin' *that* to any bank. Look what they did with the seven thousand I've got in the Lazette bank. They've tied it up so nobody will be able to touch it until half the lawyers in the county have had a chance to gas about it. An' by that time there won't be a two-bit piece left to argue over. No, siree, you've got to keep that coin where you can put your hands on it when you want it!"

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"When *you* want it," she smiled. "Do you know, Deal," she added seriously, blushing as she looked at him, "that our romance has been so much different from other romances that I've heard about. It has seemed so—er—matter of fact."

He grinned. "All romances—real romances—are a heap matter of fact. Love is the most matter-of-fact thing in the world. When a guy meets a girl that he takes a shine to—an' the girl takes a shine to him—there ain't anything goin' to keep them from makin' a go of it."

He reddened a little.

"That's what I thought when I saw you. Even when the Drifter was tellin' me about you, I was sure of you."

"I think you have shown it in your actions," she laughed.

"But how about you?" he suggested; "did you have any thoughts on the subject?"

"I—I think that even while I thought you were my brother, I realized that my feeling for you was strange and unusual; though I laid it to the fact that I had never had a brother, and therefore could not be expected to know just how a sister should feel toward one. But it has all been unusual, hasn't it?"

"If you mean me comin' here like I did, an' masqueradin', an' lettin' you kiss me, an' fuss over me—why, mebbe that would be considered unusual. But love ain't unusual; an' a man fightin' for the woman he loves ain't unusual."

While he had been talking a change had come over him. His voice had lost its note of gentle raillery, his lips had straightened into hard lines, his eyes were glowing with the light she had seen in them more than once—the cold glitter of hostility.

Startled, she took him by the shoulders and shook him.

"Why, what on earth has come over you, Deal?"

He grinned mirthlessly, got up, took a hitch in his cartridge belt, and drew a full breath.

"The fightin' ain't over yet," he said. "There's a bunch of guys comin' toward the Double A. Dale's gang, most likely—after the money I took from Maison."

She was on her feet now, and looking out into the basin. Two or three miles away, enveloped in huge dust cloud, were a number of riders. They were coming fast, and headed directly for the Double A ranchhouse.

The girl clung to Sanderson's arm in sudden terror until he gently released himself, and taking her by the shoulders forced her through a door and into the sitting-room.

"Hide that money in a safe place—where the devil himself couldn't find it. Don't give it up, no matter what happens."

He walked to a window and looked out. Behind him he could hear Mary running here and there; and at last when the riders were within half a mile of the house, she came and stood behind Sanderson, panting, resting her hands on his shoulders to peer over them at the coming riders.

Sanderson turned and smiled at her. "We'll go out on the porch, now, an' wait for them."

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"Deal," she whispered excitedly; "why don't you go away? Get on Streak—he'll outrun any horse in the county! Go! Get Williams and the other boys. Deal!" She shook him frenziedly. "It isn't the money they are after—it's you! They'll kill you, Deal! And there are so many of them! Run—run!"

He grinned, patting her shoulder as he led her out upon the porch and forced her into a chair.

When the men had come near enough for him to distinguish their faces, and he saw that Dale was leading them, he walked to a slender porch column and leaned against it, turning to smile at Mary.

"Maison decided he'd have to talk, looks like," he said. "Some men just can't help it."

Rigid in her chair, the girl watched the riders swoop toward the ranchhouse; Sanderson, lounging against the porch column, smiled saturninely.

The riders headed directly toward the porch. Sanderson counted them as they came to a halt within thirty feet of the edge of the porch. There were twenty of them.

Dale, his face flushed, his eyes alight with triumph, dismounted and stepped forward, halting at the edge of the porch and sweeping his hat from his head with exaggerated courtesy.

"Delighted to see you, ma'am—an' your friend, Deal Sanderson. Mr. Sanderson paid my friend Maison a visit last night, takin' away with him ninety thousand dollars of the bank's money. Me an' my men has come over to get the money—an' Mr. Sanderson. The Okar court allows that it needs him. I've got a warrant for him."

Dale's grin was huge. He felt secure with his men behind him.

But if he expected Sanderson to be impressed he was disappointed. The latter's face did not change color, nor did he shift his position in the slightest manner. And his cold, amused grin disconcerted Dale. His voice, when he spoke, was gentle and drawling:

"Was you thinkin' Miss Bransford is interested in warrants, Dale? Oh, don't! There's an honest judge in Okar, an' he ain't helpin' Maison's gang. Get back to Okar an' tell Maison that Sanderson ain't visitin' Okar today."

"You ain't, eh!" Dale's voice snapped with rage. "Well, we ain't carin' a damn whether you do or not! We've got you, right where we want you. I've got a warrant, an' you'll come peaceable or we'll plant you! There ain't only two horses in the corral—showing that your men has gone. An' there ain't anything between you an' the coyotes!"



“Only you, Dale,” said Sanderson. His voice was still gentle, still drawling. But into it had come a note that made Dale’s face turn pale and caused the bodies of the men in the group to stiffen.

“Only you, Dale,” Sanderson repeated. His right hand was at his hip, resting lightly on the butt of the six-shooter that reposed in its holster.

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"I've always wanted to test the idea of whether a crook like you thought more of what he was doin' than he did of his own life. This gun leather of mine is kind of short at the top—if you'll notice. The stock an' the hammer of the gun are where they can be touched without interferin' with the leather. There ain't any trigger spring, because I've been brought up to fan the hammer. There ain't any bottom to the holster, an' it's hung by a little piece of leather so's it'll turn easy in any direction.

"It can easy be turned on you. You get goin'. I'll have a chance to bore one man before your crowd gets me. Likely it will be you. What are you sayin'?"

Dale was saying nothing. His face changed color, he shifted his feet uneasily, and looked back at his men. Some of them were grinning, and it was plain to Dale that not one of them would act unless ordered to do so.

And an order, given by him, would mean suicide, nothing less; for from that country in which Sanderson had gained his reputation had come stories of the man's remarkable ability with the weapon he had described, and Dale had no longing to risk his life so recklessly.

There was a long, tense silence. Not a man in the group of riders moved a finger. All were gazing, with a sort of dread fascination, at the holster at Sanderson's right hip, and at the butt of the gun in it, projecting far, the hammer in plain sight.

The situation could not last. Sanderson did not expect it to last. Seemingly calm and unconcerned, he was in reality passionately alert and watchful.

For he had no hope of escaping from this predicament. He had made a mistake in sending his men away with Williams, and he knew the chances against him were too great. He had known that all along—even when talking and comforting Mary Bransford.

He knew that Dale had come to kill him; that Graney had not issued any warrant for him, for Graney knew that Maison had acted of his own volition—or at least had given the judge that impression.

But whether the warrant was a true one or not, Sanderson had decided that he would not let himself be taken. He had determined that at the first movement made by any man in the group he would kill Dale and take his chance with the others.

Dale knew it—he saw the cold resolution in Sanderson's eyes. Dale drew a deep breath, and the men in the group behind him watched him narrowly.

But just when it seemed that decisive action in one direction or another must be taken, there came an interruption.

Behind Sanderson—from one of the windows of the ranchhouse—came a hoarse curse.

Sanderson saw Dale's eyes dilate; he saw the faces of the men in the group of riders change color; he saw their hands go slowly upward. Dale, too, raised his hands.

Glancing swiftly over his shoulder, Sanderson saw Barney Owen at one of the windows. He was inside the house, his arms were resting on the window-sill. He was kneeling, and in his hands was a rifle, the muzzle covering Dale and the men who had come with him.

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Owen's face was chalk white and working with demoniac passion. His eyes were wild, and blazing with a wanton malignancy that awed every man who looked at him—Sanderson included. His teeth were bared in a horrible snarl; the man was like some wild animal—worse, the savage, primitive passions of him were unleashed and rampant, directed by a reasoning intelligence. His voice was hoarse and rasping, coming in jerks:

“Get out of the way, Sanderson! Stand aside! I'll take care of these whelps! Get your hands up, Dale! Higher—higher! You damned, sneaking vulture! Come here to make trouble, eh? You and your bunch of curs! I'll take care of you! Move—one of you! Move a finger! You won't! Then go! Go! I'll count three! The man that isn't going when I finish counting gets his quick! One—two——”

“Wait!! Already on the move, the men halted at the sound of his voice. The violence of the passion that gripped him gave him a new thought.

“You don't go!” he jeered at them. “You stay here. Sanderson, you take their guns! Grab them yourself!”

Sanderson drew his own weapon and moved rapidly among the men. He got Dale's gun first and threw it in the sand at the edge of the porch. Then he disarmed the others, one after another, throwing the weapons near where he had thrown Dale's.

He heard Owen tell Mary Bransford to get them, and he saw Mary gathering them up and taking them into the house.

Sanderson made his search of the men thorough, for he had caught the spirit of the thing. At last, when the guns were all collected, Owen issued another order:

“Now turn your backs—every last man of you! And stay that way! The man that turns his head will never do it again!

“Sanderson, you go after Williams and the others. They've only been gone about an hour, and they won't travel fast. Get them! Bring them back here. Then we'll take the whole bunch over to Okar and see what Judge Graney has to say about that warrant!”

Sanderson looked at Mary Bransford, a huge grin on his face. She smiled stiffly at him in return, and nodded her head.

Seemingly, it was the only way out of a bad predicament. Certainly they could not commit wholesale murder, and it was equally certain that if Dale was permitted to go, he and his men would return. Or they might retire to a distance, surround the house and thus achieve their aim.

Sanderson, however, was not satisfied, for he knew that a sudden, concerted rush by the men—even though they were unarmed—would result disastrously to Owen—and to Mary—if she decided to remain.

Telling the little man to keep a watchful eye on the men, he went among them, ordering those that were mounted from their horses. When they were all standing, he began to uncoil the ropes that were hanging from the saddles.

He worked fast, and looking up once he saw Owen's eyes glowing with approval—while Mary smiled broadly at him. They knew what he meant to do.

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Dale and his men knew also, for their faces grew sullen. Sanderson, however, would tolerate no resistance. Rope in hand, he faced Dale. The latter's face grew white with impotent fury as he looked at the rope in Sanderson's hands; but the significant Hardness that flashed into Sanderson's eyes convinced him of the futility of resistance, and he held his hands outward.

Sanderson tied them. Very little of the rope was required in the process, and after Dale was secured, Sanderson threw a loop around the hands of a man who stood beside Dale, linking him with the latter.

Several others followed. Sanderson used half a dozen ropes, and when he had finished, all the Dale men—with their leader on an extreme end, were lashed together.

There were hard words spoken by the men; but they brought only grins to Sanderson's face, to Owen's, and to Mary's.

"They won't bother you a heap, now," declared Sanderson as he stepped toward the porch and spoke to Owen. "Keep an eye on them, though, an' don't let them go to movin' around much."

Sanderson stepped up on the porch and spoke lowly to Mary, asking her to go with him after Williams—for he had had that thought in mind ever since Owen had issued the order for him to ride after the engineer.

But Mary refused, telling Sanderson that by accompanying him she would only hamper him.

