

The Texan eBook

The Texan

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Chapter

A prologue

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THE TEXAN

A PROLOGUE

Exactly twenty minutes after young Benton dismounted from his big rangy black before the door of a low adobe saloon that fronted upon one of the narrow crooked streets of old Las Vegas, he glanced into the eyes of the thin-lipped croupier and laughed. "You've got 'em. Seventy-four good old Texas dollars." He held up a coin between his thumb and forefinger. "I've got another one left, an' your boss is goin' to get that, too—but he's goin' to get it in legitimate barter an' trade."

As the cowpuncher stepped to the bar that occupied one side of the room, a group of Mexicans who had lounged back at his entrance crowded once more about the wheel and began noisily to place their bets. He watched them for a moment before turning his attention to the heavy-lidded, flabby-jowled person who leaned ponderously against the sober side of the bar.

"Who owns this joint?" he asked truculently, as he eyed with disfavour the filthy shirt-sleeves rolled back from thick forearms, the sagging vest, and the collarless shirt-band that buried itself in a fold of the fat neck.

"I do," was the surly rejoinder. "Got any kick comin'?"

"Nary kick." The cowpuncher tossed his dollar onto the bar. "Give me a little red licker," he ordered, and grinned at the sullen proprietor as he filled his glass to the brim.

"An outfit," he confided, with slow insolence, "that'll run an eagle-bird wheel ain't got no more conscience than a *hombre's* got brains that'll buck one. In Texas we'd shoot a man full of little holes that 'ud try it."

"Why'n you stay in Texas, then?" growled the other.

The cowman drank his liquor and refilled the glass. "Most fat men," he imparted irrelevantly, "are plumb mindful that they're easy hit, an' consequent they're cheerful-hearted an' friendly. Likewise, they mind their own business, which is also why they've be'n let grow to onhuman proportions. But, not to seem uncivil to a stranger, an' by way of gettin' acquainted, I'll leak it out that it ain't no fault of Texas that I come away from there—but owin' only to a honin' of mine to see more of the world than what Texas affords.

"The way to see a world," I debates, "is like anythin' else—begin at the bottom an' work up. So I selects seventy-five dollars an' hits fer Las Vegas."

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The fat man pocketed the dollar and replaced it with a greasy fifty-cent piece, an operation which the Texan watched with interest as he swallowed his liquor.

"They ain't nothin' like eagle-bird wheels an' snake-liniment at two bits a throw to help a man start at the bottom," he opined, and reaching for the half-dollar, tossed it to a forlorn-looking individual who lounged near the door. "Here, Greaser, lend a hand in helpin' me downward! Here's four bits. Go lay it on the wheel—an' say: I got a hunch! I played every number on that wheel except the thirteen—judgin' it to be onlucky." The forlorn one grinned his understanding, and clutching the piece of silver, elbowed into the group that crowded the roulette wheel. The cowpuncher turned once more to the surly proprietor:

"So now you see me, broke an' among evil companions, in this here God-forsaken, lizard-ridden, Greaser-loving sheep-herdin' land of sorrow. But, give me another jolt of that there pizen-fermentus an' I'll raise to heights unknown. A few more shots of that an' they ain't no tellin' what form of amusement a man's soul might incline to."

"Y'got the price?"

"I ain't got even the makin's—only an ingrowin' cravin' fer spiritual lickin' an' a hankerin' to see America first——"

"That hoss," the proprietor jerked a thumb toward the open door beyond which the big rangy black pawed fretfully at the street. "Mebbe we might make a trade. I got one good as him 'er better. It's that sor'I standin' t'other side of yourn."

The Texan rested an arm upon the bar and leaned forward confidentially. "Fatty," he drawled, "you're a liar." The other noted the hand that rested lightly upon the cowman's hip near the ivory butt of the six-gun that protruded from its holster, and took no offence. His customer continued: "They ain't no such horse—an' if they was, *you* couldn't own him. They ain't no man ever throw'd a kak on Ace of Spades but me, an' as fer sellin' him, or tradin' him—I'll shoot him first!"

A sudden commotion at the back of the room caused both men to turn toward the wheel where a fierce altercation had arisen between the croupier and the vagabond to whom the Texan had tossed his last coin.

"You'll take that er nothin'! It's more money'n y'ever see before an'——"

"*Non! Non! De treize! De, w'at you call t'irten—she repe't! A'm git mor' as seex hondre dollaire—*" The proprietor lumbered heavily from behind the bar and Benton noted that the thick fingers closed tightly about the handle of a bung-starter. The crowd of Mexicans thinned against the wall as the man with ponderous stealth approached to a point directly behind the excited vagabond who continued his protestations with

increasing vigour. The next instant the Texan's six-gun flashed from its holster and as he crossed the room his eye caught the swift nod of the croupier.

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When the proprietor drew back his arm to strike, the thick wrist was seized from behind and he was spun violently about to glare into the smiling eyes of the cowpuncher—eyes in which a steely glint flickered behind the smile, a glint more ominous even than the feel of the muzzle of the blue-black six-gun that pressed deeply into his flabby paunch just above the waistband of his trousers.

“Drop that mallet!” The words came softly, but with an ungentle softness that was accompanied by a boring, twisting motion of the gun muzzle as it pressed deeper into his midriff. The bung-starter thudded upon the floor.

“Now let’s get the straight of this,” continued the Texan. “Hey, you Greaser, if you c’n quit talkin’ long enough to say somethin’, we’ll find out what’s what here. You ort to look both ways when you’re in a dump like this or the coyotes’ll find out what you taste like. Come on, now—give me the facts in the case an’ I’ll a’joodicate it to suit all parties that’s my way of thinkin’.”

“*Oui!* A’m play de four bit on de *treize*, an’ *voila!* She ween! Da’s wan gran’ honch! A’m play heem wan tam’ mor’. De w’eel she spin ‘roun’, de leetle ball she sing lak de bee an’, *Nom de Dieu!* She repe’t! De t’irten ween ag’in. A’m reech—But *non!*” The man pointed excitedly to the croupier who sneered across the painted board upon which a couple of gold pieces lay beside a little pile of silver. “A-ha, *canaille!* Wat you call—son of a dog! T’ief! She say, ‘feefy dollaire’! Dat more as seex hondre dollaire——”

“It’s a lie!” cried the croupier fiercely, “the thirteen don’t repeat. The sixteen win—you kin see fer yourself. An’ what’s more, they can’t no damn Injun come in here an’ call me no——”

“Hold on!” The Texan shifted his glance to the croupier without easing the pressure on the gun. “If the sixteen win, what’s the fifty bucks for? His stake’s on the thirteen, ain’t it?”

“What business you got, hornin’ in on this? It hain’t your funeral. You Texas tin-horns comes over here an’ lose——”

“That’ll be about all out of you. An’ if I was in your boots I wouldn’t go speakin’ none frivolous about funerals, neither.”

The smile was gone from the steel-grey eyes and the croupier experienced a sudden chilling in the pit of his stomach.

“Let’s get down to cases,” the cowpuncher continued. “I kind of got the Greaser into this here jack-pot an’ it’s up to me to get him out. He lays four bits on the thirteen—she pays thirty-five—that’s seventeen-fifty. Eighteen, as she lays. The blame fool leaves it lay an’ she win again—that’s thirty-five times eighteen. Good Lord! An’ without no

pencil an' paper! We'll cut her up in chunks an' tackle her: let's see, ten times eighteen is one-eighty, an' three times that is—three times the hundred is three hundred, and three times the eighty

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is two-forty. That's five-forty, an' a half of one-eighty is ninety, an' five-forty is six-thirty. We'd ort to double it fer interest an' goodwill, but we'll leave it go at the reglar price. So, just you skin off six hundred an' thirty bucks, an' eighteen more, an' pass 'em acrost. An' do it *pronto* or somethin' might happen to Fatty right where he's thickest." The cowpuncher emphasized his remarks by boring the muzzle even deeper into the unctuous periphery of the proprietor. The croupier shot a questioning glance toward his employer.

"Shell it out! You fool!" grunted that worthy. "Fore this gun comes out my back. An', besides, it's cocked!" Without a word the croupier counted out the money, arranging it in little piles of gold and silver.

As the vagabond swept the coins into his battered Stetson the Texan gave a final twist to the six-gun. "If I was you, Fatty, I'd rub that there thirteen number off that wheel an' paint me a tripple-ought or mebbe, another eagle-bird onto it."

He turned to the man who stood grinning over his hatful of money:

"Come on, Pedro, me an' you're goin' away from here. The licker this *hombre* purveys will shore lead to bloodshed an' riotin', besides which it's onrespectable to gamble anyhow."

Pausing to throw the bridle reins over the horn of his saddle, the Texan linked his arm through that of his companion and proceeded down the street with the big black horse following like a dog. After several minutes of silence he stopped and regarded the other thoughtfully.

"Pedro," he said, "me an' you, fallin' heir to an onexpected legacy this way, it's fit an' proper we should celebrate accordin' to our lights. The common an' onchristian way would be to spliflicate around from one saloon to another 'till we'd took in the whole town an' acquired a couple of jags an' more or less onfavourable notoriety. Then, in a couple of days or two, we'd wake up with fur on our tongue an' an inch long an' our wealth divided amongst thieves. But, Pedro, such carryin's-on is ondecent an' improvident. Take them great captains of industry you read about! D'you reckon every pay-day old Andy Rockyfellow goes a rampin' down Main Street back there in Noo York, proclaimin' he's a wolf an' it's his night to howl? Not on your tintype, he don't! If he did he'd never of rose out of the rank an' file of the labourin' class, an' chances is, would of got fired out of that fer not showin' up at the corral Monday mornin'! Y'see I be'n a-readin' up on the lives of these here saints to kind of get a line on how they done it. Take that whole bunch an' they wasn't hardly a railroad nor a oil mill nor a steel factory between 'em when they was born. I got all their numbers. I know jest how they done it, an' when I

get time I'm a-goin' out an' make the Guggenhimers cough up my share of Mexico an' the Rocky Mountains an' Alaska.

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"But to get down to cases, as the preachers says: Old Andy he don't cantankerate none noticeable. When he feels needful of a jamboree he goes down to the bank an' fills his pockets an' a couple of valises with change, an' gum-shoes down to John D. Swab's, an' they hunt up Charley Carnage an' a couple of senators an' a rack of chips an' they finds 'em a back room, pulls off their collars an' coats an' goes to it. They ain't no kitty only to cover the needful expenses of drinks, eats, an' smokes—an' everything goes, from cold-decks to second-dealin'. Then when they've derove recreation enough, on goes their collars an' coats, an' they eat a handful of cloves an' get to work on the public again. They's a lot of money changes hands in these here sessions but it never gets out of the gang, an' after you get their brands you c'n generally always tell who got gouged by noticin' what goes up. If coal oil hists a couple of cents on the gallon you know Andy carried his valises home empty an' if railroad rates jumps—the senators got nicked a little, an' vicy versy. Now you an' me ain't captains of industry, nor nothin' else but our own soul, as the piece goes, but 'tain't no harm we should try a law-abidin' recreation, same as these others, an' mebbe after some practice we'll get to where the Guggenhimers will be figgerin' how to get the western hemisphere of North America back from us.

"It's like this. Me an' you'll stop in an' get us a couple of drinks. Then we'll hunt us up a hash-house an' put a big bate of ham an' aigs out of circulation, an' go get us a couple more drinks, an' heel ourselves with a deck of cards an' a couple bottles of cactus juice, an' hunt us up a place where we'll be ondisturbed by the riotorous carryin's-on of the frivolous-minded, an' we'll have us a two-handed poker game which no matter who wins we can't lose, like I was tellin' you, 'cause they can't no outside parties horn in on the profits. But first-off we'll hunt up a feed barn so Ace of Spades can load up on oats an' hay while we're havin' our party."

An hour later the Texan deposited a quart bottle, a rack of chips, and a deck of cards on a little deal table in the dingy back room of a saloon.

"I tell you, Pedro, they's a whole lot of fancy trimmin's this room ain't got, but it's quiet an' peaceable an' it'll suit our purpose to a gnat's hind leg." He dropped into a chair and reached for the rack of chips.

"It's a habit of mine to set facin' the door," he continued, as he proceeded to remove the disks and arrange them into stacks. "So if you got any choist just set down acrost the table there an' we'll start the festivities. I'll bank the game an' we'll take out a fifty-dollar stack an' play table stakes." He shoved three stacks of chips across the table. "Just come acrost with fifty bucks so's we c'n keep the bank straight an' go ahead an' deal. An' while you're a-doin' it, bein' as you're a pretty good Greaser, I'll just take a drink to you——"

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"Greasaire, *non!* Me, A'm hate de damn Greasaire!"

The cowpuncher paused with the bottle half way to his lips and scrutinized the other: "I thought you was a little off colour an' talked kind of funny. What be you?"

"Me, A'm Blood breed. Ma fader she French. Ma moder she Blood Injun. A'm leeve een Montan' som'tam'—som'tam' een Canada. A'm no lak dees contrie! Too mooch hot. Too mooch Greasaire! Too mooch sheep. A'm lak I go back hom'. A'm ride for T. U. las' fall an' A'm talk to round-up cook, Walt Keeng, hees nam', an' he com' from Areezoon'. She no like Montan'. She say Areezoon' she bettaire—no fence—beeg range—plent' cattle. You goin' down dere an' git job you see de good contrie. You no com' back Nort' no more. So A'm goin' down w'en de col' wedder com' an' A'm git de job wit' ol' man Fisher on, w'at you call Yuma bench—*Sacre!*" The half-breed paused and wiped his face.

"Didn't you like it down Yuma Way?" Benton smiled.

"Lak it! *Voila!* No wataire! No snow! Too mooch, w'at you call, de leezard! Een de wintaire, A'm so Godamn hot A'm lak for die. *Non!* A'm com' way from dere. A'm goin' Nort' an' git me nodder job w'ere A'm git som' wataire som'tam'. Mebbe so git too mooch col' in wintaire, but, *voila!* Better A'm lak I freeze l'il bit as burn oop!"

The Texan laughed. "I don't blame you none. I never be'n down to Yuma but they tell me it's hell on wheels. Go ahead an' deal, Pedro."

"Pedro, *non!* Ma moder she nam' Moon Eye, an' ma fader she Cross-Cut Lajune. Derefor', A'm Batiste Xavier Jean Jacques de Beaumont Lajune."

The bottle thumped upon the table top.

"What the hell is that, a name or a song?"

"Me, das ma nam'—A'm call Batiste Xavier Jean——"

"Hold on there! If your ma or pa, or whichever one done the namin' didn't have no expurgated dictionary handy mebbe they ain't to blame—but from now on, between you an' me, you're Bat. That's name enough, an' the John Jack Judas Iscariot an' General Jackson part goes in the discards. An' bein' as this here is only a two-handed game, the discards is dead—— See?"

At the end of an hour the half-breed watched with a grin as the Texan raked in a huge pile of chips.

"Dat de las'," he said, "Me, A'm broke."

“Broke!” exclaimed the cowpuncher, “you don’t mean you’ve done lost all that there six hundred an’ forty-eight bucks?” He counted the little piles of silver and gold, which the half-breed had shoved across the board in return for stack after stack of chips.

“Six-forty-two,” he totalled. “Let’s see, supper was a dollar an’ four bits, drinks two dollars, an’ two dollars for this bottle of prune-juice that’s about gone already, an’—Hey, Bat, you’re four bits shy! Frisk yourself an’ I’ll play you a showdown for them four bits.” The other grinned and held a silver half dollar between his finger and thumb.

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“Non! A’m ke’p dat four bit! Dat lucky four bit. A’m ponch hole in heem an’ car’ heem roun’ ma neck lak’ de medicine bag. A’m gon’ back Nort’—me! A’m got no frien’s. You de only friend A’m got. You give me de las’ four bit. You, give me de honch to play de t’irteen. A’m git reech, an’ den you mak’ de bank, w’at you call, com’ ’crost. Now A’m goin’ back to Montan’ an’ git me de job. Wat de hell!”

“Where’s your outfit?” asked the Texan as he carefully stowed the money in his pockets.

“Ha! Ma outfeet—A’m sell dat outfeet to git de money to com’ back hom’. A’m play wan leetle gam’ coon can an’ *voila!* A’m got no money. De damn Greasaire she ween dat money an’ A’m broke. A’m com’ som’tam’ on de freight train—som’tam’ walk, an’ A’m git dees far. Tomor’ A’m git de freight train goin’ Nort’ an’ som’tam’ A’m git to Montan’. Eet ees ver’ far, but mebbe-so A’m git dere for fall round-up. An’ Ba Goss, A’m nevaire com’ sout’ no mor’. Too mooch hot! Too mooch no wataire! Too mooch, w’at you call, de pizen boog—mebbe-so in de bed—in de pants—in de boot—you git bite an’ den you got to die! *Voila!* Wat de hell!”

The Texan laughed and reaching into his pocket drew out two twenty dollar gold pieces and a ten which thudded upon the table before the astonished eyes of the half-breed.

“Here, Bat, you’re a damn good Injun! You’re plumb squanderous with your money, but you’re a good sport. Take that an’ buy you a ticket to as far North as it’ll get you. Fifty bucks ort to buy a whole lot of car ridin’. An’ don’t you stop to do no gamblin’, neither — Ain’t I told you it’s onrespectable an’ divertin’ to morals? If you don’t *sabe* coon can no better’n what you do poker, you stand about as much show amongst these here Greasers as a rabbit in a coyote patch. It was a shame to take your money this way, but bein’ as you’re half-white it was up to me to save you the humiliatin’ agony of losin’ it to Greasers.”

The half-breed pocketed the coins as the other buttoned his shirt and took another long pull at the bottle.

“Wer’ you goin’ now?” he asked as the cowpuncher started for the door. The man paused and regarded him critically. “First off, I’m goin’ to get my horse. An’ then me an’ you is goin’ down to the depot an’ you’re a-goin’ to buy that there ticket. I’m a-goin’ to see that you get it ironclad an’ onredeemable, I ain’t got no confidence in no gambler an’ bein’ as I’ve took a sort of likin’ to you, I hate to think of you a-walkin’ clean to Montana in them high-heeled boots. After that I’m a-goin’ to start out an’ examine this here town of Las Vegas lengthways, crossways, down through the middle, an’ both sides of the crick. An’ when that’s off my mind, I’m a-goin’ to begin on the rest of the world.” He moved his arm comprehensively and reached for the bottle.

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"You wait right here till I get old Ace of Spades," he continued solemnly when he had rasped the raw liquor from his throat. "If you ain't here when I come back I'll swallow-fork your ears with this here gat just to see if my shootin' eye is in practice. The last time I done any fancy shootin' I was kind of wild—kep' a-hittin' a little to one side an' the other—not much, only about an inch or so—but it wasn't right good shootin'."

The half-breed grinned: "A'm stay here till you com' back. A'm fin' dat you ma frien'. A'm lak' you, *bien!*"

When the Texan returned, fifteen minutes later, the man of many names was gone. "It's just like I said, you can't trust no gambler," he muttered, with a doleful nod of the head. "He's pulled out on me, but he better not infest the usual marts of midnight. 'Cause I'm a-goin' to start out an' take in everything that's open in this man's town, an' if I find him I'll just nachelly show him the onprincipledness of lyin' to a friend."

Stepping to the bar he bought a drink and a moment later swung onto the big rangy black and clattered down the street. At the edge of the town he turned and started slowly back, dismounting wherever the lights of a saloon illumined the dingy street, but never once catching a glimpse of the figure that followed in the thick blackness of the shadows. Before the saloon of the surly proprietor the cowpuncher brought his big black to a stand and sat contemplating the sorrel that stood dejectedly with ears adroop and one hind foot resting lightly upon the toe.

"So that's the cayuse Fatty wanted to trade me for Ace of Spades!" he snorted. "That dog-legged, pot-gutted, lop-eared patch of red he offers to trade to *me* fer *Ace of Spades!* It's a doggone insult! I didn't know it at the time, havin' only a couple of drinks, an' too sober to judge a insult when I seen one. But it's different now, I can see it in the dark. I'm a-goin' in there an'—an' twist his nose off an' feed it to him. But first I got to find old Bat. He's an Injun, but he's a good old scout, an' I hate to think of him walkin' all the way to Montana while some damn Greaser is spendin' my hard earned samolians that I give him for carfare. It's a long walk to Montana. Plumb through Colorado an' Wyomin' an'—an' New Jersey, or somewheres. Mebbe he's in there now. As they say in the Bible, or somewheres, you got to hunt for a thing where you find it, or something. Hold still, there you black devil you! What you want to stand there spinnin' 'round like a top for? You be'n drinkin', you doggone old ringtail! What was I goin' to do, now. Oh, yes, twist Patty's nose, an' find Bat an' shoot at his ears a while, an' make him get his ticket to New Jersey an'——"

"This is a blame slow old town, she needs wakin' up, anyhow. If I ride in that door I'll get scraped off like mud off a boot."

He spurred the black and brought him up with a jerk beside the sorrel which snorted and reared back, snapping the reins with which he had been tied, and stood with distended nostrils sniffing inquiringly at Ace of Spades as the cowpuncher swung to the ground.

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"Woke up, didn't you, you old stager? Y'ain't so bad lookin' when you're alive. Patty'll have to get him a new pair of bridle reins. Mebbe the whole town'll look better if it's woke up some.

"Y-e-e-e-e-o-w! Cowboys a-comin'!"

A citizen or two paused on the street corner, a few Mexicans grinned as they drew back to allow the Gringo free access to the saloon, and a swarthy figure slipped unobserved across the street and blended into the shadow of the adobe wall.

"O-o-o-o-o-h, the yaller r-o-s-e of Texas!" sang the cowpuncher, with joyous vehemence. As he stepped into the room, his eyes swept the faces of the gamblers and again he burst into vociferous song:

"O-o-o-o-o-h, w-h-e-r-e is my wanderin' b-o-y tonight?"

"Hey, you! Whad'ye think this is, a camp meetin'?"

The Texan faced the speaker. "Well, if it ain't my old college chum! Fatty, I stopped in a purpose to see you. An' besides which, by the unalien rights of the Constitution an' By-laws of this here United States of Texas, a man's got a right to sing whatever song suits him irregardless of sex or opportunity." The other glared malevolently as the cowpuncher approached the bar with a grin. "Don't bite yourself an' die of hydrophobia before your eggication is complete, which it ain't till you've learnt never to insult no Texas man by offerin' to trade no rat-tailed, ewe-necked old buzzard fodder fer a top Texas horse.

"Drop that mallet! An' don't go reachin-' around in under that bar, 'cause if you find what you're huntin' fer you're a-goin' to see fer yourself if every cloud's got a silver linin'. 'Tend to business now, an' set out a bottle of your famous ol' Las Vegas stummick shellac an' while I'm imbibin' of its umbilical ambrosier, I'll jest onscrew your nose an' feed it to the cat."

Sweat stood out upon the forehead of the heavy-paunched proprietor as with a flabby-faced grin he set out the bottle. But the Texan caught the snake-like flash of the eyes with which the man signalled to the croupier across the room. Gun in hand, he whirled:

"No, you don't, Toney!" An ugly blue-black automatic dropped to the floor and the croupier's hands flew ceilingward.

"I never seen such an outfit to be always a-reachin'," grinned the cowpuncher. "Well, if there ain't the ol' eagle-bird wheel! Give her a spin, Toney! They say you can't hit an eagle on the fly with a six-gun, but I'm willin' to try! Spin her good, 'cause I don't want no onfair advantage of that there noble bird. Stand back, Greasers, so you don't get nicked!"

As the croupier spun the wheel, three shots rang in an almost continuous explosion and the gamblers fell over each other in an effort to dodge the flying splinters that filled the powder-fogged air.

“Little black bull slid down the mountain,
L-o-n-g t-i-m-e ago!”

roared the Texan as he threw open the cylinder of his gun.

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"H-e-e-e-e scraped his horn on a hickory saplin',
L-o-n-g t-i-m-e ago——"

There was a sudden commotion behind him, a swift rush of feet, a muffled thud, and a gasping, agonized grunt. The next instant the huge acetelyne lamp that lighted the room fell to the floor with a crash and the place was plunged in darkness.

"Queek, m's'u, dees way!" a hand grasped his wrist and the cowpuncher felt himself drawn swiftly toward the door. From all sides sounded the scuffling of straining men who breathed heavily as they fought in the blackness.

A thin red flame cut the air and a shot rang sharp. Someone screamed and a string of Spanish curses blended into the hubbub of turmoil.

"De hosses, queek, m's'u!"

The cool air of the street fanned the Texan's face as he leaped across the sidewalk, and vaulted into the saddle. The next moment the big black was pounding the roadway neck and neck with another, smaller horse upon which the half-breed swayed in the saddle with the ease and grace of the loose-rein rider born.

It was broad daylight when the cowpuncher opened his eyes in an arroyo deep among the hills far, far from Las Vegas. He rubbed his forehead tenderly, and crawling to a spring a few feet distant, buried his face in the tiny pool and drank deeply of the refreshing liquid. Very deliberately he dried his face on a blue handkerchief, and fumbled in his pockets for papers and tobacco. As he blew the grey smoke from his nostrils he watched the half-breed who sat nearby industriously splicing a pair of broken bridle reins.

"Did you get that ticket, Bat?" he asked, with a hand pressed tightly against his aching forehead.

The other grinned. "Me, A'm no wan' no ticket. A'm lak A'm stay wit' you, an' mebbe-so we git de job togedder."

The cowpuncher smoked for a time in silence.

"What was the rookus last night?" he asked, indifferently. Then, suddenly, his eye fell upon the sorrel that snipped grass at the end of a lariat rope near the picketed black, and he leaped to his feet. "Where'd you get that horse?" he exclaimed sharply. "It's Fatty's! There's the reins he busted when he snorted loose!"

Again the half-breed grinned. "A'm bor' dat hoss for com' 'long wit' you. Dat Fatty, she damn bad man. She try for keel you w'en you tak' de shot at de wheel. A'm com' 'long dat time an' A'm keek heem in de guts an' he roll 'roun' on de floor, an' A'm t'row de

bottle of wheesky an' smash de beeg lamp an' we com' 'long out of dere." The cowpuncher tossed his cigarette away and spat upon the ground.

"How'd you happen to come in there so handy just at the right time?" he asked with a sidewise glance at the half-breed.

"Oh, A'm fol' you long tam'. A'm t'ink mebbe-so you git l'il too mooch hooch an' som'one try for do you oop. A'm p'ek in de door an' seen Fatty gon' shoot you. Dat mak' me mad lak hell, an' A'm run oop an' keek heem so hard I kin on hees belly. You ma frien'. A'm no lak I seen you git keel."

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The Texan nodded. "I see. You're a damn good Injun, Bat, an' I ain't got no kick comin' onto the way you took charge of proceedin's. But you sure raised hell when you stole that horse. They's prob'ly about thirty-seven men an' a sheriff a-combin' these here hills fer us at this partic'lar minute an' when they catch us——"

The half-breed laughed. "Dem no ketch. We com' feefy mile. Dat leetle hoss she damn good hoss. We got de two bes' hoss. We ke'p goin' dey no ketch. 'Spose dey do ketch. Me, A'm tell 'em A'm steal dat hoss an' you not know nuthin' 'bout dat."

There was a twinkle in the Texan's eye as he yawned and stretched prodigiously. "An' I'll tell 'em you're the damndest liar in the state of Texas an' North America throw'd in. Come on, now, you throw the shells on them horses an' we'll be scratchin' gravel. Fifty miles ain't no hell of a ways—my throat's beginnin' to feel kind of draw'd already."

"W'er' we goin'?" asked the half-breed as they swung into the saddles.

"Bat," said the other, solemnly, "me an' you is goin' fast, an' we're goin' a long time. You mentioned somethin' about Montana bein' considerable of a cow country. Well, me an' you is a-goin' North—as far North as cattle is—an' we're right now on our way!"

CHAPTER I

THE TRAIN STOPS

"I don't see why they had to build their old railroad down in the bottom of this river bed." With deft fingers Alice Marcum caught back a wind-tossed whisp of hair. "It's like travelling through a trough."

"Line of the least resistance," answered her companion as he rested an arm upon the polished brass guard rail of the observation car. "This river bed, running east and west, saved them millions in bridges."

The girl's eyes sought the sky-line of the bench that rose on both sides of the mile-wide valley through which the track of the great transcontinental railroad wound like a yellow serpent.

"It's level up there. Why couldn't they have built it along the edge?"

The man smiled: "And bridged all those ravines!" he pointed to gaps and notches in the level sky-line where the mouths of creek beds and coulees flashed glimpses of far mountains. "Each one of those ravines would have meant a trestle and trestles run into big money."

“And so they built the railroad down here in this ditch where people have to sit and swelter and look at their old shiny rails and scraggly green bushes and dirt walls, while up there only a half a mile away the great rolling plains stretch away to the mountains that seem so near you could walk to them in an hour.”

“But, my dear girl, it would not be practical. Railroads are built primarily with an eye to dividends and—” The girl interrupted him with a gesture of impatience.

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"I hate things that are practical—hate even the word. There is nothing in all the world so deadly as practicability. It is ruthless and ugly. It disregards art and beauty and all the higher things that make life worth living. It is a monster whose god is dollars—and who serves that god well. What does any tourist know of the real West—the West that lies beyond those level rims of dirt? How much do you or I know of it? The West to us is a thin row of scrub bushes along a narrow, shallow river, with a few little white-painted towns sprinkled along, that for all we can see might be in Illinois or Ohio. I've been away a whole winter and for all the West I've seen I might as well have stayed in Brooklyn."

"But certainly you enjoyed California!"

"California! Yes, as California. But California isn't the West! California is New York with a few orange groves thrown in. It is a tourist's paradise. A combination of New York and Palm Beach. The real West lies east of the Rockies, the uncommercialized, unexploited—I suppose you would add, the impractical West. A New Yorker gets as good an idea of the West when he travels by train to California as a Californian would get of New York were he to arrive by way of the tube and spend the winter in the Fritz-Waldmore."

"I rather liked California, what little I saw of it. A business trip does not afford an ideal opportunity for sight seeing."

"You like Newport and Palm Beach, too."

The man ignored the interruption.

"But, at least, this trip has combined a good bit of business with a very big bit of pleasure. It is two years since I have seen you and——"

"And so you're going to tell me for the twenty-sixth time in three days that you still love me, and that you want me to marry you, and I'll have to say 'no' again, and explain that I'm not ready to marry anybody." She regarded him with an air of mock solemnity. "But really Mr. Winthrop Adams Endicott I think you *have* improved since you struck out for yourself into the wilds of—where was it, Ohio, or some place."

"Cincinnati," answered the man a trifle stiffly. The girl shuddered. "I had to change cars there once." Again she eyed him critically. "Yes, two years have made a really noticeable improvement. Do the Cincinnati newspapers always remember to use your whole name or do they dare to refer to Winthrop A. Endicott. If I were a reporter I really believe I'd try it once. If you keep on improving, some day somebody is going to call you Win."

The man flushed: "Are you never serious?" he asked.

“Never more so than this minute.”

“You say you are not ready to marry. You expect to marry, then, sometime?”

“I don’t *expect* to. I’m *going* to.”

“Will you marry me when you are ready?”