Reluctantly, then, though swiftly, Sanderson ran to the corral, threw saddle and bridle on Streak, and returned to the porch. He halted there for a word with Owen and Mary, then raced northeastward, following a faint trail that Williams and the others had taken, which led for a time over the plains, then upward to the mesa which rimmed the basin.

CHAPTER XXVI

A MAN IS HANGED

Sanderson and Streak grew dim in the distance until, to the watchers at the ranchhouse, horse and rider merged into a mere blot that crawled up the long slope leading to the mesa. The watchers saw the blot yet a little longer, as it traveled with swift, regular leaps along the edge of the mesa; then it grew fainter and fainter, and at last they saw it no more.

Dale's men, their backs to Owen and Mary, seemed to have accepted their defeat in a spirit of resignation, for they made no attempt to turn their heads.

Mary, white and shaking, though with a calmness that came from the knowledge that in this crisis she must do what she could, went inside and stood behind Owen, ready to respond to any call he might make upon her.

Owen, his rage somewhat abated, though he still watched Dale and his men with sullen, malevolent eyes, had changed his position. Mary had brought a chair, and Owen sat on it, the rifle still resting on the window-sill, menacing the men.

The minutes, it seemed to the girl, passed with exceeding slowness. She watched the hands of a clock on a shelf in the room drag themselves across the face of the dial, and twice she walked in front of the shelf and peered intently at the clock, to be certain it was going.

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Williams and the other men had been gone for something more than an hour. But, as Owen had said, they would travel slowly, having no incentive for haste. Sanderson, on the other hand, would make Streak run his best—and she knew Streak could run.

So she began to estimate the time that would elapse before Sanderson and Williams returned. With an hour's start, she gave Sanderson three-quarters of an hour to catch them. Then, three quarters of an hour additional would be required for the run home—if they came back as swiftly as Sanderson had gone.

But she doubted that. She would give them a full hour for the return trip. That would make an hour and three quarters.

But it seemed to her that an age elapsed before the minute hand on the clock dragged itself one-quarter of the distance around the circle.

She looked out at Dale and his men. The men were all standing, their backs to the house. But it seemed to the girl that they were standing nearer to one another than they had been all along, and a pulse of trepidation ran over her.

Watching them closely, Mary felt they were meditating some action. They were whispering to one another, and Dale was gesturing as emphatically as he could.

The girl was certain they contemplated concerted action of some sort, and she was just about to apprise Owen of her fears, when she saw one of the men—and then another and another—working with the ropes that bound them. One of the men turned, a huge grin on his face. She caught the flash of metal in the man's hands, saw the rope fall from them, severed.

She shouted, then, at Owen:

“Look out, Barney; they’ve got a knife!”

At the instant she spoke the men moved as though by prearrangement. By the time her voice reached Owen's ears the men had scattered, running in all directions. Several ran directly away from the house, others toward it, some went toward the corners of the building nearest them. All were running zigzag fashion.

Owen, his eyes blazing, fired three times in rapid succession. One of the men tumbled, headlong, turning over several times and landing face downward on the sand of the yard; but several others, apparently uninjured, ran straight for the ranchhouse.

There were no stationary targets for Owen to shoot at. By the time he had fired the three shots the men were all moving. Several the girl saw as they ran around the ranchhouse; three or four others ran straight for the door in which she stood.

She cried sharply to Owen, and the latter fired once, as three or four figures crossed the porch. The girl could not tell whether or not Dale was one of the three, for the men moved quickly.

Owen missed; Mary heard him curse. And before he had time to do either again the men were inside. Mary was standing near Owen, and she had reached down for one of the pistols that lay on the floor.

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By the time the men entered the door she had raised the weapon, and as the first figure burst through the opening, she leveled the weapon and pulled the trigger.

The gun went off, but did no apparent damage, and before she could fire again the men were upon her. She threw the heavy weapon into the face of the man nearest her—she did not look at him; and ran through the nearest door, which opened into the kitchen. She heard the man curse as the weapon struck him full in the face, and she knew, then, that she had struck Dale.

In the kitchen the girl hesitated. She would have gone outside, on the chance that the men there might not see her, but, hesitating at the kitchen door, she saw a big man running toward it.

So she turned and ran into the room she used as a pantry, slamming the door behind her, bolting it and leaning against it, breathing heavily.

She had not, however, escaped the eyes of the man who had been running toward the kitchen door. She heard Dale's voice, asking one of the men if he had seen her, and the latter answered:

"She ducked into the pantry and closed the door."

She heard a man step heavily across the kitchen floor, and an instant later he was shoving against the door with a shoulder.

"Bolted, eh?" he said with a short laugh. He walked away, and presently returned.

"Well, you'll keep," he said, "there ain't any windows."

She knew from his voice that the man was Dale. He had gone outside and had seen there was no escape for her except through the door she had barred.

There came a silence except for the movements of the men, and the low hum of their voices. She wondered what had become of Owen, but she did not dare unbolt the door for fear that Dale might be waiting on the other side of it. So, in the grip of a nameless terror she leaned against the door and waited.

She heard Dale talking to his men; he was standing near the door behind which she stood, and she could hear him distinctly.

"You guys hit the breeze after Sanderson. Kill him,—an' anybody that's with him! Wipe out the whole bunch! I'll stay here an' make the girl tell me where the coin is. Get goin', an' go fast, for Sanderson will travel some!"

The girl heard the boots of the men clatter on the floor as they went out. Listening intently, she could hear the thudding of their horses' hoofs as they fled. She shrank

back from the door, looking hard at it, wondering if it would hold, if it would resist Dale's efforts to burst it open—as she knew he would try to do.

She wished, now, that she had followed Sanderson's suggestion about riding after Williams. This situation would not have been possible, then.

Working feverishly, she piled against the door all the available articles and objects she could find. There were not many of them, and they looked a pitifully frail barricade to her.

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A silence that followed was endured with her cringing against the barricade. She had a hope that Dale would search for the money—that he would find it, and go away without attempting to molest her. But when she heard his step just outside the door, she gave up hope and stood, her knees shaking, awaiting his first movement.

It came quickly enough. She heard him; saw the door give just a trifle as he leaned his weight against it.

The movement made her gasp, and he heard the sound.

“So you’re still there, eh? Well, I thought you would be. Open the door!”

“Dale,” she said, desperately, “get out of here! I’ll tell you where the money is—I don’t want it.”

“All right,” he said, “where is it?”

“It’s in the parlor; the packages are stuffed between the springs of the lounge.”

He laughed, jeeringly.

“That dodge don’t go,” he said in a voice that made her feel clammy all over. “If it’s there, all right. I’ll get it. But the money can wait. Open the door!”

“Dale,” she said, as steadily as she could, “if you try to get in here I shall kill you!”

“That’s good,” he laughed; “you threw your gun at me. It hit me, too. Besides if you had a gun you’d be lettin’ it off now—this door ain’t so thick that a bullet wouldn’t go through it. Shoot!”

Again there came a silence. She heard Dale walking about in the kitchen. She heard him place a chair near the wall which divided the pantry from the kitchen, and then for the first time she realized that the partition did not reach entirely to the ceiling; that it rose to a height only a few feet above her head.

She heard Dale laugh, triumphantly, at just the instant she looked at the top of the partition, and she saw one of Dale’s legs come over. It dangled there for a second; then the man’s head and shoulders appeared, with his hands gripping the top of the wall.

She began to tear at the barricade she had erected, and had only succeeded in partially demolishing it, when Dale swung his body over the wall and dropped lightly beside her.

She fought him with the only weapons she had, her hands, not waiting for him to advance on her, but leaping at him in a fury and striking his face with her fists, as she had seen men strike others.

He laughed, deeply, scornfully, as her blows landed, mocking her impotent resistance. Twice he seized her hands and swept them brutally to her sides, where he held them—trying to grip them in one of his; but she squirmed free and fought him again, clawing at his eyes.

The nails of her fingers found his cheek, gashing it deeply. The pain from the hurt made him furious.

“Damn you, you devil, I’ll fix you!” he cursed. And in an access of bestial rage he tore her hands from his face, crushed them to her sides, wrenching them cruelly, until she cried out in agony.

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Then, his face hideous, he seized her by the shoulders and crushed her against the outside wall, so that her head struck it and she sagged forward into his arms, unconscious.

The lock on Barney Owen's rifle had jammed just as Dale entered the room, following the rush of the men to the outside door. He had selected Dale as his target.

He tried for a fatal instant to work the lock, saw his error, and swung the weapon over his head in an attempt to brain the man nearest him. The man dodged and the rifle slipped from Owen's hands and went clattering to the floor. Then the man struck with the butt of one of the pistols he had picked up from the floor, and Owen went down in a heap.

When he regained consciousness the room was empty. For a time he lay where he had fallen, too dizzy and faint to get to his feet; and then he heard Dale's voice, saying:

"A bullet wouldn't go through it. Shoot!"

At the sound of Dale's voice a terrible rage, such as had seized Owen at the moment he had stuck the rifle through the window, gripped him now, and he sat up, swaying from the strength of it. He got to his feet, muttering insanely, and staggered toward the kitchen door—from the direction in which Dale's voice seemed to come.

It took him some time to reach the door, and when he did get there he was forced to lean against one of the jambs for support.

But he gained strength rapidly, and peering around the door jamb he was just in time to see Dale step on a chair and lift himself over the partition dividing the kitchen from the pantry.

Owen heard the commotion that followed Dale's disappearance over the partition; he heard the succeeding crashes and the scuffling. Then came Dale's voice:

"Damn you, you devil, I'll fix you!"

Making queer sounds in his throat, Owen ran into the sitting-room where the weapons taken from the men had been piled. They were not there. He picked up the rifle. By some peculiar irony the lock worked all right for him now, but a quick look told him there were no more cartridges in the magazine. He dropped the rifle and looked wildly around for a another weapon.

He saw a lariat hanging from a peg on the kitchen wall. It was Sanderson's rope—Owen knew it. Sanderson had oiled it, and had hung it from the peg to dry.

Owen whined with joy when he saw it. His face working, odd guttural sounds coming from his throat, Owen leaped for the rope and pulled it from the peg. Swiftly uncoiling it, he glanced at the loop to make sure it would run well; then with a bound he was on the chair and peering over the top of the partition, the rope in hand, the noose dangling.

He saw Dale directly beneath it. The Bar D man was standing over Mary Bransford. The girl was on her back, her white face upturned, her eyes closed.

Grinning with hideous joy, Owen threw the rope. The loop opened, widened, and dropped cleanly over Dale's head.

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Dale threw up both hands, trying to grasp the sinuous thing that had encircled his neck, but the little man jerked the rope viciously and the noose tightened. The force of the jerk pulled Dale off his balance, and he reeled against the partition.

Before he could regain his equilibrium Owen leaned far over the top of the partition. Exerting the last ounce of his strength Owen lifted, and Dale swung upward, swaying like an eccentric pendulum, his feet well off the floor.

Dale's back was toward the wall, and he twisted and squirmed like a cat to swing himself around so that he could face it.