The girl laughed. “Yes, if I can’t find the man I want, I think I shall. But he must be somewhere,” she continued, after a pause during which her eyes centred upon the point where the two gleaming rails vanished into the distance. “He must be impractical, and human, and—and *elemental*. I’d rather be smashed to pieces in the Grand Canyon, than live for ever on the Erie Canal!”

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"Aren't you rather unconventional in your tastes——?"

"If I'm not, I'm a total failure! I hate conventionality! And lines of least resistance! And practical things! It is the *men* who are the real sticklers for convention. The same kind of men that follow the lines of least resistance and build their railroads along them——because it is practical!

"I don't see why you want to marry me!" she burst out resentfully. "I'm not conventional, nor practical. And I'm not a line of least resistance!"

"But I love you. I have always loved you, and——"

The girl interrupted him with a quick little laugh, which held no trace of resentment.

"Yes, yes, I know. I believe you do. And I'm glad because really, Winthrop, you're a dear. There are lots of things about you I admire. Your teeth, and eyes, and the way you wear your clothes. If you weren't so terribly conventional, so cut and dried, and matter of fact, and *safe*, I might fall really and truly in love with you. But—Oh, I don't know! Here I am, twenty-three. And I suppose I'm a little fool and have never grown up. I like to read stories about knights errant, and burglars, and fair ladies, and pirates, and mysterious dark oriental-looking men. And I like to go to places where everybody don't go——only Dad won't let me and—— Why just think!" she exclaimed in sudden wrath, "I've been in California for three months and I've ridden over the same trails everybody else has ridden over, and motored over the same roads and climbed the same mountains, and bathed at the same beach, and I've met everybody I ever knew in New York, just as I would have met them in Newport or Palm Beach or in Paris or Venice or Naples for that matter!"

"But why go off the beaten track where everything is arranged for your convenience? These people are experienced travellers. They know that by keeping to the conventional routes-----"

"Winthrop Adams Endicott, if you say that word again I'll shriek! Or I'll go in from this platform and not speak to you again——ever! You know very well that there isn't a traveller among them. They're just tourists——professional goers. They do the same things, and say the same things, and if they could think, they'd think the same things every place they go. And I don't want things arranged for my convenience——so there!"

Winthrop Adams Endicott lighted a cigarette, brushed some white dust from his sleeve, and smiled.

"If I were a man and loved a girl so very, very much I wouldn't just sit around and grin. I'd do something!"



“But, my dear Alice, what would you have me do? I’m not a knight errant, nor a burglar, nor a pirate, nor a dark mysterious oriental—I’m just a plain ordinary business man and _____”

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"Well, I'd do something—even if it was something awful like getting drunk or shooting somebody. Why, if you even had a past you wouldn't be so hopeless. I could love a man with a past. It would show at least, that he hadn't followed the line of the least resistance. The world is full of canals—but there are only a few canyons. Look! I believe we're stopping! Oh, I hope it's a hold-up! What will you do if it is?" The train slowed to a standstill and Winthrop Adams Endicott leaned out and gazed along the line of the coaches.

"There is a little town here. Seems to be some commotion up ahead—quite a crowd. If I can get this blamed gate open we can go up and see what the trouble is."

"And if you can't get it open you can climb over and lift me down. I'm just dying to know what's the matter. And if you dare to say it wouldn't be conventional I'll—I'll jump!"

CHAPTER II

WOLF RIVER

A uniformed flagman, with his flag and a handful of torpedoes swung from the platform and started up the track.

"What's the trouble up in front?" asked the girl as Endicott assisted her to the ground.

"Cloud busted back in the mountains, an' washed out the trussle, an' Second Seventy-six piled up in the river."

"Oh, a wreck?" she exclaimed. "Will we have time to go up and see it?"

"I'd say it's a wreck," grinned the trainman. "An' you've got all the time you want. We're a-goin' to pull in on the sidin' an' let the wrecker an' bridge crew at it. But even with 'em a-workin' from both ends it'll be tomorrow sometime 'fore they c'n get them box cars drug out an' a temp'ry trussle throw'd acrost."

"What town is this?"

"Town! Call it a town if you want to. It's Wolf River. It's a shippin' point fer cattle, but it hain't no more a town 'n what the crick's a river. The trussle that washed out crosses the crick just above where it empties into Milk River. I've railroaded through here goin' on three years an' I never seen no water in it to speak of before, an' mostly it's plumb dry."

The man sauntered slowly up the track as one who performs a merely nominal duty, and the girl turned to follow Endicott. "It would have been easier to walk through the train," he ventured, as he picked his way over the rough track ballast.

“Still seeking the line of least resistance,” mocked the girl. “We can walk through a train any time. But we can’t breathe air like this, and, see,—through that gap—the blue of the distant mountains!”

The man removed his hat and dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. “It’s awfully hot, and I have managed to secrete a considerable portion of the railroad company’s gravel in my shoes.”

“Don’t mind a little thing like that,” retorted the girl sweetly. “I’ve peeled the toes of both of mine. They look like they had scarlet fever.”

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Passengers were alighting all along the train and hurrying forward to join those who crowded the scene of the wreck.

"It was a narrow escape for us," said Endicott as the two looked down upon the mass of broken cars about which the rapidly falling waters of the stream gurgled and swirled. "Had we not been running an hour late this train would in all probability, have plunged through the trestle."

"Was anybody hurt?" asked the girl. The train conductor nodded toward the heap of debris.

"No'm, the crew jumped. The fireman an' head brakeman broke a leg apiece, an' the rest got bunged up a little; but they wasn't no one hurt.

"I was just tellin' these folks," he continued, "that they'll be a train along on the other side in a couple of hours for to transfer the passengers an' mail."

The girl turned to Endicott. "There isn't much to see here," she said. "Let's look around. It's such a funny little town. I want to buy something at the store. And, there's a livery stable! Maybe we can hire horses and ride out where we can get a view of the mountains."

As the two turned toward the little cluster of frame buildings, a tall, horse-faced man clambered onto the pilot of the passenger locomotive and, removing his hat, proceeded to harangue the crowd. As they paused to listen Alice stared in fascination at the enormous Adam's apple that worked, piston-like above the neckband of the collarless shirt of vivid checks.

"Ladies an' gents," he began, with a comprehensive wave of the soft-brimmed hat. "Wolf River welcomes you in our town. An' while you're amongst us we aim to show you one an' all a good time. This here desastorious wreck may turn out to be a blessin' in disguise. As the Good Book says, it come at a most provincial time. Wolf River, ladies an' gents, is celebratin', this afternoon an' evenin', a event that marks an' epykak in our historious career: The openin' of the Wolf River Citizen's Bank, a reg'lar bonyfido bank with vaults, cashier, an' a board of directors consistin' of her leadinist citizens, with the Honorable Mayor Maloney president, which I introdoose myself as.

"In concludin' I repeet that this here is ondoubtfully the luckiest wreck in the lives of any one of you, which it gives you a unpressagented chanct to see with your own eyes a hustlin' Western town that hain't ashamed to stand on her own legs an' lead the world along the trail to prosperity.

"Wolf River hain't a braggin' town, ladies an' gents, but I defy any one of you to name another town that's got more adjacent an' contigitus territory over which to grow onto.

We freely admit they's a few onconsequential improvements which is possessed by some bigger an' more notorious cities such as sidewalks, sewers, street-gradin', an' lights that we hain't got yet. But Wolf River is a day an' night town, ladies an' gents, combinin' business with pleasure in just the right perportion, which it's plain to anyone that takes the trouble to investigate our shippin' corrals, four general stores, one *hotel*, an' seven saloons, all of which runs wide open twenty-four hours a day an' is accommodated with faro, roulette, an' poker outfits fer the benefit of them that's so inclined to back their judgment with a little money.

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"In concloodin' I'll say that owin' to the openin' of the bank about which I was tellin' you of, Wolf River is holdin' the followin' programme which it's free to everyone to enter into or to look on at.

"They'll be a ropin' contest, in which some of our most notorious ropers will rope, throw, an' hog-tie a steer, in the least shortness of time. The prizes fer this here contest is: First prize, ten dollars, doneated by the directors of the bank fer which's openin' this celebration is held in honour of. Second prize, one pair of pants doneated by the Montana Mercantile Company. Third prize, one quart of bottle in bond whiskey doneated by our pop'lar townsman an' leadin' citizen, Mr. Jake Grimshaw, proprietor of The Long Horn Saloon.

"The next contest is a buckin' contest, in which some of our most notorious riders will ride or get bucked offen some of our most fameous outlaw horses. The prizes fer this here contest is: First, a pair of angory chaps, doneated by the directors of the bank about which I have spoke of before. Second prize, a pair of spurs doneated by the Wolf River Tradin' Company. Third prize, a coffin that was ordered by Sam Long's wife from the Valley Outfittin' Company, when Sam had the apendiceetis of the stummick, an' fer which Sam refused to pay fer when he got well contrary to expectations.

"Both these here contests is open to ladies an' gents, both of which is invited to enter. They will also be hoss racin', fancy an' trick ridin', an' shootin', fer all of which sootable prizes has be'n pervided, as well as fer the best lookin' man an' the homliest lady an' vicy versy. Any lady or gent attendin' these here contests will be gave out a ticket good fer one drink at any saloon in town. These drinks is on the directors of the bank of which I have before referred to.

"An', ladies an' gents, in concloodin' I'll say that that hain't all! Follerin' these here contests, after each an' every lady an' gent has had time to git their drink they'll be a supper dished out at the *hootel* fer which the directors of the bank of which you have already heard mention of has put up fifty cents a plate. This here supper is as free as gratis to all who care to percipitate an' which will incloode a speech by the Honorable Mayor Maloney, part of which I have already spoke, but will repeat fer the benefit of them that hain't here.

"Followin' the supper a dance will be pulled off in Curly Hardee's dance-hall, the music fer which will be furnished by some of our most notorious fiddlers incloodin' Mrs. Slim Maloney, wife of the Honorable Mayor Maloney, who will lead the grand march, an' who I consider one of the top pyanoists of Choteau County, if not in the hull United States. It is a personal fact ladies an' gents, that I've heard her set down to a pyano an' play *Old Black Joe* so natural you'd swear it was *Home Sweet Home*. An' when she gits het up to it, I'll promise she'll loosen up an' tear off some of the liveliest music any one of you's ever shook a leg to.

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"An' now, ladies an' gents, you can transfer an' go on when the train pulls in on t'other side, or yon can stay an' enjoy yourselves amongst us Wolf River folks an' go on tomorrow when the trussle gits fixed——"

"Ye-e-e-e-o-o-w! W-h-e-e-e-e."

Bang, bang, bang! Bang, bang, bang! A chorus of wild yells, a fusillade of shots, and the thud of horses' hoofs close at hand drew all eyes toward the group of riders that, spreading fan-like over the flat that lay between the town and the railway, approached at top speed.

"The cowboys is comin'! Them's the Circle J," cried the Mayor. "Things'll lively up a bit when the T U an' the I X an' the Bear Paw Pool boys gits in." The cowboys were close, now, and the laughing, cheering passengers surged back as the horses swerved at full speed with the stirrups of their riders almost brushing the outermost rank of the crowd. A long thin rope shot out, a loop settled gently about the shoulders of the Mayor of Wolf River, and a cowhorse stopped so abruptly that a cloud of alkali dust spurted up and settled in a grey powder over the clothing of the assembled passengers.

"Come on, Slim, an' give these folks a chance to get their second wind while you let a little licker into that system of yours."

The Mayor grinned; "Tex Benton, hain't you had no bringin' up whatever? That was a pretty throw but it's onrespectable, no mor'n what it's respectable to call the Mayor of a place by his first name to a public meetin'."

"I plumb ferget myself, your Honour," laughed the cowpuncher as he coiled his rope. "Fact is, I learnt to rope mares back in Texas, an' I ain't——"

"Yip-e-i-e!"

"Ropin' mares!" The cowboys broke into a coyote chorus that drowned the laughter of the crowd.

"The drinks is on me!" sputtered the Mayor, when he was able to make himself heard. "Jest you boys high-tail over to the Long Horn an' I'll be along d'rectly." He turned once more to the crowd of passengers.

"Come on, gents, an' have a drink on me. An' the ladies is welcome, too. Wolf River is broad in her idees. We hain't got no sexual restrictions, an' a lady's got as good a right to front a bar an' nominate her licker as what a man has."

Standing beside Endicott upon the edge of the crowd Alice Marcum had enjoyed herself hugely. The little wooden town with its high fenced cattle corrals, and its row of one story buildings that faced the alkali flat had interested her from the first, and she had



joined with hearty goodwill in the rounds of applause that at frequent intervals had interrupted the speech of the little town's Mayor. A born horsewoman, she had watched with breathless admiration the onrush of the loose-rein riders—the graceful swaying of their bodies, and the flapping of soft hat brims, as their horses approached with a thunder of pounding hoofs. Her eyes had sparkled at the reckless swerving of the horses when it seemed that the next moment the back-surging crowd would be trampled into the ground. She had wondered at the precision with which the Texan's loop fell; and had joined heartily in the laughter that greeted the ludicrous and red-faced indignation with which a fat woman had crawled from beneath a coach whither she had sought refuge from the onrush of thundering hoofs.

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In the mind of the girl, cowboys had always been associated with motion picture theatres, where concourses of circus riders in impossible regalia performed impossible feats of horsemanship in the unravelling of impossible plots. She had never thought of them as real—or, if she had, it was as a vanished race, like the Aztec and the buffalo.

But here were real cowboys in the flesh: Open-throated, bronzed man, free and unrestrained as the air they breathed—men whose very appearance called to mind boundless open spaces, purple sage, blue mountains, and herds of bellowing cattle. Here were men bound by no petty and meaningless conventions—men the very sight of whom served to stimulate and intensify the longing to see for herself the land beyond the valley rims—to slip into a saddle and ride, and ride, and ride—to feel the beat of the rain against her face, and the whip of the wind, and the burning rays of the sun, and at night to lie under the winking stars and listen to the howl of the coyotes.

“Disgusting rowdies!” wheezed the fat woman as, dishevelled and perspiring, she waddled toward the steps of her coach; while the Mayor, his Adam’s apple fairly pumping importance, led a sturdy band of thirsters recruited from among the train passengers across the flat toward a building over the door of which was fixed a pair of horns of prodigious spread. Lest some pilgrim of erring judgment should mistake the horns for short ones, or misapprehend the nature of the business conducted within, the white false front of the building proclaimed in letters of black a foot high: LONG HORN SALOON. While beneath the legend was depicted a fat, vermilion clad cowboy mounted upon a tarantula-bodied, ass-eared horse of pink, in the act of hurling a cable-like rope which by some prodigy of dexterity was made to describe three double-bows and a latigo knot before its loop managed to poise in mid-air above the head of a rabbit-sized baby-blue steer whose horns exceeded in length the pair of Texas monstrosities that graced the doorway.

“We’re goin’ to back onto the sidin’ now,” announced the conductor, “where dinner will be served in the dinin’ car as ushool.”

The cowboys had moved along to view the wreck and were grouped about the broken end of the trestle where they lolled in their saddles, some with a leg thrown carelessly about the horn and others lying back over the cantle, while the horses which a few moments before had dashed across the common at top speed now stood with lowered heads and drooping ears, dreaming cayuse dreams.

The engine bell was ringing monotonously and the whistle sounded three short blasts, while the passengers clambered up the steps of the coaches or backed away from the track.

“Let’s walk to the side track, it’s only a little way.”

Alice pointed to where the flagman stood beside the open switch. Endicott nodded acquiescence and as he turned to follow, the girl's handkerchief dropped from her hand and, before it touched the ground, was caught by a gust of wind that swept beneath the coaches and whirled out onto the flat where it lay, a tiny square of white against the trampled buffalo grass.

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Endicott started to retrieve it, but before he had taken a half-dozen steps there was a swift pounding of hoofs and two horses shot out from the group of cowboys and dashed at full speed, their riders low in the saddle and each with his gaze fixed on the tiny bit of white fabric. Nose and nose the horses ran, their hoofs raising a cloud of white alkali dust in their wake. Suddenly, just as they reached the handkerchief, the girl who watched with breathless interest gasped. The saddles were empty! From the madly racing horses her glance flew to the cloud of dust which concealed the spot where a moment before had lain that little patch of white. Her fingers clenched as she steeled herself to the sight of the two limp, twisted forms that the lifting dust cloud must reveal. Scarcely daring to wink she fixed her eyes upon the ground—but the dust cloud had drifted away and there were no limp, twisted forms. Even the little square of white was gone. In bewilderment she heard cries of approval and loud shouts of applause from the passengers. Once more her ears caught the sound of pounding hoofs, and circling toward her in a wide curve were the two riders, erect and firm in their saddles, as a gauntleted hand held high a fluttering scrap of white.

The horses brought up directly before her, a Stetson was swept from a thick shock of curly black hair, the gauntleted hand extended the recalcitrant handkerchief, and she found herself blushing furiously for no reason at all beneath the direct gaze of a pair of very black eyes that looked out from a face tanned to the colour of old mahogany.

“Oh, thank you! It was splendid—the horsemanship.” She stammered. “I’ve seen it in the movies, but I didn’t know it was actually done in real life.”

“Yes, mom, it is. It’s owin’ to the horse yeh’ve got, an’ yer cinch. Yeh’ll see a heap better’n that this afternoon right on this here flat. An’ would yeh be layin’ over fer the dance tonight, mom?”

The abrupt question was even more disconcerting than the compelling directness of his gaze.

For an instant, the girl hesitated as her eyes swept from the cowpuncher’s face to the brilliant scarf loosely knotted about his throat, the blue flannel shirt, the bright yellow angora chaps against which the ivory butt of a revolver showed a splotch of white, and the boots jammed into the broad wooden stirrups, to their high heels from which protruded a pair of enormously rowelled spurs inlaid with silver. By her side Endicott moved impatiently and cleared his throat.

She answered without hesitation. “Yes, I think I shall.”

“I’d admire fer a dance with yeh, then,” persisted the cowpuncher.

“Why—certainly. That is, if I really decide to stay.”

“We’ll try fer to show yeh a good time, mom. They’ll be some right lively fiddlin’, an’ she don’t bust up till daylight.”

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With a smile the girl glanced toward the other rider who sat with an air of tolerant amusement. She recognized him as the man called Tex—the one who had so deftly dropped his loop over the shoulders of the Mayor, and noted that, in comparison with the other, he presented rather a sorry appearance. The heels of his boots were slightly run over. His spurs were of dingy steel and his leather chaps, laced up the sides with rawhide thongs looked as though they had seen much service. The scarf at his throat, however, was as vivid as his companion's and something in the flash of the grey eyes that looked into hers from beneath the broad brim of the Stetson caused an inexplicable feeling of discomfort. Their gaze held a suspicion of veiled mockery, and the clean cut lips twisted at their comers into the semblance of a cynical, smiling sneer.

"I want to thank you, too," she smiled, "it wasn't your fault your friend——"

"Jack Purdy's my name, mom," interrupted the other, importantly.

"—that Mr. Purdy beat you, I am sure. And are you always as accurate as when you lassoed the honourable Mayor of Wolf River?"

"I always get what I go after—sometimes," answered the man meeting her gaze with a flash of the baffling grey eyes. A subtle something, in look or words, seemed a challenge. Instinctively she realized that despite his rough exterior here was a man infinitely less crude than the other. An ordinary cowpuncher, to all appearance, and yet—something in the flash of the eyes, the downward curve of the corners of the lips aroused the girl's interest. He was speaking again:

"I'll dance with you, too—if you stay. But I won't mortgage none of your time in advance." The man's glance shifted deliberately from the girl to Endicott and back to the girl again. Then, without waiting for her to reply, he whirled his horse and swung off at top speed to join the other cowpunchers who were racing in the wake of the Mayor.

CHAPTER III

PURDY

Some moments later, Jack Purdy nosed his horse into the group of cayuses that stood with reins hanging, "tied to the ground," in front of the Long Horn Saloon. Beyond the open doors sounded a babel of voices and he could see the men lined two deep before the bar.

Swinging from the saddle he threw the stirrup over the seat and became immediately absorbed in the readjustment of his latigo strap. Close beside him Tex Benton's horse dozed with drooping head. Swiftly a hand whose palm concealed an open jack-knife slipped beneath the Texan's right stirrup-leather and a moment later was withdrawn as the cayuse, suspicious of the fumbling on the wrong side of the saddle, snorted



nervously and sheered sharply against another horse which with an angry squeal, a laying back of the ears, and a vicious snap of the teeth, resented the intrusion. Purdy jerked sharply at the reins of his own horse which caused that animal to rear back and pull away.

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"Whoa, there! Yeh imp of hell!" he rasped, in tones loud enough to account for the commotion among the horses, and slipping the knife into his pocket, entered the saloon from which he emerged unobserved while the boisterous crowd was refilling its glasses at the solicitation of a white goods drummer who had been among the first to accept the invitation of the Mayor.

Three doors up the street he entered a rival saloon where the bartender was idly arranging his glasses on the back-bar in anticipation of the inevitable rush of business which would descend upon him when the spirit should move the crowd in the Long Horn to start "going the rounds."

"Hello, Cinnabar!" The cowpuncher leaned an elbow on the bar, elevated a foot to the rail, and producing tobacco and a book of brown papers, proceeded to roll a cigarette. The bartender returned the greeting and shot the other a keen glance from the corner of his eye as he set out a bottle and a couple of glasses.

"Be'n down to the wreck?" he asked, with professional disinterestedness. The cowpuncher nodded, lighted his cigarette, and picking the bottle up by the neck, poured a few drops into his glass. "Pretty bad pile-up," persisted the bartender as he measured out his own drink. "Two or three of the train crew got busted up pretty bad. They say

"Aw, choke off! What the hell do I care what they say? Nor how bad the train crew got busted up, nor how bad they didn't?" Purdy tapped the bar with his glass as his black eyes fixed the other with a level stare. "I came over fer a little talk with yeh, private. I'm a-goin' to win that buckin' contest—an' yer goin' to help me—sabe?"

The bartender shook his head: "I don't know how I c'n help you none."

"Well yeh will know when I git through—same as Doc Godkins'll know when I have a little talk with him. Yer both a-goin' to help, you an' Doc. Yeh see, they was a nester's gal died, a year back, over on Beaver Crick, an' Doc tended her. 'Tarford fever,' says Doc. But ol' Lazy Y Freeman paid the freight, an' he thinks about as much of the nesters as what he does of a rattlesnake. I was ridin' fer the Lazy Y outfit, an' fer quite a spell 'fore this tarford fever business the ol' man use to ride the barb wire along Beaver, reg'lar. Yeh know how loose ol' Lazy Y is with his change? A dollar don't loom no bigger to him than the side of Sugar Loaf Butte, an' it slips through his fingers as easy as a porkypine could back out of a gunnysack. Well, that there dose of tarford fever that the nester gal died of cost ol' Lazy Y jest a even thousan' bucks. An' Doc Godkins got it."

The cowpuncher paused and the bartender picked up his glass. "Drink up," he said, "an' have another. I do'no what yer talkin' about but it's jest as bad to not have enough red licker in under yer belt when y' go to make a ride as 'tis to have too much."

“Never yeh mind about the licker. I c’n reg’late my own drinks to suit me. Mebbe I got more’n a ride a-comin’ to me ’fore tonight’s over.”

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The bartender eyed him questioningly: "You usta win 'em all—buckin', an' ropin', an'——"

"Yes, I usta!" sneered the other. "An' I could now if it wasn't fer that Texas son of a ——! Fer three years hand runnin' he's drug down everything he's went into. He c'n out-rope me an' out-ride me, but he can't out-guess me! An' some day he's goin' to have to out-shoot me. I'm goin' to win the buckin' contest, an' the ropin', too. See?" The man's fist pounded the bar.

The bartender nodded; "Well, here's *to* you."

Once more Purdy fixed the man with his black-eyed stare. "Yes. But they's a heap more a-comin' from you than a 'here's *to* yeh.'"

"Meanin'?" asked the other, as he mechanically swabbed the bar.

"Meanin' that you an' Doc's goin' to help me do it. An' that hain't all. Tonight 'long 'bout dance time I want that saddle horse o' yourn an' yer sideways saddle, too. They's a gal o' mine come in on the train, which she'll be wantin', mebbe, to take a ride, an' hain't fetched no split-up clothes fer to straddle a real saddle. That sideways contraption you sent fer 'fore yer gal got to ridin' man-ways is the only one in Wolf River, an' likewise hern's the only horse that'll stand fer bein' rigged up in it."

"Sure. You're welcome to the horse an' saddle, Jack. The outfit's in the livery barn. Jest tell Ross to have him saddled agin' you want him. He's gentled down so's a woman c'n handle him all right."

"Uh, huh. An' how about the other? Y'goin' to do as I say 'bout that, too?"

The bartender opened a box behind him and selected a cigar which he lighted with extreme deliberation. "I told you onct I don't know what yer talkin' about. Lazy Y Freeman an' Doc Godkins's dirty work ain't none of my business. If you win, you win, an' that's all there is to it."

The cowpuncher laughed shortly, and his black eyes narrowed, as he leaned closer. "Oh, that's all, is it? Well, Mr. Cinnabar Joe, let me tell yeh that hain't all—by a damn sight!" He paused, but the other never took his eyes from his face. "Do yeh know what chloral is?" The man's voice lowered to a whisper and the words seemed to hiss from between his lips. The other shook his head. "Well, it's somethin' yeh slip into a man's licker that puts him to sleep."

"You mean drug? Dope!" The bartender's eyes narrowed and the corner of his mouth whitened where it gripped the cigar.

Purdy nodded: "Yes. It don't hurt no one, only it puts 'em to sleep fer mebbe it's three er four hours. I'll get some from Doc an' yer goin' to slip a little into Tex Benton's booze. Then he jest nach'lly dozes off an' the boys thinks he's spliflicated an' takes him down to the hotel an' puts him to bed, an' before he wakes up I'll have the buckin' contest, an' the ropin' contest, an' most of the rest of it in my war-bag. I hain't afraid of none of the rest of the boys hornin' in on the money—an' 'tain't the money I want neither; I want to win them contests particular—an' I'm a-goin' to."

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Without removing his elbows from the bar, Cinnabar Joe nodded toward the door: "You git to hell out o' here!" he said, quietly. "I don't set in no game with you, see? I don't want none o' your chips. Of all the God-damned low-lived——"

"If I was you," broke in the cowpuncher with a meaning look, "I'd choke off 'fore I'd got in too fer to back out." Something in the glint of the black eyes caused the bartender to pause. Purdy laughed, tossed the butt of his cigarette to the floor, and began irrelevantly: "It's hell—jest hell with the knots an' bark left on—that Nevada wild horse range is." The cowpuncher noted that Cinnabar Joe ceased suddenly to puff his cigar. "It's about seven year, mebbe it's eight," he continued, "that an outfit got the idee that mebbe Pete Barnum had the wild horse business to hisself long enough. Four of 'em was pretty rough hands, an' the Kid was headed that way.

"Them that was there knows a heap more'n what I do about what they went through 'fore they got out o' the desert where water-holes was about as common as good Injuns. Anyways, this outfit didn't git no wild horses. They was good an' damn glad to git out with what horses they'd took in, an' a whole hide. They'd blow'd in all they had on their projec' an' they was broke when they headed fer Idaho." The bartender's cigar had gone out and the cowpuncher saw that his face was a shade paler. "Then a train stopped sudden one evenin' where they wasn't no station, an' after that the outfit busted up. But they wasn't broke no more, all but the Kid. They left him shift fer hisself. Couple o' years later two of the outfit drifted together in Cinnabar an' there they found the Kid drivin' a dude-wagon. Drivin' a dude-wagon through the park is a damn sight easier than huntin' wild horses, an' a damn sight safer than railroadin' with a Colt, so when the two hard hands stops the Kid's dude-wagon in the park, thinkin' they'd have a cinch goin' through the Kid's passengers, they got fooled good an' proper when the Kid pumps 'em full of .45 pills. After that the Kid come to be know'd as Cinnabar Joe, an' when the last of the dude-wagons was throw'd out fer automobiles the Kid drifted up into the cow country. But they's a certain express company that's still huntin' fer the gang—not knowin' o' course that the Cinnabar Joe that got notorious fer defendin' his dudes was one of 'em.'"

The cowpuncher ceased speaking and produced his "makings" while the other stood gazing straight before him, the dead cigar still gripped in the corner of his mouth. The scratch of the match roused him and quick as a flash he reached beneath the bar and the next instant had Purdy covered with a six-shooter. With his finger on the trigger Cinnabar Joe hesitated, and in that instant he learned that the man that faced him across the bar was as brave as he was unscrupulous. The fingers that twisted the little cylinder of paper never faltered and the black eyes looked straight into the muzzle of the gun.

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Now, in the cow country the drawing of a gun is one and the same movement with the firing of it, and why Cinnabar Joe hesitated he did not know.

Purdy laughed: "Put her down, Cinnabar. Yeh won't shoot, now. Yeh see, I kind of figgered yeh might be sort o' riled up, so I left my gun in my slicker. Shootin' a unarmed man don't git yeh nothin' but a chanct to stretch a rope."

The bartender returned the gun to its place. "Where'd you git that dope, Jack?" he asked, in a dull voice.

"Well, seein' as yeh hain't so blood-thirsty no more, I'll tell yeh. I swung down into the bad lands couple weeks ago huntin' a bunch of mares that strayed off the south slope. I was follerin' down a mud-crack that opens into Big Dry when all to onct my horse jumps sideways an' like to got me. The reason fer which was a feller layin' on the ground where his horse had busted him agin' a rock. His back was broke an' he was mumblin'; which he must of laid there a day, mebbe two, cause his tongue an' lips was dried up till I couldn't hardly make out what he was sayin'. I caught here an' there a word about holdin' up a train an' he was mumblin' your name now an' agin so I fetched some water from a hole a mile away an' camped. He et a little bacon later but he was half crazy with the pain in his back. He'd yell when I walked near him on the ground, said it jarred him, an' when I tried to move him a little he fainted plumb away. But he come to agin an' begged me fer to hand him his Colt that had lit about ten feet away so he could finish the job. I seen they wasn't no use tryin' to git him nowheres. He was all in. But his mutterin' had interested me consid'ble. I figgers if he's a hold-up, chances is he's got a nice fat *cache* hid away somewheres, an' seein' he hain't never goin' to need it I might's well have the handlin' of it as let it rot where it's at. I tells him so an' agrees that if he tips off his *cache* to me I'll retaliate by givin' him the gun. He swears he ain't got no *cache*. He's blow'd everything he had, his nerve's gone, an' he's headin' fer Wolf River fer to gouge yeh out of some *dinero*. He claims yeh collected reward on them two yeh got in the Yellowstone an' what's more the dudes tuk up a collection of a thousan' bucks an' give it to yeh besides. *You* was his *cache*. So he handed me the dope I just sprung on yeh, an' he says besides that you an' him's the only ones left. The other one got his'n down in Mexico where he'd throw'd in with some Greaser bandits."

"An' what—— Did you give him the gun?" asked the bartender.

Purdy nodded: "Sure. He' done a good job, too. He was game, all right, never whimpered nor hung back on the halter. Jest stuck the gun in his mouth an' pulled the trigger. I was goin' to bury him but I heard them mares whinner down to the water-hole so I left him fer the buzzards an' the coyotes.