During the time Dale struggled to turn, Owen moved rapidly. Leaping off the chair, keeping the rope taut over the top of the partition, Owen ran across the kitchen and swiftly looped the end of the rope around a wooden bar that was used to fasten the rear outside door.

Then, running into the front room, he got the rifle, and returning to the kitchen he got on the chair beside the partition.

He could hear Dale cursing. The man's legs were thrashing about, striking the boards of the partition. Owen could hear his breath as it coughed in his throat. But the little man merely grinned, and crouched on the chair, waiting.

He was waiting for what he knew would come next. Dale would succeed in twisting his body around before the rope could strangle him, he would grasp the rope and pull himself upward until he could reach the top of the partition with his hands.

And while Owen watched and waited, Dale's hands came up and gripped the top of the wall—both hands, huge and muscular. Owen looked at them with great glee before he acted. Then he brought the stock of the rifle down on one of the hands with the precision of a cold deliberation that had taken possession of him.

Dale screamed with the pain of the hurt, then cursed. But he still gripped the top of the partition with the other hand.

Owen grinned, and with the deliberation that had marked the previous blow he again brought the rifle stock down, smashing the remaining hand. That, too, disappeared, and Dale's screaming curses filled the cabin.

Owen waited. Twice more the hands came up, and twice more Owen crushed them with the rifle butt. At last, though Owen waited for some time, the hands came up no more. Then, slowly, cautiously, Owen stuck his head over the top of the partition.

Dale's head had fallen forward; he was swinging slowly back and forth, his body limp and lax.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE AMBUSH

Streak had done well, having slightly improved on the limit set for the trip by Mary Bransford. With no delay whatever, Williams and his men and the Double A cowpunchers were headed for the ranchhouse, their horses running hard.

Sanderson was leading them, though close behind came several of the Double A men, their faces set and grim; and then one of Williams' men, a young fellow who had admired Mary Bransford from afar; then some more of the Double A men, and Williams and the remainder of his band of engineers.

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There was no word spoken. In a few swift sentences Sanderson had told them what had occurred, and there was no need for words as they fled southwestward.

For a few miles the trail was hard and smooth, and the posse made good time. Then they struck a stretch of broken country, where volcanic action had split the surface of the earth into fissures and chasms, thus making speed impossible.

It took them long to cross the section, and when it was behind them they found themselves in a hilly country where the going was not much better than it had been in the volcanic area.

The trail was narrow, and they were forced to travel in single file. Sanderson led the way, Streak thundering along, a living blot splitting the brown, barren wasteland, followed closely by other blots, rushing over the hazardous trail, the echoes of their passing creating a rumble as of drumfire reverberating in a canon.

They came to a point where the trail led upward sharply, veering around the shoulder of a hill and dropping precipitously into a valley.

For an instant, as the riders flashed around the shoulder of the hill, they caught a glimpse of a group of riders coming toward them, visible to Sanderson and the others as they were for a second exposed to view in a narrow defile. Then the view of them was cut off, and Sanderson and the men following him were in the valley, riding desperately, as before.

Still there had been no word said. Sanderson had seen the oncoming riders, but he attached no importance to their appearance, for cowpunchers often rode in groups to some outlying camp, and these men might belong to some ranch in the vicinity.

There was a straight stretch of hard, smooth trail in the center of the valley, and Sanderson made Streak take it with a rush. Sanderson grinned grimly as he heard the other men coming close behind him—they were as eager as he, and as vengeful.

Up out of the valley went Streak, running with long, smooth leaps that gave no indication of exhaustion; Sanderson patted his neck as he raced upward out of the valley and into the defile where they had seen the riders.

Sanderson was halfway up the defile when he was assailed with the thought that by this time—even before this—they should have met the other riders—had the latter kept the trail.

Struck by a sudden suspicion that there was something strange about the disappearance of the riders, Sanderson abruptly pulled Streak up. The other men were some distance behind, and Sanderson slipped out of the saddle to give Streak a breathing spell.

The movement saved his life, for his feet had hardly struck the ground when he heard the thud of a rifle bullet, the sharp crash of the weapon, and saw the leaden missile rip the leather on the cantle of the saddle.

As though the shot were a signal, there followed others—a ripping, crashing volley. Sanderson saw the smoke spurts ballooning upward from behind some rocks and boulders that dotted the hills on both sides of the defile, he saw several of his men drop from their horses and fall prone to the ground.

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He shouted to the men to leave their horses and “take cover,” and he himself sought the only cover near him—a wide fissure in the wall of the long slope below the point where the attackers were concealed.

Streak, apparently aware of the danger, followed Sanderson into the shelter of the fissure.

It was an admirable spot for an ambushade. Sanderson saw that there were few places in which his men could conceal themselves, for the hostile force occupied both sides of the defile. Their rifles were still popping, and Sanderson saw two of the Double A force go down before they could find shelter.

Sanderson divined what had happened—Dale and his men had overpowered Owen, and had set this ambushade for himself and the Double A men.

Dale was determined to murder all of them; it was to be a fight to a finish—that grim killing of an entire outfit, which, in the idiomatic phraseology of the cowpuncher, is called a “clean-up.”

Sanderson was aware of the disadvantage which must be faced, but there was no indication of fear or excitement in his manner. It was not the first time he had been in danger, and he drew his belt tighter and examined his pistols as he crouched against the ragged wall of the fissure. Then, calling Streak to him, he pulled his rifle out of the saddle holster and examined the magazine.

Rifle in hand, he first surveyed the wall of the defile opposite him. The crevice in which he was hiding was irregular at the entrance, and a jutting shoulder of it concealed him from view from the wall of the defile opposite him. Another projection, opposite the jutting shoulder, protected him from any shots that might be aimed at him from his left.

The fissure ran, with sharp irregularities, clear up the face of the wall behind him. He grinned with satisfaction when he saw that there were a number of places along the upward line of the fissure which would afford him concealment in an offensive battle with Dale’s men.

He contemplated making things rather warm for the Dale contingent presently; but first he must make sure that none of his own men was exposed to danger.

Cautiously, then, he laid his head close to the ragged wall of the fissure and peered upward and outward. Behind a big boulder on the opposite side of the defile he saw a man’s head appear.

Watching for a time, Sanderson made certain the man was not one of his own outfit, and then he shoved the muzzle of his rifle out, laid his cheek against the stock, and covered the partly exposed head of the man behind the boulder.

Sanderson waited long with his cheek caressing the rifle stock, while the man behind the boulder wriggled farther out, exposing himself more and more in his eagerness to gain a more advantageous position.

And presently, without moving his head, Sanderson discovered that it was Williams who was in danger.

Williams had concealed himself behind a jagged rock, which protected him from the bullets fired from across the defile, and from the sides. But the rock afforded him no protection from the rear, and the man behind the boulder was going to take advantage of his opportunity.

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"That's my engineer, mister," he said grimly; "an' I ain't lettin' you make me go to the trouble of sendin' east for another. You're ready now, eh?"

The man behind the boulder had reached a position that satisfied him. Sanderson saw him snuggle the stock of his rifle against his shoulder.

Sanderson's rifle cracked viciously. The man behind the boulder was lying on a slight slope, and when Sanderson's bullet struck him, he gently rolled over and began to slide downward. He came—a grotesque, limp thing—down the side of the defile, past the engineer, sliding gently until he landed in a queer-looking huddle at the bottom, near the trail.

Sanderson intently examined other rocks and boulders on the opposite side of the defile. He had paid no attention to Williams' "Good work, Sanderson!" except to grin and assure himself that Williams hadn't "lost his nerve."

Presently at an angle that ran obliquely upward from a flat, projecting ledge, behind which another Double A man lay, partly concealed, Sanderson detected movement.

It was only a hat that he saw this time, and a glint of sunlight on the barrel of a rifle. But he saw that the rifle, after moving, became quite motionless, and he suspected that it was about to be used.

Again the cheek snuggled the stock of his rifle.

"This is goin' to be some shot—if I make it!" he told himself just before he fired. "There ain't nothin' to shoot at but one of his ears, looks like."

But at the report of the rifle, the weapon that had been so rigid and motionless slipped from behind the rock and clattered downward. It caught halfway between the rock and the bottom of the defile. There came no sound from behind the rock, and no movement.

"Got him!" yelled Williams. "Go to it! There's only two more on this side, that I can see. They're trying mighty hard to perforate me—I'm losing weight dodging around here trying to keep them from drawing a bead on me. If I had a rifle——"

Williams' voice broke off with the crash of a rifle behind him, though a little to one side. Talking to Sanderson, and trying to see him, Williams had stuck his head out a little too far. The bullet from the rifle of the watching enemy clipped off a small piece of the engineer's ear.

Williams' voice rose in impotent rage, filling the defile with profane echoes. Sanderson did not hear Williams. He had chanced to be looking toward the spot from whence the smoke spurt came.



A fallen tree, its top branches hanging down the wall of the defile, provided concealment from which the enemy had sent his shot at Williams. Sanderson snapped a shot at the point where he had seen the smoke streak, and heard a cry of rage.

A man, his face distorted with pain, stood up behind the fallen tree trunk, the upper part of his body in plain view.

His rage had made him reckless, and he had stood erect the better to aim his rifle at the fissure in which Sanderson was concealed. He fired—and missed, for Sanderson had ducked at the movement. Sanderson heard the bullet strike the rock wall above his head, and go ricochetting into the cleft behind him.

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He peered out again instantly, to see that the man was lying doubled across the fallen tree trunk, his rifle having dropped, muzzle down, in some bushes below him.

Sanderson heard Williams' voice, raised in savage exultation:

"Nip my ear, will you—yon measly son-of-a-gun! I'll show you!"

"Got him with my pistol!" he yelled to one of the Double A men near him. "Come on out and fight like men, you miserable whelps!"

The young engineer's fighting blood was up—that was plain to Sanderson. Sanderson grinned, yielded to a solemn hope that Williams would not get reckless and expose himself needlessly, and began to examine the walls of the fissure to determine on a new offensive movement.

He was interrupted, though, by another shout from Williams.

"Got him!" yelled the engineer; "plumb in the beezer!"

Sanderson peered out, to see the body of a man come tumbling down the opposite wall of the defile.

"That's all on this side!" Williams informed the others, shouting. "Now let's get at the guys on the other side and salivate them!"

Again Sanderson grinned at the engineer's enthusiasm. That enthusiasm was infectious, for Sanderson heard some of the other men laughing. The laughing indicated that they now entertained a hope of ultimate victory—a hope which they could not have had before Williams and Sanderson had disposed of the enemies at their rear.

Sanderson, too, was imbued with a spirit of enthusiasm. He began to climb the walls of the crevice, finding the ragged rock projections admirably convenient for footing.

However, his progress was slow, for he had to be careful not to let his head show above the edge of the rock that formed the fissure; and so he was busily engaged for the greater part of half an hour before he finally reached a position from which he thought he could get a glimpse of the men on his side of the defile.

Meanwhile there had been no sound from the bottom, or the other side of the defile, except an occasional report of a rifle, which told that Dale's men were firing, or the somewhat more crashing report of a pistol, which indicated that his own men were replying.

From where he crouched in the fissure, Sanderson could see some of the horses at the bottom of the defile. They were grazing unconcernedly. Scattered along the bottom of

the defile were the men who had fallen at the first fire, and Sanderson's eye glinted with rage when he looked at them; for he recognized some of them as men of the outfit for whom he had conceived a liking. Two of Williams' men were lying there, too, and Sanderson's lips grimmed as he looked at them.

Thoroughly aroused now, Sanderson replaced the empty cartridges in the rifle with loaded ones, and, finding a spot between two small boulders, he shoved the muzzle of the rifle through.

He had no fear of being shot at from the rear, for the men had permitted him to go far enough through the defile to allow the others following him to come into range before they opened fire.

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Thus Sanderson was between the Dale outfit and the Double A ranchhouse, and he had only to look back in the direction from which he and Williams had come. None of the Dale men could cross the fissure.

Cautiously Sanderson raised his head above the rocky edge of the fissure. He kept his head concealed behind the two small boulders and he had an uninterrupted view of the entire side of the defile.

He saw a number of men crouching behind rocks and boulders that were scattered over the steep slope, and he counted them deliberately—sixteen. He could see their faces plainly, and he recognized many of them as Dale's men. They were of the vicious type that are to be found in all lawless communities.

Sanderson's grin as he sighted along the barrel of his rifle was full of sardonic satisfaction, tempered with a slight disappointment. For he did not see Dale among the others. Dale, he supposed, had stayed behind.

The thought of what Dale might be doing at the Double A ranchhouse maddened Sanderson, and taking quick sight at a man crouching behind a rock, he pulled the trigger.

Looking only in front of him, at the other side of the defile where Sanderson's men were concealed, the man did not expect attack from a new quarter, and as Sanderson's bullet struck him he leaped up, howling with pain and astonishment, clutching at his breast.

He had hardly exposed himself when several reports from the other side of the defile greeted him. The man staggered and fell behind his rock, his feet projecting from one side and his head from the other.

Instantly the battle took on a new aspect. It was a flank attack, which Dale's men had not anticipated, and it confused them. Several of them shifted their positions, and in doing so they brought parts of their bodies into view of the men on the opposite wall.

There rose from the opposite wall a succession of reports, followed by hoarse cries of pain from Dale's men. They flopped back again, thus exposing themselves to Sanderson's fire, and the latter lost not one of his opportunities.

It was the aggressors themselves that were now under cross fire, and they relished it very little.

A big man, incensed at his inability to silence Sanderson, and wounded in the shoulder, suddenly left the shelter of his rock and charged across the steep face of the slope toward the fissure.

This man was brave, despite his associations, but he was a Dale man, and deserved no mercy. Sanderson granted him none. Halfway of the distance between his rock and the fissure he charged before Sanderson shot him. The man fell soundlessly, turning over and over in his descent to the bottom of the defile.

And then rose Williams' voice—Sanderson grinned with bitter humor:

"We've got them, boys; we've got them. Give them hell, the damned buzzards!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

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NYLAND MEETS A "KILLER"

Ben Nyland had gone to Lazette to attend to some business that had demanded his attention. He had delayed going until he could delay no longer.

"I hate like blazes to go away an' leave you alone, here—to face that beast, Dale, if he comes sneakin' around. But I reckon I've just got to go—I can't put it off any longer. If you'd only go an' stay at Bransford's while I'm gone I'd feel a heap easier in my mind."

"I'm not a bit afraid," Peggy declared. "That last experience of Dale's with Sanderson has done him good, and he won't bother me again."

That had been the conversation between Ben and Peggy as Ben got ready to leave. And he had gone away, half convinced that Peggy was right, and that Dale would not molest her.

But he had made himself as inconspicuous as possible while in Okar, waiting for the train, and he was certain that none of Dale's men had seen him.

Nyland had concluded his business as quickly as possible, but the best he could do was to take the return train that he had told Peggy he would take. That train brought him back to Okar late in the afternoon of the next day.

Ben Nyland had been born and raised in the West, and he was of the type that had made the West the great supply store of the country. Rugged, honest, industrious, Ben Nyland had no ambitions beyond those of taking care of his sister—which responsibility had been his since the death of his parents years before.

It had not been a responsibility, really, for Nyland worshiped his sister, and it had been his eagerness to champion her that had made an enemy of Alva Dale.

He hated Dale, but not more than he hated Maison and Silverthorn for the part they were playing—and had played—in trying to rob him of his land.

Nyland was a plodder, but there ran in his veins the fighting blood of ancestors who had conquered the hardships and dangers of a great, rugged country, and there had been times when he thought of Dale and the others that his blood had leaped like fire through his veins.

Twice Peggy had prevented him from killing Alva Dale.

Nyland was afflicted with a premonition of evil when he got off the train at Okar. To the insistence of the owner of the livery stable, where he had left his horse, Nyland replied:

"I ain't got no time to do any drinkin'; I've got to get home."

The premonition of evil still oppressed him as he rode his horse homeward. He rode fast, his face set and worried.

When he reached the clearing through which Dale had come on the night he had visited the Nyland cabin, he looked furtively around, for the dire foreboding that had gripped him for hours had grown suddenly stronger.

He halted his horse and sat motionless in the saddle, intently examining every object within view.

It was to the horse corral that he finally turned when he could see nothing strange in the objects around him. He had looked at the house, and there seemed to be nothing wrong here, for he could see Peggy's wash on the line that ran from a porch column to a corner of the stable.

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The actions of the three horses in the corral was what attracted his attention. They were crowding the rail at the point nearest him, neighing shrilly, though with a curious clacking in their throats that he instantly detected.

"They're wantin' water," he said aloud. He rode to the water trough and saw that it was dry, with a deposit in the bottom which did not contain a drop of moisture.

"There ain't been no water put in there since I left," he decided; "them horses is chokin' with thirst."

A pulse of anxiety ran over him. There was no doubt in his mind now that his presentiment of evil was not without foundation, and he wheeled his horse and sent it toward the house.

"Peggy would give them water if she was able to be on her feet," he declared, "she's that kind."

But halfway to the house another thought assailed him. It drew his brows together in a scowl, it stiffened his lips until they were in straight, hard lines.

"Mebbe Dale's been here! Mebbe he's still here!"

He abruptly halted his horse and gazed around him. As though he expected to find something there he looked toward a little timber grove to the right of the house, far back toward the rimming hills. At the edge of the grove he saw a horse, saddled and bridled.

A quick change came over Nyland. The blood left his face, and his eyes took on an expression of cold cunning.

Dismounting, he hitched his horse to one of the rails of the corral fence. With his back turned to the house, his head cocked to one side, as though he were intent on the knot he was tying in the reins, he furtively watched the house.

He took a long time to tie the reins to the rail, but the time was well spent, for, before he finished, he saw a man's face at one of the kitchen windows.

It was not Dale. He was convinced of that, even though he got only a flashing glance at the face.

Danger threatened Peggy, or she had succumbed to it. There was no other explanation of the presence of a strange man in the kitchen. For if Peggy was able to walk, she would have watered the horses, she would have met him at the door, as she had always done.

And if the man were there for any good purpose he would have made his presence known to Nyland, and would not have hidden himself in the kitchen, to peer at Nyland through one of the windows.

Nyland was convinced that Peggy had been foully dealt with. But haste and recklessness would avail Nyland little. The great mingled rage and anxiety that had seized him demanded instant action, but he fought it down; and when he turned toward the house and began to walk toward the kitchen door, his manner—outwardly—was that of a man who has seen nothing to arouse his suspicions.

Yet despite the appearance of calm he was alert, and every muscle and sinew of his body was tensed for instant action. And so, when he had approached to within a dozen feet of the kitchen door, and a man's figure darkened the opening, he dove sidewise, drawing his gun as he went down and snapping a shot at the figure he had seen.

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So rapid were his movements, and so well timed was his fall, that he was halfway to the ground when the flash came from the doorway. And the crash of his own gun followed the other so closely that the two seemed almost instantaneous.

Nyland did not conclude his acrobatic performance with the dive. Landing on the ground he rolled over and over, scrambling toward the wall of the cabin—reaching it on all fours and crouching there, gun in hand—waiting.

He had heard no sound from the man, nor did the latter appear. The silence within the cabin was as deep as it had been just an instant before the exchange of shots.

There was a window in the rear wall of the cabin—a kitchen window. There was another on the opposite side—the dining-room. There was a front door and two windows on the side Nyland was on.

Two courses were open for Nyland. He could gain entrance to the house through one of the windows or the front door, thereby running the risk of making a target of himself, or he could stay on the outside and wait for the man to come out—which he would have to do some time.

Nyland decided to remain where he was. For a long time he crouched against the wall and nothing happened. Then, growing impatient, he moved stealthily around the rear corner, stole to the rear window, and peered inside.

It took him long to prepare for the look—he accomplished the action in an instant—a flashing glance. A gun roared close to his head, the flash blinding him; the glass tinkling on the ground at his feet.

But Nyland had not been hit, and he grinned feline as he dropped to the ground, slipped under the window, and ran around the house. Ducking under the side window he ran around to the front. From the front window he could look through the house, and he saw the man, gun in hand, watching the side door.

Nyland took aim through the window, but just as he was about to pull the trigger of the weapon the man moved stealthily toward the door—out of Nyland's vision.

Evidently the man considered the many windows to be a menace to his safety, and had determined to go outside, where he would have an equal chance with his intended victim.

Grinning coldly, Nyland moved to the corner of the house nearest the kitchen door. The man stepped out of the door, and at the instant Nyland saw him he was looking toward the rear of the house.

Nyland laughed—aloud, derisively. He did not want to shoot the man in the back.

At Nyland's laugh the man wheeled, snapping a shot from his hip. He was an instant too late, though, for with the man's wheeling movement Nyland's gun barked death to him.

He staggered, the gun falling from his loosening fingers, his hands dropped to his sides, and he sagged forward inertly, plunging into the dust in front of the kitchen door.

Nyland ran forward, peered into the man's face, saw that no more shooting on his part would be required, and then ran into the house to search for Peggy.

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She was not in the house—a glance into each room told Nyland that. He went outside again, his face grim, and knelt beside the man.

The latter's wound was fatal—Nyland saw that plainly, for the bullet had entered his breast just above the heart.

Nyland got some water, for an hour he worked over the man, not to save his life, but to restore him to consciousness only long enough to question him.

And at last his efforts were rewarded: the man opened his eyes, and they were swimming with the calm light of reason. He smiled faintly at Nyland.

"Got me," he said. "Well, I don't care a whole lot. There's just one thing that's been botherin' me since you come. Did you think somethin' was wrong in the house when you was tyin' your cayuse over there at the corral fence?"

At Nyland's nod he continued:

"I knowed it. It was the water, wasn't it—in the trough? I'm sure a damned fool for not thinkin' of that! So that was it? Well, you've got an eye in your head—I'll tell you that. I'm goin' to cash in, eh?"