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"About that there chloral. I'll slip over an' git it from Doc. An' say, I'm doin' the right thing by yeh. I could horn yeh fer a chunk o' that reward money, but I won't do a friend that way. An' more'n that," he paused and leaned closer. "I'll let you in on somethin' worth while one of these days. That there thousan' that ol' Lazy Y paid Doc hain't a patchin' to what he's goin' to fork over to me. See?"

Cinnabar Joe nodded, slowly, as he mouthed his dead cigar, and when he spoke it was more to himself than to Purdy. "I've played a square game ever since that time back on the edge of the desert. I don't want to have to do time fer that. It wouldn't be a square deal nohow, I was only a Kid then an' never got a cent of the money. Then, there's Jennie over to the hotel. We'd about decided that bartendin' an' hash-slingin' wasn't gittin' us nowheres an' we was goin' to hitch up an' turn nesters on a little yak outfit I've bought over on Eagle." He stopped abruptly and looked the cowpuncher squarely in the eye. "If it wasn't fer her, by God! I'd tell you jest as I did before, to git to hell out of here an' do your damndest. But it would bust her all up if I had to do time fer a hold-up. You've got me where you want me, I guess. But I don't want in on no dirty money from old Lazy Y, nor no one else. You go it alone—it's your kind of a job.

"This here chloride, or whatever you call it, you sure it won't kill a man?"

Purdy laughed: "Course it won't. It'll only put him to sleep till I've had a chanct to win out. I'll git the stuff from Doc an' find out how much is a dost, an' you kin' slip it in his booze."

As the cowpuncher disappeared through the door, Cinnabar Joe's eyes narrowed. "You damn skunk!" he muttered, biting viciously upon the stump of his cigar. "If you was drinkin' anything I'd switch glasses on *you*, an' then shoot it out with you when you come to. From now on it's you or me. You've got your hooks into me an' this is only the beginnin'." The man stopped abruptly and stared for a long time at the stove-pipe hole in the opposite wall. Then, turning, he studied his reflection in the mirror behind the bottles and glasses. He tossed away his cigar, straightened his necktie, and surveyed himself from a new angle.

"This here Tex, now," he mused. "He sure is a rantankerous cuss when he's lickered up. He'd jest as soon ride his horse through that door as he would to walk through, an' he's always puttin' somethin' over on someone. But he's a man. He'd go through hell an' high water fer a friend. He was the only one of the whole outfit had the guts to tend Jimmy Trimble when he got the spotted fever—nursed him back to good as ever, too, after the Doc had him billed through fer yonder." Cinnabar Joe turned and brought his fist down on the bar. "I'll do it!" he gritted. "Purdy'll think Tex switched the drinks on me. Only I hope he wasn't lyin' about that there stuff. Anyways, even if he was, it's one of them things a man's got to do. An' I'll rest a whole lot easier in my six by two than what I would if I give Tex the long good-bye first." Unconsciously, the man began to croon the dismal wail of the plains:

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"O bury me not on the lone prairie-e-e
In a narrow grave six foot by three,
Where the buzzard waits and the wind blows free,
Then bury me not on the lone prairie-e-e.

Yes, we buried him there on the lone prairie-e-e
Where the owl all night hoots mournful-e-e
And the blizzard beats and the wind blows free
O'er his lonely grave on the lone prairie-e-e.

And the cowboys now as they roam the plain"——

"Hey, choke off on that!" growled Purdy as he advanced with rattling spurs. "Puts me in mind of *him*—back there in Big Dry. 'Spose I ort to buried him, but it don't make no difference, now." He passed a small phial across the bar. "Fifteen or twenty drops," he said laconically, and laughed. "Nothin' like keepin' yer eyes an' ears open. Doc kicked like a steer first, but he seen I had his hide hung on the fence onless he loosened up. But he sure wouldn't weep none at my demise. If ever I git sick I'll have some other Doc. I'd as soon send fer a rattlesnake." The man glanced at the clock. "It's workin' 'long to'ards noon, I'll jest slip down to the Long Horn an' stampede the bunch over here."

CHAPTER IV

CINNABAR JOE

In the dining car of the side-tracked train Alice Marcum's glance strayed from the face of her table companion to the window. Another cavalcade of riders had swept into town and with a chorus of wild yells the crowd in the Long Horn surged out to greet them. A moment later the dismounted ones rushed to their horses, leaped into the saddles and, joined by the newcomers, dashed at top speed for perhaps thirty yards and dismounted to crowd into another saloon across whose front the word HEADQUARTERS was emblazoned in letters of flaming red.

"They're just like a lot of boys," exclaimed the girl with a smile, "The idea of anybody mounting a horse to ride *that* distance!"

"They're a rough lot, I guess." Winthrop Adams Endicott studied his menu card.

"Rough! Of course they're rough! Why shouldn't they be rough? Think of the work they do—rain or shine, riding out there on the plains. When they get to town they've earned the right to play as they want to play! I'd be rough, too, if I lived the life they live. And if I were a man I'd be right over there with them this minute."

“Why be a man?” smiled Endicott. “You have the Mayor’s own word for the breadth of Wolf River’s ideas. As for myself, I don’t drink and wouldn’t enjoy that sort of thing. Besides, if I were over there I would have to forgo——”

“No pretty little speeches, *please*. At least you can spare me that.”

“But, Alice, I mean it, really. And——”

“Save ’em for the Cincinnati girls. They’ll believe ’em. Who do you think will win this afternoon. Let’s bet! I’ll bet you a—an umbrella against a pair of gloves, that my cavalier of the yellow fur trousers will win the bucking contest, and——”

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"Our train may pull out before the thing is over, and we would never know who won."

"Oh, yes we will, because we're going to stay for the finish. Why, I wouldn't miss this afternoon's fun if forty trains pulled out!"

"I ought to be in Chicago day after tomorrow," objected the man.

"I ought to be, too. But I'm not going to be. For Heaven's sake, Winthrop, for once in your life, do something you oughtn't to do!"

"All right," laughed the man with a gesture of surrender. "And for the rope throwing contest I'll pick the other."

"What other?" The girl's eyes strayed past the little wooden buildings of the town to the clean-cut rim of the bench.

"Why the other who rode after your handkerchief. The fellow who lassoed the honourable Mayor and was guilty of springing the pun."

The girl nodded with her eyes still on the skyline. "Oh, yes. He seemed—somehow—different. As if people amused him. As if everything were a joke and he were the only one who knew it was a joke. I could *hate* a man like that. The other, Mr. Purdy, hates him."

The man regarded her with an amused smile: "You keep a sort of mental card index. I should like to have just a peep at my card."

"Cards sometimes have to be rewritten—and sometimes it really isn't worth while to fill them out again. Come on, let's go. People are beginning to gather for the fun and I want a good seat. There's a lumber pile over there that'll be just the place, if we hurry."

In the Headquarters saloon Tex Benton leaned against the end of the bar and listened to a Bear Paw Pool man relate how they took in a bunch of pilgrims with a badger game down in Glasgow. Little knots of cowpunchers stood about drinking at the bar or discussing the coming celebration.

"They've got a bunch of bad ones down in the corral," someone said. "That ol' roman nose, an' the wall-eyed pinto, besides a lot of snorty lookin' young broncs. I tell yeh if Tex draws either one of them ol' outlaws it hain't no cinch he'll grab off this ride. The *hombre* that throws his kak on one of them is a-goin' to do a little sky-ballin' 'fore he hits the dirt, you bet. But jest the same I'm here to bet ten to eight on him before the drawin'."

Purdy who had joined the next group turned at the words.

"I'll jest take that," he snapped. "Because Tex has drug down the last two buckin' contests hain't no sign he c'n go south with 'em all." At the end of the bar Tex grinned as he saw Purdy produce a roll of bills.

"An', by gosh!" the Bear Paw Pool man was saying, "when they'd all got their money down an' the bull dog was a-clawin' the floor to git at the badger, an' the pilgrims was crowded around with their eyes a-bungin' out of their heads, ol' Two Dot Wilson, he shoves the barrel over an' they wasn't a doggone thing in under it but a——"

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"What yeh goin' to have, youse?" Purdy had caught sight of Tex who stood between the Bear Paw Pool man and Bat Lajune. "I'm bettin' agin' yeh winnin' the buckin' contest, but I'll buy yeh a drink."

Tex grinned as his eyes travelled with slow insolence over the other's outfit.

"You're sure got up some colourful, Jack," he drawled. "If you sh'd happen to crawl up into the middle of one of them real outlaws they got down in the corral, an' quit him on the top end of a high one, you're a-goin' to look like a rainbow before you git back."

The other scowled: "I guess if I tie onto one of them outlaws yeh'll see me climb off 'bout the time the money's ready. Yeh Texas fellers comes up here an' makes yer brag about showin' us Montana boys how to ride our own horses. But it's real money talks! I don't notice you backin' up yer brag with no real *dinero*."

Tex was still smiling. "That's because I ain't found anyone damn fool enough to bet agin' me."

"Didn't I jest tell yeh I was bettin' agin' you?"

"Don't bet enough to hurt you none. How much you got, three dollars? An' how much odds you got to get before you'll risk 'em?"

Purdy reached for his hip pocket. "Jest to show yeh what I think of yer ridin' I'll bet yeh even yeh don't win."

"Well," drawled the Texan, "seein' as they won't be only about ten fellows ride, that makes the odds somewhere around ten to one, which is about right. How much you want to bet?"

With his fingers clutching his roll of bills, Purdy's eyes sought the face of Cinnabar Joe. For an instant he hesitated and then slammed the roll onto the bar.

"She goes as she lays. Count it!"

The bartender picked up the money and ran it through. "Eighty-five," he announced, laconically.

"That's more'n I got on me," said Tex ruefully, as he smoothed out three or four crumpled bills and capped the pile with a gold piece.

Purdy sneered: "It's money talks," he repeated truculently. "'Tain't hardly worth while foolin' with no piker bets but if that's the best yeh c'n do I'll drag down to it." He reached for his roll.

“Hold on!” The Texan was still smiling but there was a hard note in his voice. “She goes as she lays.” He turned to the half-breed who stood close at his elbow.

“Bat. D’you recollect one night back in Las Vegas them four bits I loant you? Well, just you shell out about forty dollars interest on them four bits an’ we’ll call it square for a while.” The half-breed smiled broadly and handed over his roll.

“Forty-five, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty—” counted Tex, and with a five-dollar bill between his thumb and forefinger, eyed Purdy condescendingly: “I’m a-goin’ to let you drag down that five if you want to,” he said, “‘cause you’ve sure kissed good-bye to the rest of it. They ain’t any of your doggoned Montana school-ma’m-cayuses but what I c’n ride slick-heeled, an’ with my spurs on—” he paused; “better drag down the five. You might need a little loose change if that girl should happen to get thirsty between dances.”

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"Jest leave it lay," retorted Purdy; "an' at that, I'll bet I buy her more drinks than what you do."

Tex laughed: "Sure. But there ain't nothin' in buyin' 'em drinks. I've bought 'em drinks all night an' then some other *hombre*'d step in an'——"

"I'd bet yeh on *that*, too. I didn't notice her fallin' no hell of a ways fer you."

"Mebbe not. I wasn't noticin' her much. I was kind of studyin' the pilgrim that was along with her."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"That's what I was tryin' to figger out. But, hey, Cinnabar, how about that drink? I'm dry as a post-hole."

"Fill 'em up, Cinnabar. I'm makin' this noise," seconded Purdy. And as the Texan turned to greet an acquaintance, he caught out of the tail of his eye the glance that flashed between Purdy and the bartender. Noticed, also out of the tail of his eye, that, contrary to custom, Cinnabar filled the glasses himself and that a few drops of colourless liquid splashed from the man's palm into the liquor that was shoved toward him. The Texan knew that Purdy had watched the operation interestedly and that he straightened with an audible sigh of relief at its conclusion. "Come on, drink up!" Purdy raised his glass as Tex faced the bar with narrowed eyes.

"What's them fellows up to?" cried Cinnabar Joe, and as Purdy turned, glass in hand, to follow his glance Tex saw the bartender swiftly substitute his own glass for the one into which he had dropped the liquid.

The next instant Purdy was again facing him. "What fellers?" he asked sharply.

Cinnabar Joe laughed: "Oh, that Bear Paw Pool bunch. Fellow's got to keep his eye peeled whenever they git their heads together. Here's luck."

For only an instant did Tex hesitate while his brain worked rapidly. "There's somethin' bein' pulled off here," he reasoned, "that I ain't next to. If that booze was doped why did Cinnabar drink it? Anyways, he pulled that stall on Purdy fer some reason an' it's up to me to see him through with it. But if I do git doped it won't kill me an' when I come alive they's a couple of fellows goin' to have to ride like hell to keep ahead of me."

He drank the liquor and as he returned the glass to the bar he noted the glance of satisfaction that flashed into Purdy's eyes.

"Come on, boys, let's git things a-goin'!" Mayor Maloney stood in the doorway and beamed good humouredly: "'Tain't every cowntown's got a bank an' us Wolf Riverites



has got to do ourself proud. Every rancher an' nester in forty mile around has drove in. The flat's rimmed with wagons an' them train folks is cocked up on the lumber piles a-chickerin' like a prairie-dog town. We'll pull off the racin' an' trick ridin' an' shootin' first an' save the ropin' an' buckin' contests to finish off on. Come on, you've all had enough to drink. Jump on your horses an' ride out on the flat like hell was tore loose fer recess. Then when I denounce what's a-comin', them that's goin' to complete goes at it, an' the rest pulls off to one side an' looks on 'til their turn comes."

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A six-shooter roared and a bullet crashed into the ceiling.

“Git out of the way we’re a-goin’ by!” howled someone, and instantly the chorus drowned the rattle of spurs and the clatter of high-heeled boots as the men crowded to the door.

“Cowboys out on a yip ti yi!
Coyotes howl and night birds cry
And we’ll be cowboys ’til we die!”

Out in the street horses snorted and whirled against each other, spurs rattled, and leather creaked as the men leaped into their saddles. With a thunder of hoofs, a whirl of white dust, the slapping of quirts and ropes against horses’ flanks, the wicked bark of forty-fives, and a series of Comanche-like yells the cowboys dashed out onto the flat. Once more Tex Benton found himself drawn up side by side with Jack Purdy before the girl, for whose handkerchief they had raced. Both waved their hats, and Alice smiled as she waved her handkerchief in return.

“Looks like I was settin’ back with an ace in the hole, so far,” muttered Tex, audibly.

Purdy scowled: “Ace in the hole’s all right *sometimes*. But it’s the lad that trails along with a pair of deuces back to back that comes up with the chips, cashin’ in time.”

Slim Maloney announced a quarter-mile dash and when Purdy lined up with the starters, Tex quietly eased his horse between two wagons, and, slipping around behind the lumber-piles, rode back to the Headquarters Saloon. The place was deserted and in a chair beside a card table, with his head buried in his arms, sat Cinnabar Joe, asleep. The cowpuncher crossed the room and shook him roughly by the shoulder:

“Hey, Joe—wake up!”

The man rolled uneasily and his eyelids drew heavily apart. He mumbled incoherently.

“Wake up, Joe!” The Texan redoubled his efforts but the other relapsed into a stupor from which it was impossible to rouse him.

A man hurrying past in the direction of the flats paused for a moment to peer into the open door. Tex glanced up as he hurried on.

“Doc!” There was no response and the cowpuncher crossed to the door at a bound. The street was deserted, and without an instant’s hesitation he dashed into the livery and feed barn next door whose wide aperture yawned deserted save for the switching of tails and the stamping of horses’ feet in the stalls. The door of the harness room stood slightly ajar and Tex jerked it open and entered. Harness and saddles littered the floor and depended from long wooden pegs set into the wall while upon racks hung

sweatpads and saddle blankets of every known kind and description. Between the floor and the lower edge of the blankets that occupied a rack at the farther side of the room a pair of black leather shoes showed.