Nyland nodded and the man sighed. He closed his eyes for an instant, but opened them slightly at Nyland's question:

"What did you do to Peggy? Where is she?"

The man was sinking fast, and it seemed that he hardly comprehended Nyland's question. The latter repeated it, and the man replied weakly:

"She's over in Okar—at Maison's—in his rooms. She——"

He closed his eyes and his lips, opening the latter again almost instantly to cough a crimson stream.

Nyland got up, his face chalk white. Standing beside the man he removed the two spent cartridges from the cylinder of his pistol and replaced them with two loaded ones. Then he ran to his horse, tore the reins from the rail of the corral fence, mounted with the horse in a dead run, and raced toward Okar.

CHAPTER XXIX

NYLAND'S VENGEANCE

Just before the dusk enveloped Okar, Banker Maison closed the desk in his private office and lit a cigar. He leaned back in the big desk chair, slowly smoking, a complacent smile on his lips, his eyes glowing with satisfaction.

For Maison's capacity for pleasure was entirely physical. He got more enjoyment out of a good dinner and a fragrant cigar than many intellectual men get out of the study of a literary masterpiece, or a philanthropist out of the contemplation of a charitable deed.

Maison did not delve into the soul of things. The effect of his greed on others he did not consider. That was selfishness, of course, but it was a satisfying selfishness.

It did not occur to him that Mary Bransford, for instance, or Sanderson—or anybody whom he robbed—could experience any emotion or passion over their losses. They might feel resentful, to be sure; but resentment could avail them little—and it didn't bring the dollars back to them.

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He chuckled. He was thinking of the Bransfords now—and Sanderson. He had put a wolf on Sanderson's trail—he and Silverthorn; and Sanderson would soon cease to bother him.

He chuckled again; and he sat in the chair at the desk, hugely enjoying himself until the cigar was finished. Then he got up, locked the doors, and went upstairs.

Peggy Nyland had not recovered consciousness. The woman who was caring for the girl sat near an open window that looked out upon Okar's one street when Maison entered the room.

Maison asked her if there was any change; was told there was not. He stood for an instant at the window, mentally anathematizing Dale for bringing the girl to his rooms, and for keeping her there; then he dismissed the woman, who went down the stairs, opened the door that Maison had locked, and went outside.

He stood for an instant longer at the window; then he turned and looked down at Peggy, stretched out, still and white, on the bed.

Maison looked long at her, and decided it was not remarkable that Dale had become infatuated with Peggy, for the girl was handsome.

Maison had never bothered with women, and he yielded to a suspicion of sentiment as he looked down at Peggy. But, as always, the sentiment was not spiritual.

Dale had intimated that the girl was his mistress. Well, he was bound to acknowledge that Dale had good taste in such matters, anyway.

The expression of Maison's face was not good to see; there was a glow in his eyes that, had Peggy seen it, would have frightened her.

And if Maison had been less interested in Peggy, and with his thoughts of Dale, he would have heard the slight sound at the door; he would have seen Ben Nyland standing there in the deepening dusk, his eyes aflame with the wild and bitter passions of a man who had come to kill.

Maison did not see, nor did he hear until Ben leaped for him. Then Maison heard him, felt his presence, and realized his danger.

He turned, intending to escape down the other stairway. He was too late.

Ben caught him midway between the bed and the door that opened to the stairway, and his big hands went around the banker's neck, cutting short his scream of terror and the incoherent mutterings which followed it.

Peggy Nyland had been suffering mental torture for ages, it seemed to her. Weird and grotesque thoughts had followed one another in rapid succession through her brain. The thing had grown so vivid—the horrible imaginings had seemed so real, that many times she had been on the verge of screaming. Each time she tried to scream, however, she found that her jaws were tightly set, her teeth clenched, and she could get no sound through them.

Lately, though—it seemed that it had been for hours—she had felt a gradual lessening of the tension. Within the last few hours she had heard voices near her; had divined that persons were near her. But she had not been certain. That is, until within a few minutes.

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Then it seemed to her that she heard some giant body threshing around near her; she heard a stifled scream and incoherent mutterings. The thing was so close, the thumping and threshing so real, that she started and sat up in bed, staring wildly around.

She saw on the floor near her two men. One had his hands buried in the other's throat, and the face of the latter was black and horribly bloated.

This scene, Peggy felt, was real, and again she tried to scream.

The effort was successful, though the sound was not loud. One of the men turned, and she knew him.

"Ben," she said in an awed, scared voice, "what in God's name are you doing?"

"Killin' a snake!" he returned sullenly.

"Dale?" she inquired wildly. Her hands were clasped, the fingers working, twisting and untwisting.

"Maison," he told her, his face dark with passion.

"Because of me! O, Ben! Maison has done nothing to me. It was Dale, Ben—Dale came to our place and attacked me. I felt him carrying me—taking me somewhere. This—this place——"

"Is Maison's rooms," Ben told her. In his eyes was a new passion; he knelt beside the bed and stroked the girl's hair.

"Dale, you said—Dale. Dale hurt you? How?"

She told him, and he got up, a cold smile on his face.

"You feel better now, eh? You can be alone for a few minutes? I'll send someone to you."

He paid no attention to her objections, to her plea that she was afraid to be alone. He grinned at her, the grin that had been on his face when he had shot Dal Colton, and backed away from her until he reached the stairs.

Outside he mounted his horse and visited several saloons. There was no sign of Dale. In the City Hotel he came upon a man who told him that earlier in the day Dale had organized a posse and had gone to the Double A to arrest Sanderson. This man was not a friend of Dale's, and one of the posse had told him of Dale's plan.

Nyland mounted his horse again and headed it for the neck of the basin. In his heart was the same lust that had been there while he had been riding toward Okar.

And in his soul was a rage that had not been sated by the death of the banker who, a few minutes before Nyland's arrival, had been so smugly reviewing the pleasurable incidents of his life.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LAW TAKES A HAND

Barney Owen was tying the knot of the rope more securely when he heard the bolt on the pantry door shoot back. He wheeled swiftly, to see Mary Bransford emerging from the pantry, her hands covering her face in a vain endeavor to shut from sight the grisly horror she had confronted when she had reached her feet after recovering consciousness.

Evidently she had no knowledge of what had occurred, for when at a sound Owen made and she uncovered her eyes, she saw Owen and instantly fainted.

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Owen dove forward and caught her as she fell, and then with a strength that was remarkable in his frail body he carried her to the lounge in the parlor.

Ho was compelled to leave her there momentarily, for he still entertained fears that Dale would escape the loop of the rope. So he ran into the pantry, looked keenly at Dale, saw that, to all appearances, he was in the last stages of strangulation, and then went out again, to return to Mary.

But before he left Dale he snatched the man's six-shooter from its sheath, for his own had been lost in the confusion of the rush of Dale's men for the door.

Mary was sitting up on the lounge when Owen returned. She was pale, and a haunting fear, cringing, abject, was in her eyes.

She got to her feet when she saw Owen and ran to him, crying.

Owen tried to comfort her, but his words were futile.

"You be brave, little woman!" he said. "You must be brave! Sanderson and the other men are in danger, and I've got to go to Okar for help!"

"I'll go with you," declared the girl. "I can't stay here—I won't. I can't stand being in the same house with—with that!" She pointed to the kitchen.

"All right," Owen said resignedly; "we'll both go. What did you do with the money?"

Mary disclosed the hiding place, and Owen took the money, carried it to the bunkhouse, where he stuffed it into the bottom of a tin food box. Then, hurriedly, he saddled and bridled two horses and led them to where Mary was waiting on the porch.

Mounting, they rode fast toward Okar—the little man's face working nervously, a great eagerness in his heart to help the man for whom he had conceived a deep affection.

Banker Maison had made no mistake when he had told Sanderson that Judge Graney was honest. Graney looked honest. There was about him an atmosphere of straightforwardness that was unmistakable and convincing. It was because he was honest that a certain governor had sent him to Okar.

And Graney had vindicated the governor's faith in him. Whenever crime and dishonesty raised their heads in Okar, Judge Graney pinned them to the wall with the sword of justice, and called upon all men to come and look upon his deeds.

Maison, Silverthorn, and Dale—and others of their ilk—seldom called upon the judge for advice. They knew he did not deal in their kind. Through some underground channel

they had secured a deputyship for Dale, and upon him they depended for whatever law they needed to further their schemes.

Judge Graney was fifty—the age of experience. He knew something of men himself. And on the night that Maison and Sanderson had come to him, he thought he had seen in Sanderson's eyes a cold menace, a threat, that meant nothing less than death for the banker, if the latter had refused to write the bill of sale.

For, of course, the judge knew that the banker was being forced to make out the bill of sale. He knew that from the cold determination and alert watchfulness in Sanderson's eyes; he saw it in the white nervousness of the banker.

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And yet it was not his business to interfere, or to refuse to attest the signatures of the men. He had asked Maison to take the oath, and the banker had taken it.

Thus it seemed he had entered into the contract in good faith. If he had not, and there was something wrong about the deal, Maison had recourse to the law, and the judge would have aided him.

But nothing had come of it; Maison had said nothing, had lodged no complaint.

But the judge had kept the case in mind.

Late in the afternoon of the day on which Dale had organized the posse to go to the Double A, Judge Graney sat at his desk in the courtroom. The room was empty, except for a court attache, who was industriously writing at a little desk in the rear of the room.

The Maison case was in the judge's mental vision, and he was wondering why the banker had not complained, when the sheriff of Colfax entered.

Graney smiled a welcome at him. "You don't get over this way very often, Warde, but when you do, I'm glad to see you. Sit on the desk—that's your usual place, anyway."

Warde followed the suggestion about the desk; he sat on it, his legs dangling. There was a glint of doubt and anxiety in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Warde?" asked the judge.

"Plenty," declared Warde. "I've come to you for advice—and perhaps for some warrants. You recollect some time ago there was a herd of cattle lost in Devil's Hole—and some men. Some of the men were shot, and one or two of them went down under the herd when it stampeded."

"Yes," said the judge, "I heard rumors of it. But those things are not uncommon, and I haven't time to look them up unless the cases are brought formally to my attention."

"Well," resumed Warde, "at the time there didn't seem to be any clue to work on that would indicate who had done the killing. We've nothing to do with the stampede, of course—that sort of stuff is out of my line. But about the shooting of the men. I've got evidence now."

"Go ahead," directed the judge.

"Well, on the night of the killing two of my men were nosing around the level near Devil's Hole, trying to locate a horse thief who had been trailed to that section. They didn't find the horse thief, but they saw a bunch of men sneaking around a camp fire that belonged to the outfit which was trailin' the herd that went down in Devil's Hole.



"They didn't interfere, because they didn't know what was up. But they saw one of the men stampede the herd, and they saw the rest of them do the killing."

"Who did the killing?"

"Dale and his gang," declared the sheriff.

Judge Graney's eyes glowed. He sat erect and looked hard at the sheriff.

"Who is Sanderson?" he asked.

"That's the fellow who bossed the trail herd."

The judge smiled oddly. "There were three thousand head of cattle?"

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Warde straightened. "How in hell do you know?" he demanded.

"Banker Maison paid for them," he said gently.

He related to Warde the incident of the visit of Sanderson and the banker, and the payment to Sanderson by Maison of the ninety thousand dollars.

At the conclusion of the recital Warde struck the desk with his fist.

"Damned if I didn't think it was something like that!" he declared. "But I wasn't going to make a holler until I was sure. But Sanderson knew, eh? He knew all the time who had done the killing, and who had planned it. Game, eh? He was playing her a lone hand!"

The sheriff was silent for a moment, and then he spoke again, a glow of excitement in his eyes. "But there'll be hell to pay about this! If Sanderson took ninety thousand dollars away from Maison, Maison was sure to tell Dale and Silverthorn about it—for they're as thick as three in a bed. And none of them are the kind of men to stand for that kind of stuff from anybody—not even from a man like Sanderson!"

"We've got to do something, Judge! Give me warrants for the three of them—Dale, Maison, and Silverthorn, and I'll run them in before they get a chance to hand Sanderson anything!"

Judge Graney called the busy clerk and gave him brief instructions. As the latter started toward his desk there was a sound at the door, and Barney Owen came in, breathing heavily.

Barney's eyes lighted when they rested upon the sheriff, for he had not hoped to see him there. He related to them what had happened at the Double A that day, and how Dale's men had followed Sanderson and the others to "wipe them out" if they could.

"That settles it!" declared the sheriff. He was outside in an instant, running here and there in search of men to form a posse. He found them, scores of them; for in all communities where the law is represented, there are men who take pride in upholding it.

So it was with Okar. When the law-loving citizens of the town were told what had occurred they began to gather around the sheriff from all directions—all armed and eager. And yet it was long after dusk before the cavalcade of men turned their horses' heads toward the neck of the basin, to begin the long, hard ride over the plains to the spot where Sanderson, Williams, and the others had been ambushed by Dale's men.

A rumor came to the men, however, just before they started, which made several of them look at one another—for there had been those who had seen Ben Nyland riding down the street toward Maison's bank in the dusk, his face set and grim and a wild light in his eyes.



“Maison has been guzzled—he’s deader than a salt mackerel!” came the word, leaping from lip to lip.

Sheriff Warde grinned. “Serves him right,” he declared; “that’s one less for us to hang!”

CHAPTER XXXI

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THE FUGITIVE

After the departure of Barney Owen and Mary Bransford, the Double A ranchhouse was as silent as any house, supposed to be occupied by a dead man, could be.

But after a few minutes, if one had looked over the top of the partition from which Owen had hanged Alva Dale, one might have seen Dale move a little. One might have been frightened, but if one had stayed there, it would have been to see Dale move again.

The first time he moved he had merely placed his feet upon the floor, to rest himself. The second movement resulted in him raising his smashed hands and lifting the noose from his neck.

He threw it viciously from him after removing it, so that it flew over the top of the partition and swished sinuously upon the floor of the kitchen.

For Barney Owen had not done a good job in hanging Dale. For when Barney had run across the kitchen with the rope, to tie it to the fastenings of the door, it had slacked a little, enough to permit Dale's toes to touch the floor of the pantry.

Feeling the slack, Dale had taken advantage of it, throwing his head forward a little, to keep the rope taut while Owen fastened it. All that had been involuntary with Dale.

For, at that time Dale had had no thought of trying to fool Owen—he had merely taken what chance had given him. And when the first shock of the thing was over he had begun his attempts to reach the top of the partition in order to slacken the rope enough to get it over his head—for at that time he did not know that already the rope was slack enough.

It was not until after his hands had been smashed and he had dropped to the floor again, that he realized that he might have thrown the rope off at once.

Then it was too late for him to do anything, for he felt Owen above him, at the top of the partition, and he thought Owen had a gun. So he feigned strangulation, and Owen had been deceived.

And when Owen had entered the pantry, Dale still continued to feign strangulation, letting his body sag, and causing a real pressure on his neck. He dared not open his eyes to see if Owen had a weapon, for then the little man, having a gun, would have quickly finished the work that, seemingly, the rope had begun.

Dale might have drawn his own gun, taking a long chance of hitting Owen, but he was at a great disadvantage because of the condition of his hands, and he decided not to.



Dale heard Owen and Mary go out; he heard the clatter of hoofs as they rode away. Then he emerged from the pantry, and through a window watched the two as they rode down the slope of the basin.

Then Dale yielded to the bitter disappointment that oppressed him, and cursed profanely, going from room to room and vengefully kicking things out of his way while bandaging his smashed hands.

In the parlor he overturned the lounge and almost kicked it to pieces searching for the money Mary had told him was concealed there.

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"The damned hussy!" he raged, when he realized that the money was not in the lounge.

He went out, got on his horse, and rode across the level back of the house, and up the slope leading to the mesa, where he had seen Sanderson riding earlier in the day.

For an hour he rode, warily, for he did not want to come upon Sanderson unawares—if his men had not intercepted his enemy; and then reaching the edge of a section of hilly country, he halted and sat motionless in the saddle.

For, from some distance ahead of him he heard the reports of firearms, and over him, at the sound, swept a curious reluctance to go any farther in that direction.

For it seemed to him there was something forbidding in the sound; it was as though the sounds carried to him on the slight breeze were burdened with an evil portent; that they carried a threat and a warning.

He sat long there, undecided, vacillating. Then he shuddered, wheeled his horse, and sent him scampering over the back trail.

He rode to the Bar D. His men—the regular punchers—were working far down in the basin, and there was no one in the house.

He sat for hours alone in his office, waiting for news of the men he had sent after Sanderson; and as the interval of their absence grew longer the dark forebodings that had assailed him when within hearing distance of the firing seized him again—grew more depressing, and he sat, gripping the arms of his chair, a clammy perspiration stealing over him.

He shook off the feeling at last, and stood up, scowling.

"That's what a man gets for givin' up to a damn fool notion like that," he said, thinking of the fear that had seized him while listening to the shooting. "Once a man lets on he's afraid, the thing keeps a workin' on him till he's certain sure he's a coward. Them boys didn't need me, anyway—they'll get Sanderson."

So he justified his lack of courage, and spent some hours reading. But at last the strain grew too great, and as the dusk came on he began to have thoughts of Dal Colton. Ben Nyland must have reached home by this time. Had Colton succeeded?

He thought of riding to Nyland's ranch, but he gave up that idea when he reasoned that perhaps Colton had failed, and in that case Nyland wouldn't be the most gentle person in the world to face on his own property.

If Colton had succeeded he would find him, in Okar. So he mounted his horse and rode to Okar.

The town seemed to be deserted when he dismounted in front of the City Hotel. He did not go inside the building, merely looking in through one of the windows, and seeing a few men in there, playing cards in a listless manner. He did not see Colton.

He looked into several other windows. Colton was nowhere to be seen. In several places Dale inquired about him. No one had seen Colton that day.

No one said anything to Dale about what had happened. Perhaps they thought he knew. At any rate, Dale heard no word of what had transpired during his absence. Men spoke to him, or nodded—and looked away, to look at him when his back was turned.

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All this had its effect on Dale. He noted the restraint, he felt the atmosphere of strangeness. But he blamed it all on the queer premonition that had taken possession of his senses. It was not Okar that looked strange, nor the men, it was himself.

He went to the bank building and entered the rear door, clumping heavily up the stairs, for he felt a heavy depression. When he opened the door at the top of the stairs night had come. A kerosene lamp on a table in the room blinded him for an instant, and he stood, blinking at it.

When his eyes grew accustomed to the glare he saw Peggy Nyland sitting up in bed, looking at him.

She did not say anything, but continued to look at him. There was wonder in her eyes, and Dale saw it. It was wonder over Dale's visit—over his coming to Okar. Ben must have missed him, for Dale was alive! Dale could not have heard what had happened.

"You're better, eh?" said Dale.

She merely nodded her reply, and watched Dale as he crossed the room.

Reaching a door that led into another room, Dale turned.

"Where's Maison?"

Peggy pointed at the door on whose threshold Dale stood.

Dale entered. What he saw in the room caused him to come out again, his face ashen.

"What's happened?" he demanded hoarsely, stepping to the side of the bed and looking down at Peggy.

Peggy told him. The man's face grew gray with the great fear that clutched him, and he stepped back; then came forward again, looking keenly at the girl as though he doubted her.

"Nyland killed him—choked him to death?" he said.

Peggy nodded silently. The cringing fear showing in the man's eyes appalled her. She hated him, and he had done this thing to her, but she did not want the stigma of another killing on her brother's name.

"Look here, Dale!" she said. "You'd better get out of here—and out of the country! Okar is all stirred up over what you have done. Sheriff Warde was in Okar and had a talk with Judge Graney. Warde knows who killed those men at Devil's Hole, and he is going to

hang them. You are one of them; but you won't hang if Ben catches you. And he is looking for you! You'd better go—and go fast!"

For an instant Dale stood, looking at Peggy, searching her face and probing her eyes for signs that she was lying to him. He saw no such signs. Turning swiftly, he ran down the stairs, out into the street, and mounting, with his horse already running, he fled toward the basin and the Bar D.

He had yielded entirely to the presentiment of evil that had tortured him all day.

All his schemes and plots for the stealing of the Double A and Nyland's ranch were forgotten in the frenzy to escape that had taken possession of him, and he spurred his horse to its best efforts as he ran—away from Okar; as he fled from the vengeance of those forces which his evilness had aroused.

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CHAPTER XXXII

WINNING A FIGHT

After Sanderson shot the big man who had tried to rush him, there was a silence in the defile. Those of Dale's men who had positions of security held them, not exposing themselves to the deadly fire of Sanderson and the others.

For two hours Sanderson clung to his precarious position in the fissure, until his muscles ached with the strain and his eyes blurred because of the constant vigil. But he grimly held the place, knowing that upon him depended in a large measure the safety of the men on the opposite side of the defile.

The third hour was beginning when Sanderson saw a puff of smoke burst from behind a rock held by one of his men; he heard the crash of a pistol, and saw one of Dale's men flop into view from behind a rock near him.

Sanderson's smile was a tribute to the vigilance of his men. Evidently the Dale man, fearing Sanderson's inaction might mean that he was seeking a new position from where he could pick off more of his enemies, had shifted his own position so no part of his body was exposed to Sanderson.

He had wriggled around too far, and the shot from Sanderson's man had been the result.

The man was not dead; Sanderson could see him writhing. He was badly wounded, too, and Sanderson did not shoot, though he could have finished him.

But the incident drew Sanderson's attention to the possibilities of a new position. He had thought at first that he had climbed as high in the fissure as he dared without exposing himself to the fire of the Dale men; but examining the place again he saw that he might, with exceeding caution, take another position about twenty feet farther on.

He decided to try. Letting himself down until his feet struck a flat rock projection, he rested. Then, the weariness dispersed, he began to climb, shoving his rifle between his body and the cartridge belt around his waist.

It took him half an hour to reach the point he had decided upon, and by that time the sun had gone far down into the hazy western distance, and a glow—saffron and rose and violet—like a gauze curtain slowly descending—warned him that twilight was not far away.