“Come on, Doc, let’s go get a drink.” The shoes remained motionless. “Gosh! There’s a rat over in under them blankets!” A forty-five hammer was drawn back with a sharp click. The shoes left the floor simultaneously and the head and shoulders of a man appeared above the rack.

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"Eh! Was someone calling me?"

"Yeh, I was speakin' of rats——"

"My hearing's getting bad. I was fishing around for my saddle blanket. Those barn dogs never put anything where it belongs."

"That's right. I said let's go get a drink. C'n you hear that?" Tex noted that the man's face was white and that he was eyeing him intently, as he approached through the litter.

"Just had one, thanks. Was on my way down to the flats to see the fun, and thought I'd see if my blanket had dried out all right."

"Yes? Didn't you hear me when I hollered at you in the saloon a minute ago?"

"No. Didn't know any one was in there."

"You're in a hell of a fix with your eyesight an' hearin' all shot to pieces, ain't you? But I reckon they're goin' to be the best part of you if you don't come along with me. Cinnabar Joe's be'n doped."

"*Cinnabar Joe!*" The doctor's surprise was genuine.

"Yes. Cinnabar Joe. An' you better get on the job an' bring him to, or they'll be tossin' dry ones in on top of you about tomorrow. Sold any drugs that w'd do a man that way, lately?"

The doctor knitted his brow. "Why let's see. I don't remember——"

"Your mem'ry ain't no better'n what your eyesight an' hearin' is, is it? I reckon mebbe a little jolt might get it to workin'." As Tex talked even on, his fist shot out and landed squarely upon the other's nose and the doctor found himself stretched at full length among the saddles and odds and ends of harness. Blood gushed from his nose and flowed in a broad wet stream across his cheek. He struggled weakly to his feet and interposed a shaking arm.

"I didn't do anything to you," he whimpered.

"No. I'm the one that's doin'. Is your parts workin' better? 'Cause if they ain't——"

"What do you want to know? I'll tell you!" The man spoke hurriedly as he cringed from the doubling fist.

"I know you sold the dope, 'cause when I told you about Cinnabar you wasn't none surprised at the dope—but at who'd got it. You sold it to Jack Purdy an' you knew he

aimed to give it to me. What's more, your eyesight an' hearin' is as good as mine. You seen me an' heard me in the saloon an' you was scairt an' run an' hid in the harness room. You're a coward, an' a crook, an' a damn liar! Wolf River don't need you no more. You're a-comin' along with me an' fix Cinnabar up an' then you're a-goin' to go down to the depot an' pick you out a train that don't make no local stops an' climb onto it an' ride 'til you get where the buffalo grass don't grow. That is, onless Cinnabar should happen to cash in. If he does——"

"He won't! He won't! It's only chloral. A little strychnine will fix him up."

"Better get busy then. 'Cause if he ain't to in an hour or so you're a-goin' to flutter on the down end of a tight one. These here cross-arms on the railroad's telegraph poles is good an' stout an' has the added advantage of affordin' good observation for all, which if you use a cottonwood there's always some that can't see good on account of limbs an' branches bein' in the road——"

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"Come over to the office 'til I get what I need and I'll bring him around all right!" broke in the doctor and hurried away, with the cowpuncher close at his heels.

CHAPTER V

ON THE FLAT

As Mayor Maloney had said, every rancher and nester within forty miles of Wolf River had driven into town for the celebration. Farm wagons, spring wagons, and automobiles were drawn wheel to wheel upon both sides of the flat. From the vehicles women and children in holiday attire applauded the feats of the cowboys with cheers and the waving of handkerchiefs, while the men stood about in groups and watched with apparent indifference as they talked of fences and flumes.

From the top of the lumber piles, and the long low roof of the wool warehouse, the train passengers entered into the spirit of the fun gasping in horror at some seemingly miraculous escape from death beneath the pounding hoofs of the cow-horses, only to cheer themselves hoarse when they saw that the apparent misadventure had been purposely staged for their benefit.

Races were won by noses. Hats, handkerchiefs, and even coins were snatched from the ground by riders who hung head and shoulder below their horses' bellies. Mounts were exchanged at full gallop. Playing cards were pierced by the bullets of riders who dashed past them at full speed. And men emptied their guns in the space of seconds without missing a shot.

In each event the gaudily caparisoned Jack Purdy was at the fore, either winning or crowding the winner to his supremest effort. And it was Purdy who furnished the real thrill of the shooting tournament when, with a six-shooter in each hand, he jumped an empty tomato can into the air at fifteen paces by sending a bullet into the ground beneath its base and pierced it with a bullet from each gun before it returned to earth.

A half-dozen times he managed to slip over for a few words with Alice Marcum—a bit of explanation of a coming event, or a comment upon the fine points of a completed one, until unconsciously the girl's interest centred upon the dashing figure to an extent that she found herself following his every movement, straining forward when his supremacy hung in the balance, keenly disappointed when another wrested the honours from him, and jubilantly exultant at his victories. So engrossed was she in following the fortunes of her knight that she failed to notice the growing disapproval of Endicott, who sat frowning and silent by her side. Failed, also, to notice that as Purdy's attentions waxed more obvious she herself became the object of many a glance, and lip to ear observation from the occupants of the close-drawn vehicles.

It was while Mayor Maloney was announcing the roping contest and explaining that the man who “roped, throw’d, an’ hog-tied” his steer in the least number of seconds, would be the winner, that the girl’s thoughts turned to the cowpuncher who earlier in the day had so skilfully demonstrated his ability with the lariat.

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In vain her eyes sought the faces of the cowboys. She turned to Purdy who had edged his horse close beside the lumber pile.

"Where is your friend—the one who raced with you for my handkerchief?" she asked. "I haven't seen him since you both rode up in that first wild rush. He hasn't been in any of the contests."

"No, mom," answered the cowpuncher, in tones of well-simulated regret; "he's—he's prob'ly over to some saloon. He's a good man some ways, Tex is. But he can't keep off the booze."

Kicking his feet from the stirrups the man stood upright in his saddle and peered over the top of an intervening pile of lumber. "Yes, I thought so. His horse is over in front of the Headquarters. Him an' Cinnabar Joe's prob'ly holdin' a booze histin' contest of their own." Slipping easily into his seat, he unfastened the rope from his saddle, and began slowly to uncoil it.

"All ready!" called the Mayor. "*Go git him!*"

A huge black steer dashed out into the open with a cowboy in full pursuit, his loop swinging slowly above his head. Down the middle of the flat they tore, the loop whirling faster as the horseman gained on his quarry. Suddenly the rope shot out, a cloud of white dust rose into the air as the cow-horse stopped in his tracks, a moment of suspense, and the black steer dashed frantically about seeking an avenue of escape while in his wake trailed the rope like a long thin snake with its fangs fastened upon the frantic brute's neck. A roar of laughter went up from the crowd and Purdy turned to the girl. "Made a bad throw an' got him around the neck," he explained. "When you git 'em that way you got to turn 'em loose or they'll drag you all over the flat. A nine-hundred-pound horse hain't got no show ag'in a fifteen-hundred-pound steer with the rope on his neck. An' even if the horse would hold, the cinch wouldn't, so *he's* out of it."

The black steer was rounded up and chased from the arena, and once more Mayor Maloney, watch in hand, cried "*Go git him!*"

Another steer dashed out and another cowboy with whirling loop thundered after him. The rope fell across the animal's shoulders and the loop swung under. The horse stopped, and the steer, his fore legs jerked from under him, fell heavily. To make his rope fast to the saddle-horn and slip to the ground leaving the horse to fight it out with the captive, was the work of a moment for the cowboy who approached the struggling animal, short rope in hand. Purdy who was leaning over his saddle-horn, watching the man's every move, gave a cry of relief.

"He's up behind! That'll fix your clock!" Sure enough, the struggling animal had succeeded in regaining his hind legs and while the horse, with the cunning of long



practice, kept his rope taut, the steer plunged about to such good purpose that precious seconds passed before the cowboy succeeded in making his tie-rope fast to a hind foot, jerking it from under the struggling animal, and securing it to the opposite fore foot.

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"Three minutes an' forty-three seconds!" announced the Mayor. "Git ready for the next one. . . . *Go git him!*"

This time the feat was accomplished in a little over two minutes and the successful cowboy was greeted with a round of applause. Several others missed their throws or got into difficulty, and Purdy turned to the girl:

"If I got any luck at all I'd ort to grab off this here contest. They hain't be'n no fancy ropin' done yet. If I c'n hind-leg mine they won't be nothin' to it." He rode swiftly away and a moment later, to the Mayor's "*Go git him!*" dashed out after a red and white steer that plunged down the field with head down and tail lashing the air. Purdy crowded his quarry closer than had any of the others and with a swift sweep of his loop enmeshed the two hind legs of the steer. The next moment the animal was down and the cowpuncher had a hind foot fast in the tie rope. Several seconds passed as the man fought for a fore foot—seconds which to the breathlessly watching girl seemed hours. Suddenly he sprang erect. "One minute an' forty-nine seconds!" announced the Mayor and the crowd cheered wildly.

Upon the lumber pile Alice Marcum ceased her handclapping as her eyes met those of a cowboy who had ridden up unobserved and sat his horse at almost the exact spot that had, a few moments before, been occupied by Purdy. She was conscious of a start of surprise. The man sat easily in his saddle, and his eyes held an amused smile. Once more the girl found herself resenting the smile that drew down the corner of the thin lips and managed to convey an amused tolerance or contempt on the part of its owner toward everything and everyone that came within its radius.

"If they hain't no one else wants to try their hand," began the Mayor, when the Texan interrupted him:

"Reckon I'll take a shot at it if you've got a steer handy."

"Well, dog my cats! If I hadn't forgot you! Where you be'n at? If you'd of got here on time you'd of stood a show gittin' one of them steers that's be'n draw'd. You hain't got no show now 'cause the onliest one left is a old long-geared roan renegade that's on the prod——"

Tex yawned: "Jest you tell 'em to run him in, Slim, an' I'll show you how we-all bust 'em wide open down in Texas."

Three or four cowpunchers started for the corral with a whoop and a few minutes later the men who had been standing about in groups began to clamber into wagons or seek refuge behind the wheels as the lean roan steer shot out onto the flat bounding this way and that, the very embodiment of wild-eyed fury. But before he had gone twenty yards there was a thunder of hoofs in his wake and a cow-horse, his rider motionless as a



stone image in his saddle, closed up the distance until he was running almost against the flank of the frenzied renegade. There was no preliminary whirling of rope. The man rode with his eyes fixed on the flying hind hoofs while a thin loop swung from his right hand, extended low and a little back.

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Suddenly—so suddenly that the crowd was still wondering why the man didn't swing his rope, there was a blur of white dust, a brown streak as the cow-horse shot across the forefront of the big steer, the thud of a heavy body on the ground, the glimpse of a man—among the thrashing hoofs, and then a mighty heaving as the huge steer strained against the rope that bound his feet, while the cowboy shoved the Stetson to the back of his head and felt for his tobacco and papers.

"Gosh sakes!" yelled Mayor Maloney excitedly as he stared at the watch in his hand. "Fifty-seven seconds! They can't beat that down to Cheyenne!"

At the words, a mighty cheer went up from the crowd and everybody was talking at once. While over beside the big steer the cowboy mounted his pony and coiling his rope as he rode, joined the group of riders who lounged in their saddles and grinned their appreciation.

"Ladies an' gents," began the Mayor, "you have jest witnessed a ropin' contest the winner of which is Tex Benton to beat who McLaughlin himself would have to do his da—doggondest! We will now conclood the afternoon's galaxy of spurious stars, as the circus bills says, with a buckin' contest which unneedless to say will conclood the afternoon's celebration of the openin' of a institoot that it's a credit to any town in reference to which I mean the Wolf River Citizen's Bank in which we invite to whose vaults a fair share of your patrimony. While the boys is gittin' ready an' drawin' their horses a couple of gents will pass amongst you an' give out to one an' all, ladies an' gents alike, an' no favorytes played, a ticket good fer a free drink in any saloon in Wolf River on the directors of the bank I have endeavoured to explain about which. After which they'll be a free feed at the *hotel* also on the directors. Owin' to the amount of folks on hand this here will be pulled off in relays, ladies furst, as they hain't room fer all to onct, but Hank, here, claims he's got grub enough on hand so all will git a chanct to shove right out ag'in their belt. An' I might say right here in doo elegy of our feller townsman that Hank c'n set out as fillin' an' tasty a meal of vittles as anyone ever cocked a lip over, barrin', of course, every married man's wife.

"Draw your horses, boys, an' git a-goin'!"

Alice Marcum's surprise at Tex Benton's remarkable feat, after what Purdy had told her, was nothing to the surprise and rage of Purdy himself who had sat like an image throughout the performance. When the Mayor began his oration Purdy's eyes flashed rapidly over the crowd and seeing that neither Cinnabar Joe nor the doctor were present, slipped his horse around the end of the lumber pile and dashed for the doctor's office. "That damn Doc'll wisht he hadn't never double-crossed me!" he growled, as he swung from the saddle before the horse had come to a stop. The office was empty and the man turned to the Headquarters saloon. Inside were the two men he sought, and he approached them with a snarl.

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"What the hell did yeh double-cross me for?" he shouted in a fury.

The doctor pointed to Cinnabar Joe who, still dazed from the effect of the drug, leaned upon the table. "I didn't double-cross you. The wrong man got the dope, that's all."

Cinnabar Joe regarded Purdy dully. "He switched glasses," he muttered thickly.

A swift look of fear flashed into Purdy's eyes. "How'n hell did he know we fixed his lick?" he cried, for well he realized that if the Texan had switched glasses he was cognizant of the attempt to dope him. Moistening his lips with his tongue, the cowpuncher turned abruptly on his heel. "Guess I'll be gittin' back where they's a lot of folks around," he muttered as he mounted his horse. "I got to try an' figger out if he knows it was me got Cinnabar to dope his booze. An' if he does—" The man's face turned just a shade paler beneath the tan—"I got to lay off this here buckin' contest. I hain't got the guts to tackle it."

"Have you drawn your horse?" he had reached the lumber pile and the girl was smiling down at him. He shook his head dolefully.

"No, mom, I hain't a-goin' to ride. I spraint my shoulder ropin' that steer an' I just be'n over to see doc an' he says I should keep offen bad horses fer a spell. It's sure tough luck, too, 'cause I c'd of won if I c'd of rode. But I s'pose I'd ort to be satisfied, I drug down most of the other money—all but the ropin', an' I'd of had that if it hadn't of be'n fer Tex Benton's luck. An' he'll win ag'in, chances is—if his cinch holds. Here he comes now; him an' that breed. They hain't never no more'n a rope's len'th apart. Tex must have somethin' on him the way he dogs him around."

The girl followed his glance to the Texan who approached accompanied by Bat Lajune and a cowboy who led from the horn of his saddle a blaze-faced bay with a roman nose. As the three drew nearer the girl could see the mocking smile upon his lips as his eyes rested for a moment on Purdy. "I don't like that man," she said, as though speaking to herself, "and yet——"

"Plenty others don't like him, too," growled Purdy. "I'm glad he's draw'd that roman nose, 'cause he's the out-buckin'est outlaw that ever grow'd hair—him an' that pinto, yonder, that's hangin' back on the rope."

The Texan drew up directly in front of the lumber pile and ignoring Purdy entirely, raised his Stetson to the girl. The direct cutting of Purdy had been obviously rude and Alice Marcum felt an increasing dislike for the man. She returned his greeting with a perfunctory nod and instantly felt her face grow hot with anger. The Texan was laughing at her—was regarding her with an amused smile.

A yell went up from the crowd and out on the flat beyond the Texan, a horse, head down and back humped like an angry cat, was leaping into the air and striking the ground stiff-legged in a vain effort to shake the rider from his back.

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“Bout as lively as a mud turtle. He’ll sulk in a minute,” laughed the Texan, and true to the prophecy, the horse ceased his efforts and stood with legs wide apart and nose to the ground.

“Whoopee!”

“He’s a ringtailed woozoo!”

“Thumb him!”

“Scratch him!”

The crowd laughed and advised, and the cowboy thumbed and scratched, but the broncho’s only sign of animation was a vicious switching of the tail.

“Next horse!” cried the Mayor, and a horse shot out, leaving the ground before the rider was in the saddle. Straight across the flat he bucked with the cowboy whipping higher and higher in the saddle as he tried in vain to catch his right stirrup.

“He’s a goner!”

“He’s clawin’ leather!”

To save himself a fall the rider had grabbed the horn of the saddle, and for him the contest was over.

“Come on, Bat, we’ll throw the shell on this old buzzard-head. I’m number seven an’ there’s three down!” called the Texan.

The two swung from the saddles and the roman-nosed outlaw pricked his ears and set against the rope with fore legs braced. The cowboy who had him in tow took an extra dally around the saddle horn as the Texan, hackamore in hand, felt his way inch by inch along the taut lead-rope. As the man’s hand touched his nose the outlaw shuddered and braced back until only the whites of his eyes showed. Up came the hand and the rawhide hackamore slipped slowly into place.

“He’s a-goin’ to ride with a hackamore!” cried someone as the Texan busied himself with the knots. Suddenly the lead-rope slackened and with a snort of fury the outlaw reared and lashed out with both forefeet. The Texan stepped swiftly aside and as the horse’s feet struck the ground the loaded end of a rawhide quirt smashed against his jaw.

Bat Lajune removed the saddle from the Texan’s horse and stepped forward with the thick felt pad which Tex, with a hand in the cheek-strap of the hackamore, brushed along the outlaw’s sides a few times and then deftly threw over the animal’s back. The horse, braced against the rope, stood trembling in every muscle while Bat brought

forward the saddle with the right stirrup-leather and cinch thrown back over the seat. As he was about to hand it to the Texan he stopped suddenly and examined the cinch. Then without a word carried it back, unsaddled his own horse, and taking the cinch from his saddle exchanged it for the other.

“Just as easy to switch cinches as it is drinks, ain’t it, Bat?” grinned Tex.

“Ba Goss! Heem look lak’ Circle J boun’ for be wan man short,” replied the half-breed, and the girl, upon whom not a word nor a move had been lost, noticed that Purdy’s jaw tightened as the Texan laughed at the apparently irrelevant remark.

The outlaw shuddered as the heavy saddle was thrown upon his back and the cinch ring deftly caught with a loop of rope and made fast.

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Out on the flat number four, on the pinto outlaw, had hit the dirt, number five had ridden through on a dead one, and number six had quit his in mid-air.

“Next horse—number seven!” called the Mayor. The cowboy who had the broncho in tow headed out on the flat prepared to throw off his dallies and two others, including Purdy, rode forward quirt in hand, to haze the hate-blinded outlaw from crashing into the wagons. With his hand gripping the cheek-strap, Tex turned and looked straight into Purdy’s eyes.

“Go crawl under a wagon an’ chaw a bone,” he said in a low even voice, “I’ll whistle when I want *you*.” For an instant the men’s glances locked, while the onlookers held their breath. Purdy was not a physical coward. The insult was direct, uttered distinctly, and in the hearing of a crowd. At his hip was the six-gun with which he had just won a shooting contest—yet he did not draw. The silence was becoming painful when the man shrugged, and without a word, turned his horse away. Someone laughed, and the tension broke with a hum of low-voiced conversation.

“Next horse, ready!”

As the crowd drew back Alice Marcum leaned close to Purdy’s ear.

“I think it was splendid!” she whispered; “it was the bravest thing I ever saw.” The man could scarcely believe his ears.

“Is she kiddin’ me?” he wondered, as he forced his glance to the girl’s face. But no, she was in earnest, and in her eyes the man read undisguised admiration. She was speaking again.

“Any one of these,” she indicated the crowd with a sweep of her gloved hand, “would have shot him, but it takes a real man to preserve perfect self-control under insult.”

The cowpuncher drew a long breath. “Yes; mom,” he answered; “it was pretty tough to swaller that. But somehow I kind of—of hated to shoot him.” Inwardly he was puzzled. What did the girl mean? He realized that she was in earnest and that he had suddenly become a hero in her eyes. Fate was playing strangely into his hands. A glitter of triumph flashed into his eyes, a glitter that faded into a look of wistfulness as they raised once more to hers.

“Would you go to the dance with me tonight, mom? These others—they don’t git me right. They’ll think I didn’t dast to shoot it out with him.”

The girl hesitated, and the cowpuncher continued. “The transfer train’s pulled out an’ the trussle won’t be fixed ’til mornin’, you might’s well take in the dance.”

Beside her Endicott moved uneasily. "Certainly not!" he exclaimed curtly as his eyes met Purdy's. And then, to the girl, "If you are bound to attend that performance you can go with me."

"Oh, I can go with you, can I?" asked the girl sweetly. "Well thank you so much, Winthrop, but really you will have to excuse me. Mr. Purdy asked me first." There was a sudden flash of daring in her eyes as she turned to the cowpuncher. "I shall be very glad to go," she said; "will you call for me at the car?"

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"I sure will," he answered, and turned his eyes toward the flats. This was to be *his* night, his last on the Wolf River range, he realized savagely. In the morning he must ride very far away. For before the eyes of all Wolf River he had swallowed an insult. And the man knew that Wolf River knew why he did not shoot.

CHAPTER VI

THE RIM OF THE BENCH

Out on the flat the Texan was riding "straight up" amid a whirl of white dust.

"Fan him, Tex!"

"Stay with him!"

The cries of the cowboys cut high above the chorus of yelling applause as the furious outlaw tried every known trick to unseat the rider. High in the air he bucked, swapping ends like a flash, and landing with all four feet "on a dollar," his legs stiff as jack-pine posts. The Texan rode with one hand gripping the hackamore rope and the other his quirt which stung and bit into the frenzied animal's shoulders each time he hit the ground. In a perfect storm of fury the horse plunged, twisted, sunfished, and bucked to free himself of the rider who swayed easily in the saddle and raked him flank and sides with his huge rowelled spurs.

"Stay a long time!"

"Scratch him, Tex!" yelled the delighted cowpunchers.

Suddenly the yells of appreciation gave place to gasps even from the initiated, as the rage-crazed animal leaped high into the air and throwing himself backward, crashed to the ground squarely upon his back. As the dust cloud lifted the Texan stood beside him, one foot still in the stirrup, slashing right and left across the struggling brute's ears with his braided quirt. The outlaw leaped to his feet with the cowboy in the saddle and the crowd went wild. Then with the enthusiasm at its height, the man jerked at his hackamore knot, and the next moment the horse's head was free and the rider rode "on his balance" without the sustaining grip on the hackamore rope to hold him firm in his saddle. The sudden loosening of the rawhide thongs gave the outlaw new life. He sunk his head and redoubled his efforts, as with quirt in one hand and hackamore in the other the cowboy lashed his shoulders while his spurs raked the animal to a bloody foam. Slower and slower the outlaw fought, pausing now and then to scream shrilly as with bared teeth and blazing eyes he turned this way and that, sucking the air in great blasts through his blood-dripping nostrils.

At last he was done. Conquered. For a moment he stood trembling in every muscle, and as he sank slowly to his knees, the Texan stepped smiling from the saddle.

“Sometime, Slim,” he grinned as he reached for his tobacco and papers, “if you-all can get holt of a horse that ain’t plumb gentle, I’ll show you a real ride.”

All about was the confusion attendant to the breaking-up of the crowd. Men yelled at horses as they hitched them to the wagons. Pedestrians, hurrying with their tickets toward the saloons, dodged from under the feet of cowboys’ horses, and the flat became a tangle of wagons with shouting drivers.

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Alice Marcum stood upon the edge of the lumber-pile with the wind whipping her skirts about her silk stockings as the Texan, saddle over his arm, glanced up and waved, a gauntleted hand. The girl returned the greeting with a cold-eyed stare and once more found herself growing furiously angry. For the man's lips twisted into their cynical smile as his eyes rested for a moment upon her own, shifted, lingered with undisguised approval upon her silk stockings, and with devilish boldness, returned to her own again. Suddenly his words flashed through her brain. "I always get what I go after—sometimes." She recalled the consummate skill with which he had conquered the renegade steer and the outlaw broncho—mastered them completely, and yet always in an off-hand manner as though the thing amused him. Never for a moment had he seemed to exert himself—never to be conscious of effort. Despite herself the girl shuddered nervously, and ignoring Endicott's proffer of assistance, scrambled to the ground and hastened toward her coach.

A young lady who possessed in a high degree a very wholesome love of adventure, Alice Marcum coupled with it a very unwholesome habit of acting on impulse. As unamenable to reason as she was impervious to argument, those who would remonstrate with her invariably found themselves worsted by the simple and easy process of turning their weapons of attack into barriers of defence. Thus when, an hour later, Winthrop Adams Endicott found her seated alone at a little table in the dining-car he was agreeably surprised when she greeted him with a smile and motioned him into the chair opposite.

"For goodness' sake, Winthrop, sit down and talk to me. There's nothing so stupid as dining alone—and especially when you want to talk to somebody." As Endicott seated himself, she rattled on: "I wanted to go to that preposterous supper they are going to 'dish up' at the hotel, but when I found they were going to separate the 'ladies and gents' and feed them in relays, I somehow lost the urge. The men, most of them, are interesting—but the women are deadly. I know just what it would be—caught snatches of it from the wagons during the lulls—preserves, and babies, and what Harry's ma died of. The men carry an atmosphere of unrestraint—of freshness——"

Endicott interrupted her with a nod: "Yes," he observed, dryly, "I believe that is the term ____"

"Don't be guilty of a pun, Winthrop. At least, not a slangy one. It's quite unsuited to your style of beauty. But, really, wasn't it all delightful? Did you ever see such riding, and shooting, and lassoing?"

"No. But I have never lived in a country where it is done. I have always understood that cowboys were proficient along those lines, but why shouldn't they be? It's their business——"

“There you go—reducing everything to terms of business! Can’t you see the romance of it—what it stands for? The wild free life of the plains, the daily battling with the elements, and the mastery of nerve and skill over blind brute force and fury! I love it! And tonight I’m going to a real cowboy dance.”

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"Alice!" The word carried a note of grave disapproval. "Surely you were not serious about attending that orgy!"

The girl stared at him in surprise. "Serious! Of course I'm serious! When will I ever get another chance to attend a cowboy dance—and with a real cowboy, too?"

"The whole thing is preposterous! Perfectly absurd! If you are bound to attend that affair I will take you there, and we can look on and——"

"I don't want to look on. I want to dance—to be in it all. It will be an experience I'll never forget."

The man nodded: "And one you may never cease to regret. What do you know of that man? Of his character; of his antecedents? He may be the veriest desperado for all you know."

The girl clapped her hands in mock delight: "Oh, wouldn't that be grand! I hadn't thought of that. To attend a dance with just a plain cowboy doesn't fall to every girl's lot, but one who is a cowboy and a desperado, too!" She rolled her eyes to express the seventh heaven of delight.

Endicott ignored the mockery. "I am sure neither your mother nor your father——"

"No, neither of them would approve, of course. But really, Winthrop, I'm way past the short petticoat stage—though the way they're making them now nobody would guess it. I know it's improper and unconventional and that it isn't done east of the Mississippi nor west of the Rocky Mountains. But when in Rome do as the roamers do, as someone has said. And as for Mr. Purdy," she paused and looked Endicott squarely in the eyes. "Do you know why he didn't shoot that disgusting Tex when he insulted him?"

Endicott nodded. "Yes," he answered. "Because he was afraid to."

Colour suffused the girl's face and she arose abruptly from the table. "At least," she said haughtily, "you and Wolf River are thoroughly in accord on *that* point."

As the man watched her disappear through the doorway he became aware that the fat woman who had sought refuge under the coach was staring at him through her lorgnette from her seat across the aisle.

"Young man, I believe you insulted that girl!" she wheezed indignantly.

"You should be a detective, madam. Not even a great one could be farther from the truth," he replied dryly, and rising, passed into the smoking compartment of his Pullman where he consumed innumerable cigarettes as he stared out into the gathering night.

Seated in her own section of the same Pullman, Alice Marcum sat and watched the twilight deepen and the lights of the little town twinkle one by one from the windows. Alone in the darkening coach the girl was not nearly so sure she was going to enjoy her forthcoming adventure. Loud shouts, accompanied by hilarious laughter and an occasional pistol shot, floated across the flat. She pressed her lips tighter and heartily wished that she had declined Purdy's invitation. It was not too late, yet. She could plead a headache, or a slight indisposition. She knew perfectly well that Endicott had been right and she wrong but, with the thought, the very feminine perversity of her strengthened her determination to see the adventure through.

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"Men are such fools!" she muttered angrily. "I'll only stay a little while, of course, but I'm going to that dance if it is the last thing I ever do—just to show him that—that—" her words trailed into silence without expressing just what it was she intended to show him.

As the minutes passed the girl's eyes glowed with a spark of hope. "Maybe," she muttered, "maybe Mr. Purdy has forgotten, or—" the sentence broke off shortly. Across the flat a rider was approaching and beside him trotted a lead-horse upon whose back was an empty saddle. For just an instant she hesitated, then rose from her seat and walked boldly to the door of the coach.

"Good evenin', mom," the cowboy smiled as he dismounted to assist her from the steps of the coach.

"Good evening," returned the girl. "But, you needn't to have gone to the trouble of bringing a horse just to ride that little way."

"'Twasn't no trouble, mom, an' he's woman broke. I figured yeh wouldn't have no ridin' outfit along so I loant a sideways saddle offen a friend of mine which his gal usta use before she learnt to ride straddle. The horse is hern, too, an' gentle as a dog. Here I'll give yeh a h'ist." The lead-horse nickered softly, and reaching up, the girl stroked his velvet nose.

"He's woman broke," repeated the cowboy, and as Alice looked up her eyes strayed past him to the window of the coach where they met Endicott's steady gaze.

The next moment Purdy was lifting her into the saddle, and without a backward glance the two rode out across the flat.

The girl was a devoted horsewoman and with the feel of the horse under her, her spirits revived and she drew in a long breath of the fragrant night. There was a living tang to the air, soft with the balm of June, and as they rode side by side the cowboy pointed toward the east where the sharp edge of the bench cut the rim of the rising moon. Alice gasped at the beauty of it. The horses stopped and the two watched in silence until the great red disc rose clear of the clean-cut sky-line.

About the wreck torches flared and the night was torn by the clang and rattle of gears as the great crane swung a boxcar to the side. The single street was filled with people—women and men from the wagons, and cowboys who dashed past on their horses or clumped along the wooden sidewalk with a musical jangle of spurs.

The dance-hall was a blaze of light toward which the people flocked like moths to a candle flame. As they pushed the horses past, the girl glanced in. Framed in the doorway stood a man whose eyes met hers squarely—eyes that, in the lamplight seemed to smile cynically as they strayed past her and rested for a moment upon her

companion, even as the thin lips were drawn downward at their corners in a sardonic grin.

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Unconsciously she brought her quirt down sharply, and her horse, glad of the chance to stretch his legs after several days in the stall, bounded forward and taking the bit in his teeth shot past the little cluster of stores and saloons, past the straggling row of houses and headed out on the trail that wound in and out among the cottonwood clumps of the valley. At first, the girl tried vainly to check the pace, but as the animal settled to a steady run a spirit of wild exhilaration took possession of her—the feel of the horse bounding beneath her, the muffled thud of his hoofs in the soft sand of the trail, the alternating patches of moonlight and shadow, and the keen tang of the night air—all seemed calling her, urging her on.