Sanderson determined to finish the battle before the darkness could come to increase the hazard, and when he reached the spot in the fissure he hurriedly took note of the strategical points of the position.

There was not much concealment for his body. He was compelled to lie flat on his stomach to be certain that no portion of his body was exposed; and he found a place in a little depression at the edge of the fissure that seemed suitable. Then he raised his head above the little ridge that concealed him from his enemies.

He saw them all—every man of them. Some of them were crouching; some were lying prone—apparently resting; still others were sitting, their backs against their protection—waiting.

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Sanderson took his rifle by the barrel and with the stock forced a channel through some rotted rock on the top of the little ridge that afforded him concealment. When he had dug the channel deeply enough—so that he could aim the weapon without exposing his head—he stuck the rifle barrel into the channel and shouted to the Dale men:

“This game is played out, boys! I’m behind you. You can’t hide any longer. I give you fair warning that if you don’t come out within a minute, throwin’ your guns away an’ holdin’ up your hands, I’ll pick you off, one by one! That goes!”

There was sincerity in Sanderson’s voice, but the men doubted. Sanderson saw them look around, but it was plain to him that they could not tell from which direction his voice came.

“Bluffin’!” scoffed a man who was in plain view of Sanderson; the very man, indeed, upon whom Sanderson had his rifle trained.

“Bluffin’, eh?” replied Sanderson grimly. “I’ve got a bead on you. At the end of one minute—if you don’t toss your guns away and step out, holdin’ up your hands, I’ll bore you—plenty!”

Half a minute passed and the man did not move. He was crouching, and his gaze swept the edge of the fissure from which Sanderson’s voice seemed to come. His face was white, his eyes wide with the fear of death.

Just when it seemed that Sanderson must shoot to make his statement and threat convincing, the man shouted:

“This game’s too certain—for me, I’m through!”

He threw his weapons away, so that they went bounding and clattering to the foot of the slope. Then he again faced the fissure, shouting:

“I know I’ve caved, an’ you know I’ve caved. But what about them guys on the other side, there? They’ll be blowin’ me apart if I go to showin’ myself.”

Sanderson called to Williams and the others, telling them the men were going to surrender, and warning them to look out for treachery.

“If one of them tries any monkey-shines, nail him!” he ordered. “There’s eleven of them that ain’t been touched—an’ some more that ain’t as active as they might be. But they can bend a gun handy enough. Don’t take any chances!”

Sanderson ordered the man to step out. He did so, gingerly, as though he expected to be shot. When he was in plain view of Sanderson’s men, Sanderson ordered him to

descend the slope and stand beside a huge rock ledge. He watched while the man descended; then he called to the others:

“Step up an’ take your medicine! One at a time! Guns first. Williams!” he called. “You get their guns as fast as they come down. I’ll see that none of them plug you while you’re doin’ it!”

There was no hitch in the surrender; and no attempt to shoot Williams. One by one the men dropped their weapons down the slope.

When all the men had reached the bottom of the defile Sanderson climbed down and asked the first man who had surrendered where they had left their horses. The animals were brought, and the men forced to mount them. Then, the Dale men riding ahead, Sanderson and the others behind, they began the return trip.

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When they reached the open country above the defile, Sanderson rode close to Williams.

"There's enough of you to take care of this gang," he said, indicating the prisoners; "I'm goin' to hit the breeze to the Double A an' see what's happened there!"

"Sure!" agreed Williams. "Beat it!"

When Streak got the word he leaped forward at a pace that gave Williams an idea of how he had gained his name. He flashed by the head of the moving columns and vanished into the growing darkness, running with long, swift, sure leaps that took him over the ground like a feather before a hurricane.

But fast as he went, he did not travel too rapidly for Sanderson. For in Sanderson's heart also lurked a premonition of evil. But he did not fear it; it grimmed his lips, it made his eyes blaze with a wanton, savage fire; it filled his heart with a bitter passion to slay the man who had stayed behind at the Double A ranchhouse.

And he urged Streak to additional effort, heading him recklessly through sections of country where a stumble meant disaster, lifting him on the levels, and riding all the time with only one thought in mind—speed, speed, speed.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A MAN LEAVES OKAR

Riding the hard trail through the basin, from its neck at Okar to the broad, upward slope that led to the Double A ranchhouse, came another man, who also was sacrificing everything to speed. His horse was fresh, and he spared it not at all as he swept in long, smooth, swift undulations over the floor of the basin.

Ben Nyland's lips were as straight and hard as were those of the other man who was racing toward the Double A from another direction; his face was as grim, and his thoughts were as bitter and savage.

When he reached the bottom of the long, gentle slope that stretched to the Double A ranchhouse he did not spare his horse. The terrible spurs sank in again and again, stirring the animal to a frenzy of effort, and he rushed up the slope as though it were a level, snorting with pain and fury, but holding the pace his rider demanded of him.

And when he reached the corral fence near the Double A ranchhouse, and his rider dismounted and ran forward, the horse heaved a sigh of relief and stood, bracing his legs to keep from falling, his breath coming in terrific heaves.

An instant after his arrival Ben Nyland was inside the Double A ranchhouse, pistol in hand. He tore through the rooms in the darkness, stumbling over the furniture, knocking it hither and there as it interfered with his progress.

He found no one. Accidentally colliding with the table in the kitchen, he searched its top and discovered thereon a kerosene lamp. Lighting it with fingers that trembled, he looked around him.

There were signs of the confusion that had reigned during the day. He saw on the floor the rope that had encircled Dale's neck—one end of it was tied to the fastenings of the kitchen door.

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The tied rope was a mystery to Nyland, but it suggested hanging to his thoughts, already lurid, and he leaped for the pantry. There he grimly viewed the wreck and turned away, muttering.

"He's been here an' gone," he said, meaning Dale; "them's his marks—ruin."

Blowing out the light he went to the front door, paused in it and then went out upon the porch, from where he could look northeastward at the edge of the mesa surmounting the big slope that merged into the floor of the basin.

Faintly outlined against the luminous dark blue of the sky, he caught the leaping silhouette of a horse and rider. He grinned coldly, and stepped back into the shadow of the doorway.

"That's him, damn him!" he said. "He's comin' back!"

He had not long to wait. He saw the leaping silhouette disappear, seeming to sink into the earth, but he knew that horse and rider were descending the slope; that it would not be long before they would thunder up to the ranchhouse—and he gripped the butt of his gun until his fingers ached.

He saw a blot appear from the dark shadows of the slope and come rushing toward him. He could hear the heave and sob of the horse's breath as it ran, and in another instant the animal came to a sliding halt near the edge of the porch, the rider threw himself out of the saddle and ran forward.

At the first step taken by the man after he reached the porch edge, he was halted by Nyland's sharp:

"Hands up!"

And at the sound of the other's voice the newcomer cried out in astonishment:

"Ben Nyland! What in hell are you doin' here?"

"Lookin' for Dale," said the other, hoarsely. "Thought you was him, an' come pretty near borin' you. What saved you was a notion I had of wantin' Dale to know what I was killin' him for! Pretty close, Deal!"

"Why do you want to kill him?"

"For what he done to Peggy—damn him! He sneaked into the house an' hurt her head, draggin' her to Okar—to Maison's. I've killed Maison, an' I'll kill him!"

"He ain't here, then—Dale ain't?" demanded Sanderson.

"They ain't nobody here," gruffly announced Nyland. "They've been here, an' gone. Dale, most likely. The house looks like a twister had struck it!"

Sanderson was inside before Nyland ceased speaking. He found the lamp, lit it, and looked around the interior, noting the partially destroyed lounge and the other wrecked furniture, strewn around the rooms. He went out again and met Nyland on the porch.

One look at Sanderson told Nyland what was in the latter's mind, and he said:

"He's at the Bar D, most likely. We'll get him!"

"I ain't takin' no chance of missin' him," Sanderson shot back at Nyland as they mounted their horses; "you fan it to Okar an' I'll head for his shack!"

Nyland's agreement to this plan was manifested by his actions. He said nothing, but rode beside Sanderson for a mile or so, then he veered off and rode at an angle which would take him to the neck of the basin, while Sanderson, turning slightly northward, headed Streak for Dale's ranch.

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Halfway between the Double A and the neck of the basin, Nyland came upon the sheriff and his posse. The posse halted Nyland, thinking he might be Dale, but upon discovering the error allowed the man to proceed—after he had told them that Sanderson was safe and was riding toward the Bar D. Sanderson, Nyland said, was after Dale. He did not say that he, too, wanted to see Dale.

“Dale!” mocked the sheriff, “Barney Owen hung him!”

“Dale’s alive, an’ in Okar—or somewhere!” Nyland flung back at them as he raced toward town.

“I reckon we might as well go back,” said the sheriff to his men. “The clean-up has took place, an’ it’s all over—or Sanderson wouldn’t be back. We’ll go back to Okar an’ have a talk with Silverthorn. An’ mebbe, if Dale’s around, we’ll run into him.”

The posse, led by the sheriff, returned to Okar. Within five minutes after his arrival in town the sheriff was confronting Silverthorn in the latter’s office in the railroad station. The posse waited.

“It comes to this, Silverthorn,” said the sheriff. “We ain’t got any evidence that you had a hand in killing those men at Devil’s Hole. But there ain’t a man—an honest man—in town that ain’t convinced that you did have a hand in it. What I want to say to you is this:

“Sanderson and Nyland are running maverick around the country tonight. Nyland has killed Maison and is hunting for Dale. Sanderson and his men have cleaned up the bunch of guys that went out this morning to wipe Sanderson out. And Sanderson is looking for Dale. And after he gets Dale he’ll come for you, for he’s seeing red, for sure.

“I ain’t interfering. This is one of the times when the law don’t see anything—and don’t want to see anything. I won’t touch Nyland for killing Maison, and I won’t lay a finger on Sanderson if he shoots the gizzard out of you. There’s a train out of here in fifteen minutes. I give you your chance—take the train or take your chance with Sanderson!”

“I’ll take the train,” declared Silverthorn.

Fifteen minutes later, white and scared, he was sitting in a coach, cringing far back into one of the seats, cursing, for it seemed to him that the train would never start.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A MAN GETS A SQUARE DEAL



Dale did not miss Ben Nyland by more than a few hundred yards as he passed through the neck of the basin. But the men could not see each other in the black shadows cast by the somber mountains that guarded the entrance to the basin, and so they sped on, one headed away from Okar and one toward it, each man nursing his bitter thoughts; one intent on killing and the other riding to escape the death that, he felt, was imminent.

Dale reached the Bar D and pulled the saddle and bridle from his horse. He caught up a fresh animal, threw saddle and bridle on him, and then ran into the house to get some things that he thought might be valuable to him.

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He came out again, and nervously paused on the threshold of the door to listen.

A sound reached his ears—the heavy drumming of a horse’s hoofs on the hard sand in the vicinity of the ranchhouse; and Dale gulped down his fear as he ran to his horse, threw himself into the saddle and raced around a corner of the house.

He had hardly vanished into the gloom of the night when another rider burst into view.

The second rider was Sanderson. He did not halt Streak at the door of the Bar D ranchhouse, for from a distance he had seen a man throw himself upon a horse and dash away, and he knew of no man in the basin, except Dale, who would find it necessary to run from his home in that fashion.

So he kept Streak in the dead run he had been in when approaching the house, and when he reached the corner around which Dale had vanished, he saw his man, two or three hundred yards ahead, flashing across a level toward the far side of the big basin.

He knew that Dale thought his pursuer was Nyland, and that thought gave Sanderson a grim joy. In Sanderson’s mind was a picture of Dale’s face—of the stark, naked astonishment that would be on it when he discovered that it was Sanderson and not Nyland who had caught him.

For Sanderson would catch him—he was convinced of that.

The conviction became strengthened when, after half an hour’s run, Streak had pulled up on Dale. Sanderson could see that Dale’s horse was running erratically; that it faltered on the slight rises that they came to now and then. And when Sanderson discovered that Dale’s horse was failing, he urged Streak to a faster pace. In an hour the space between the two riders had become less. They were climbing the long, gradual slope that led upward out of the basin when Dale’s horse stumbled and fell, throwing Dale out of the saddle.

There was something horribly final in the manner of Dale’s falling, for he tumbled heavily and lay perfectly quiet afterward. His horse, after rising, stumbled on a few steps and fell again.

Sanderson, fully alive to the danger of haste, rode slowly toward the fallen man. He was taking no chances, for Dale might be shamming in an effort to shoot Sanderson as he came forward.

But Dale was not shamming. Dismounting and drawing his pistol, Sanderson went forward. Dale did not move, and when at last Sanderson stood over the fallen man he saw that his eyes were closed and that a great gash had been cut in his forehead near the right temple.



Sanderson saw that the man was badly hurt, but to make sure of him he drew Dale's pistol from its sheath and searched his clothing for other weapons—finding another pistol in a pocket, and a knife in a belt. These he threw into some brush near by, and then he bent over the man.

Dale was unconscious, and despite all Sanderson could do, he remained so.

Sanderson examined the wound in his temple, and discovered that it was deep and ragged—such a wound as a jagged stone might make.

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It was midnight when Sanderson ceased his efforts and decided that Dale would die. He pitied the man, but he felt no pang of regret, for Dale had brought his death upon himself. Sanderson wondered, standing there, looking down at Dale, whether he would have killed the man. He decided that he would have killed him.

"But that ain't no reason why I should let him die after he's had an accident," he told himself. "I'll get him to Okar—to the doctor. Then, after the doc patches him up—if he can—an' I still think he needs killing I'll do it."

So he brought Dale's horse near. The animal had had a long rest, and had regained his strength.

Sanderson bent to Dale and lifted his shoulders, so that he might get an arm under him, to carry him to his horse. But at the first movement Dale groaned and opened his eyes, looking directly into Sanderson's.

"Don't!" he said, "for God's sake, don't! You'll break me apart! It's my back—it's broke. I've felt you workin' around me for hours. But it won't do any good—I'm done. I can feel myself goin'."

Sanderson laid him down again and knelt beside him.

"You're Sanderson," said Dale, after a time. "I thought it was Nyland chasin' me for a while. Then I heard you talkin' to your horse an' I knew it was you. Why don't you kill me?"

"I reckon the Lord is doin' that," said Sanderson.

"Yes—He is. Well, the Lord ain't ever done anything for me."

He was silent for a moment. Then:

"I want to tell you somethin', Sanderson. I've tried to hate you, but I ain't never succeeded. I've admired you. I've cussed myself for doin' it, but I couldn't help it. An' because I couldn't hate you, I tried my best to do things that would make you hate me.

"I've deviled Mary Bransford because I thought it would stir you up. I don't care anything for her—it's Peggy Nyland that I like. Mebbe I'd have done the square thing to her—if I'd been let alone—an' if she'd have liked me. Peggy's better, ain't she? When I saw her after—after I saw Maison layin' there, choked to——"

"So you saw Maison—dead, you say?"

"Ben Nyland guzzled him," Dale's lips wreathed in a cynical smile. "Ben thought Maison had brought Peggy to his rooms. You knowed Maison was dead?"

Sanderson nodded.

"Then you must have been to Okar." He groaned. "Where's Ben Nyland?"

"In Okar. He's lookin' for you." Sanderson leaned closer to the man and spoke sharply to him. "Look here, Dale; you were at the Double A. What has become of Mary Bransford?"

"She went away with Barney Owen—to Okar. Nobody hurt her," he said, as he saw Sanderson's eyes glow. "She's all right—she's with her brother."

He saw Sanderson's eyes; they were filled with an expression of incredulity; and a late moon, just showing its rim above the edge of the mesa above them, flooded the slope with a brilliancy that made it possible for Dale to see another expression in Sanderson's eyes—an expression which told him that Sanderson thought his mind was wandering.

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He laughed, weakly.

“You think I’m loco, eh? Well, I ain’t. Barney Owen ain’t Barney Owen at all—he’s Will Bransford. I found that out yesterday,” he continued, soberly, as Sanderson looked quickly at him. “I had some men down to Tombstone way, lookin’ him up.

“When old Bransford showed me the letter that you took away from me, I knew Will Bransford was in Tombstone; an’ when Mary sent that thousand to him I set a friend of mine—Gary Miller—onto him. Gary an’ two of his friends salivated young Bransford, but he turned up, later, minus the money, in Tombstone. Another friend of mine sent me word—an’ a description of him. Barney Owen is Bransford.

“Just what happened to Gary Miller an’ his two friends has bothered me a heap,” went on Dale.

“They was to come this way, to help me in this deal. But they never showed up.”

Sanderson smiled, and Dale’s eyes gleamed.

“You know what’s become of him!” he charged. “That’s where you got that thousand you give to Mary Bransford—an’ the papers, showin’ that young Bransford was due here. Ain’t it?”

“I ain’t sayin’,” said Sanderson.

“Well,” declared Dale, “Barney Owen is Will Bransford. The night Morley got him drunk we went the limit with Owen, an’ he talked enough to make me suspicious. That’s why I sent to Tombstone to find out how he looked. We had the evidence to show the court at Las Vegas. We was goin’ to prove you wasn’t young Bransford, an’ then we was goin’ to put Owen out of the—”

Dale gasped, caught his breath, and stiffened.

Sanderson stayed with him until the dawn, sitting, quietly beside him until the end. Then Sanderson got up, threw the body on Dale’s horse, mounted his own, and set out across the basin toward Okar.

CHAPTER XXXV

A DEAL IN LOVE

A few days later Mary Bransford, Sanderson, and Barney Owen were sitting on the porch of the Double A ranchhouse, near where they had sat on the day Mary and Owen

and the Dale men had seen Sanderson riding along the edge of the mesa in his pursuit of Williams and the others.

Mary and Sanderson were sitting rather close together at one end of the porch; Barney Owen was sitting near them, on the porch edge, his elbows resting on his knees.

There had been a silence between the three for some time, but at last Sanderson broke it. He smiled at Mary.

"We'll build that dam—an' the irrigation plant now, mebbe," he said. "But it's goin' to be a big job. Williams says it will take a year, or more."

"There will be difficulties, too, I suppose," said Mary.

"Sure."

"But difficulties do not worry you," she went on, giving him a glowing look.

He blushed. "We promised each other not to refer to that again," he protested. "You are breaking your promise."



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"I just can't help it!" she declared. "I feel so good over your victory. Why, it really wasn't your affair at all, and yet you came here, fought our fight for us; and then, when it is all over, you wish us to say nothing about it! That isn't fair!"

He grinned. "Was you fair?" he charged.

"You told me the other day that you knew, the day after I ordered Dale away from the Double A—after tellin' you that I wasn't what I claimed to be—that Barney Owen wasn't Barney Owen at all, but your brother.

"An' you let me go on, not tellin' me. An' he didn't do a heap of talkin'. I ain't mentioned it until now, but I've wondered why? Barney knew from the first day that I wasn't what I pretended to be. Why didn't you tell me, Barney?"

Mary was blushing, and Barney's face was red. His eyes met Mary's and both pairs were lowered, guiltily.

Barney turned to Sanderson.

"Look at me!" he said. "Do I look like a man who could fight Dale, Silverthorn, and Maison—and the gang they had—with any hope of victory? When I got here—after escaping Gary Miller and the others—I was all in—sick and weak. It didn't take me long to see how things were. But I knew I couldn't do anything.

"I was waiting, though, for Gary Miller and his friends to come, to claim the Double A. I would have killed them. But they didn't come. You came.

"At first I was not sure what to think of you. But I saw sympathy in your eyes when you looked at Mary, and when you told Dale that you were Will Bransford, I decided to keep silent. You looked capable, and when I saw that you were willing to fight for Mary, why—why—I just let you go. I—I was afraid that if I'd tell you who I was you'd throw up the whole deal. And so I didn't say anything."

Sanderson grinned. "That's the reason you was so willin' to sign all the papers that wanted Will Bransford's signature. I sure was a boxhead for not tumblin' to that."

He laughed, meeting Mary's gaze and holding it.

"Talkin' of throwin' up the deal," he said. "That couldn't be. Dale an' Silverthorn an' Maison an' their gang of cutthroats couldn't make me give it up. There's only one person could make me do that. She'd only have to say that she don't think as much of me as I think she ought to. And, then——"

"She'll keep pretty silent about that, I think," interrupted Owen, grinning at the girl's crimson face.

"I wouldn't be takin' your word for it," grinned Sanderson, "it wouldn't be reliable."

"Why—" began Mary, and looked at Owen.

"Sure," he laughed, "I'll go and take a walk. There are times when three can't explain a thing as well as two."

There was a silence following Owen's departure.

Then Mary looked shyly at Sanderson, who was watching her with a smile.

"Does it need any explaining?" she began. "Can't you see that——"

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"Shucks, little girl," he said gently, as he leaned toward her, "words ain't—well, words ain't so awful important, are they?"

Apparently words were not important. For within the next few minutes there were few spoken. And progress was made without them. And then:

"I believe I never was so happy as when I saw you, that morning, coming in to Okar with Dale's body, and you said you had not killed him. And if Barney—Will, had killed him that day—if he had really hanged him, and Dale had died from it—I should have kept seeing Dale as he was hanging there all my life."

"It was Dale's day," said Sanderson.

"And Okar's!" declared the girl. "The town has taken on a new spirit since those men have left. And the whole basin has changed. Men are more interested and eager. There is an atmosphere of fellowship that was absent before. And, oh, Deal, how happy I am!"

"You ain't got anything on me!" grinned Sanderson.

And presently, looking toward the rim of the mesa, they saw Williams and his men coming toward them from Lazette, with many wagons, loaded with supplies and material for the new dam, forecasting a new day and a new prosperity for the Double A—and themselves.

"That's for a new deal," said Sanderson, watching the wagons and men.

"Wrong," she laughed, happily, "it is all for a 'Square' Deal!"

"All?" he returned, grinning at her.

"All," she repeated, snuggling close to him.