At the point where the trail rose abruptly in its ascent to the bench, the horse slackened his pace and she brought him to a stand, and for the first time since she left the town, realized she was not alone. The realization gave her a momentary start, as Purdy reined in close beside her; but a glance into the man's face reassured her.

"Oh, isn't it just grand! I feel as if I could ride on, and on, and on."

The man nodded and pointed upward where the surface of the bench cut the sky-line sharply.

"Yes, mom," he answered respectfully. "If yeh'd admire to, we c'n foller the trail to the top an' ride a ways along the rim of the bench. If you like scenes, that ort to be worth while lookin' at. The dance won't git a-goin' good fer an hour yet 'til the folks gits het up to it."

For a moment Alice hesitated. The romance of the night was upon her. Every nerve tingled, with the feel of the wild. Her glance wandered from the rim of the bench to the cowboy, a picturesque figure as he sat easily in his saddle, a figure toned by the soft touch of the moonlight to an intrinsic symbolism of vast open spaces.

Something warned her to go back, but—what harm could there be in just riding to the top? Only for a moment—a moment in which she could feast her eyes upon the widespread panorama of moonlit wonder—and then, they would be in the little town again before the dance was in full swing. In her mind's eye she saw Endicott's disapproving frown, and with a tightening of the lips she started her horse up the hill and the cowboy drew in beside her, the soft brim of his Stetson concealing the glance of triumph that flashed from his eyes.

The trail slanted upward through a narrow coulee that reached the bench level a half-mile back from the valley. As the two came out into the open the girl once more reined her horse to a standstill. Before her, far away across the moonlit plain the Bear Paws loomed in mysterious grandeur. The clean-cut outline of Miles Butte, standing apart from the main range, might have been an Egyptian pyramid rising abruptly from the desert. From the very centre of the sea of peaks the snow-capped summit of Big Baldy

towered high above Tiger Ridge, and Saw Tooth projected its serried crown until it seemed to merge into the Little Rockies which rose indistinct out of the dim beyond.

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The cowboy turned abruptly from the trail and the two headed their horses for the valley rim, the animals picking their way through the patches of prickly pears and clumps of low sage whose fragrant aroma rose as a delicate incense to the nostrils of the girl.

Upon the very brink of the valley they halted, and in awed silence Alice sat drinking in the exquisite beauty of the scene.

Before her as far as the eye could see spread the broad reach of the Milk River Valley, its obfusk depths relieved here and there by bright patches of moonlight, while down the centre, twisting in and out among the dark clumps of cottonwoods, the river wound like a ribbon of gleaming silver. At widely scattered intervals the tiny lights of ranch houses glowed dull yellow in the distance, and almost at her feet the clustering lights of the town shone from the open windows and doors of buildings which stood out distinctly in the moonlight, like a village in miniature. Faint sounds, scarcely audible in the stillness of the night floated upward—the thin whine of fiddles, a shot now and then from the pistol of an exuberant cowboy sounding tiny and far away like the report of a boy's pop-gun.

The torches of the wrecking crew flickered feebly and the drone of their hoisting gears scarce broke the spell of the silence.

Minutes passed as the girl's eyes feasted upon the details of the scene.

"Oh, isn't it wonderful!" she breathed, and then in swift alarm, glanced suddenly into the man's face. Unnoticed he had edged his horse close so that his leg brushed hers in the saddle. The hat brim did not conceal the eyes now, that stared boldly into her face and in sudden terror the girl attempted to whirl her horse toward the trail. But the man's arm shot out and encircled her waist and his hot breath was upon her cheek. With all the strength of her arm she swung her quirt, but Purdy held her close; the blow served only to frighten the horses which leaped apart, and the girl felt herself dragged from the saddle.

In the smoking compartment of the Pullman, Endicott finished a cigarette as he watched the girl ride toward the town in company with Purdy.

"She's a—a headstrong *little fool!*" he growled under his breath. He straightened out his legs and stared gloomily at the brass cuspidor. "Well, I'm through. I vowed once before I'd never have anything more to do with her—and yet—" He hurled the cigarette at the cuspidor and took a turn up and down the cramped quarters of the little room. Then he stalked to his seat, met the fat lady's outraged stare with an ungentlemanly scowl, procured his hat, and stamped off across the flat in the direction of the dance-hall. As he entered the room a feeling of repugnance came over him. The floor was filled with noisy dancers, and upon a low platform at the opposite end of the room three shirt-sleeved, collarless fiddlers sawed away at their instruments, as they marked time with

boots and bodies, pausing at intervals to mop their sweat-glistening faces, or to swig from a bottle proffered by a passing dancer. Rows of onlookers of both sexes crowded the walls and Endicott's glance travelled from face to face in a vain search for the girl.

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A little apart from the others the Texan leaned against the wall. The smoke from a limp cigarette which dangled from the corner of his lips curled upward, and through the haze of it Endicott saw that the man was smiling unpleasantly. Their eyes met and Endicott turned toward the door in hope of finding the girl among the crowd that thronged the street.

Hardly had he reached the sidewalk when he felt a hand upon his arm, and turned to stare in surprise into the dark features of a half-breed,—the same, he remembered, who had helped the Texan to saddle the outlaw. With a swift motion of the head the man signalled him to follow, and turned abruptly into the deep shadow of an alley that led along the side of the livery bam. Something in the half-breed's manner caused Endicott to obey without hesitation and a moment later the man turned and faced him.

"You hont you 'oman?" Endicott nodded impatiently and the half-breed continued: "She gon' ridin' wit Purdy." He pointed toward the winding trail. "Mebbe-so you hur' oop, you ketch." Without waiting for a reply the man slipped the revolver from his holster and pressed it into the astonished Endicott's hand, and catching him by the sleeve, hurried him to the rear of the stable where, tied to the fence of the corral, two horses stood saddled. Loosing one, the man passed him the bridle reins. "Dat hoss, she damn good hoss. Mebbe-so you ride lak' hell you com' long in tam'. Dat Purdy, she not t'ink you got de gun, mebbe-so you git chance to kill um good." As the full significance of the man's words dawned upon him Endicott leaped into the saddle and, dashing from the alley, headed at full speed out upon the winding, sandy trail. On and on he sped, flashing in and out among the clumps of cottonwood. At the rise of the trail he halted suddenly to peer ahead and listen. A full minute he stood while in his ears sounded only the low hum of mosquitoes and the far-off grind of derrick wheels.

He glanced upward and for a moment his heart stood still. Far above, on the rim of the bench, silhouetted clearly against the moonlight sky were two figures on horseback. Even as he looked the figures blended together—there was a swift commotion, a riderless horse dashed from view, and the next moment the sky-line showed only the rim of the bench.

The moon turned blood-red. And with a curse that sounded in his ears like the snarl of a beast, Winthrop Adams Endicott tightened his grip upon the revolver and headed the horse up the steep ascent.

The feel of his horse labouring up the trail held nothing of exhilaration for Endicott. He had galloped out of Wolf River with the words of the half-breed ringing in his ears: "Mebbe-so you ride lak' hell you com' long in tam'!" But, would he "com' long in tam'"? There had been something of sinister portent in that swift merging together of the two figures upon the sky-line, and in the flash-like glimpse of the riderless horse. Frantically he dug his spurless heels into the labouring sides of his mount.

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"Mebbe-so you kill um good," the man had said at parting, and as Endicott rode he knew that he would kill, and for him the knowledge held nothing of repugnance—only a wild fierce joy. He looked at the revolver in his hand. Never before had the hand held a lethal weapon, yet no slightest doubt as to his ability to use it entered his brain. Above him, somewhere upon the plain beyond the bench rim, the woman he loved was at the mercy of a man whom Endicott instinctively knew would stop at nothing to gain an end. The thought that the man he intended to kill was armed and that he was a dead shot never entered his head, nor did he remember that the woman had mocked and ignored him, and against his advice had wilfully placed herself in the man's power. She had harried and exasperated him beyond measure—and yet he loved her.

The trail grew suddenly lighter. The walls of the coulee flattened into a wide expanse of open. Mountains loomed in the distance and in the white moonlight a riderless horse ceased snipping grass, raised his head, and with ears cocked forward, stared at him. In a fever of suspense Endicott gazed about him, straining his eyes to penetrate the half-light, but the plain stretched endlessly away, and upon its surface was no living, moving thing.

Suddenly his horse pricked his ears and sniffed. Out of a near-by depression that did not show in the moonlight another horse appeared. It, too, was riderless, and the next instant, from the same direction sounded a low, muffled cry and, leaping from his saddle, he dashed toward the spot. The sage grew higher in the depression which was the head of a branch of the coulee by means of which the trail gained the bench, and as he plunged in, the head and shoulders of a man appeared above a bush. Endicott was very close when the man pushed something fiercely from him, and the body of a woman crashed heavily into the sage. Levelling the gun, he fired. The shot rang loud, and upon the edge of the depression a horse snorted nervously. The man pitched forward and lay sprawled grotesquely upon the ground and Endicott saw that his extended hand grasped a revolver.

Dully he stared at the thing on the ground at his feet. There was a movement in the scrub and Alice Marcum stood beside him. He glanced into her face. And as her eyes strayed from the sprawling figure to meet his, Endicott read in their depths that which caused his heart to race madly. She stepped toward him and suddenly both paused to listen. The girl's face turned chalk-white in the moonlight. From the direction of the coulee came the sound of horses' hoofs pounding the trail!

CHAPTER VII

THE ARREST

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Bat Lajune grinned into the dark as the galloping cow-horse carried Endicott out upon the trail of Purdy and the girl. "A'm t'ink dat wan good job. Mebbe-so de pilgrim keel Purdy, *bien*! Mebbe-so Purdy keel de pilgrim, den de sheriff ketch Purdy an' she got for git hang—dat pret' good, too. Anyhow, Tex, she don' got for bodder 'bout keel Purdy no mor'. Tex kin keel him all right, but dat Purdy she damn good shot, too. Mebbe-so she git de drop on Tex. Den afterwards, me—A'm got to fool 'roun' an' keel Purdy, an' mebbe-so A'm hang for dat, too. Wat de hell!"

A man rode up to the corral and tied his horse to the fence. The half-breed drew into the shadow. "Dat Sam Moore," he muttered. "She dipity sher'ff, an' she goin' try for git 'lect for de beeg sher'ff dis fall. Mebbe-so she lak' for git chanct for 'rest som'one. A'm goin' see 'bout dat." He stepped to the side of the man, who started nervously and peered into his face.

"Hello, Bat, what the devil you doin' prowlin' around here? Why hain't you in dancin'?"

The half-breed shrugged: "Me, A'm no lak' for dance mooch. She don' do no good. Anyhow, A'm hont 'roun' for fin' you. A'm t'ink mebbe-so you better com' 'long wit' me."

"Come along with you! What's on yer mind?" Suddenly the man straightened: "Say, look a here, if you're up to helpin' Tex Benton pull off any gag on me, you've picked the wrong hand, see!"

The other shook his head vigorously: "*Non*! Tex, she goin' in de dance-hall. She don' know nuthin' 'bout w'at A'm know."

"What you drivin' at? Come on, spit 'er out! I hain't a-goin' to fool 'round here all night an' miss the dancin'."

Bat stepped closer: "Two mans an' wan 'oman gon' up de trail. A'm t'ink som'one goin' for git keel. Mebbe-so we better gon' up an' see 'bout dat."

"You're crazy as hell! The trail's free, hain't it? What business I got hornin' in on 'em? I come to town for to take in the dance, an' I'm a-goin' to. Besides it's a good chanct to do a little 'lectioneerin'." Once more Bat shrugged, and turning away, began to untie his horse.

"Four Ace Johnson, over 'crost de riv', she dipity sher'ff, too. A'm hear she goin' run for de beeg sher'ff, nex' fall. A'm gon' over an' see if she no lak' to go 'long an' mak' de arres' if som'ting happen. Mebbe-so w'en de votin' tam' com' 'long de men lak' for hav' Choteau County sher'ff w'at kin mak' de arres' better as de sher'ff w'at kin dance good. *Voila*!" Without so much as a glance toward the other, he slipped into his saddle and started slowly down the alley. Before he reached the street Moore's horse pushed up beside him.

“Where’s this here outfit?” he growled, with a glance toward the dance-hall lights, “an’ what makes you think they’s a-goin’ to be gun-fightin’?”

“A’m t’ink dey ain’ so far,” replied the half-breed as he swung into the trail at a trot. And although the impatient deputy plied him with a volley of questions the other vouchsafed no further information. Midway of the ascent to the bench the two drew rein abruptly. From above, and at no great distance, rang the sound of a shot—then silence. The deputy glanced at the half-breed: “Hey, Bat,” he whispered, “this here’s a dangerous business!”

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"Mebbe-so Choteau County lak' to git de sher'ff w'at ain' so mooch scairt."

"Scairt! Who's scairt? It hain't that. But I got a wife an' nine kids back there in the mountains, an' I'm a-goin' to deputize you."

The half-breed shot him a look of sudden alarm: "*Non! Non!* Better I lak' I ponch de cattle. You ke'p de nine wife an' de kid!"

"You hain't got no more sense than a reservation Injun!" growled the deputy. "What I mean is, you got to help me make this here arrest!"

The half-breed grinned broadly: "Me,—A'm de, w'at you call, de posse, eh? *Bien!* Com' on 'long den. Mebbe-so we no ketch, you no git 'lect for sher'ff."

At the head of the trail the deputy checked his galloping mount with a jerk and scrutinized the three riderless horses that stood huddled together. His face paled perceptibly. "Oh, Lord!" he gasped between stiffening lips: "It's Tex, an' Jack Purdy, an' they've fit over Cinnabar Joe's gal!"

He turned wrathfully toward Bat. "Why'n you tell me who it was up here, so's I could a gathered a man's-size posse?" he demanded. "Whichever one of them two has shot up the other, they hain't goin' to be took in none peaceable. An' if they've killed one of each other a'ready, he ain't goin' to be none scrupulous about pottin' you an' me. Chances is, they've got us covered right now. 'Tain't no ways percautious to go ahead—an' we don't dast to go back! Bat, this is a hell of a place to be—an' it's your fault. Mebbe they won't shoot a unarmed man—here Bat, you take my gun an' go ahead. I'll tell 'em back there how you was game to the last. O-O-o-o-o! I got a turrible cramp in my stummick! I got to lay down. Do your duty, Bat, an' if I surmise this here attack, which I think it's the appendeetus, I'll tell 'em how you died with yer boots on in the service of yer country." The man forced his six-shooter into the half-breed's hand and, slipping limply from his saddle to the ground, wriggled swiftly into the shadow of a sage bush.

Bat moved his horse slowly forward as he peered about him. "If Purdy keel de pilgrim, den A'm better look out. He don' lak' me nohow, 'cause A'm fin' out 'bout dat cinch. Better A'm lak' Sam Moore, A'm git de 'pendeceet in my belly for li'l w'ile." He swung off his horse and flattening himself against the ground, advanced cautiously from bush to bush. At the edge of the depression he paused and stared at the two figures that huddled close together a few feet ahead. Both were gazing toward the trail and in the moonlight he recognized the face of the pilgrim. With a smile of satisfaction the half-breed stood erect and advanced boldly.

"You com' in tam', eh?" he asked, as with a nod Endicott stepped toward him and handed him the revolver.

“Yes, just in time. I am deeply grateful to you.”

“Eh?” The other’s brows drew together.

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"I say, I thank you—for the gun, and for telling me——"

"Ha, dat's a'right. W'er' Purdy?" The girl shuddered, as Endicott pointed to the ground at some little distance away. The man advanced and bent over the prostrate form.

"Ba goss!" he exclaimed with a glance of admiration. "You shoot heem after de draw! *Nom de Dieu!* You good man wit' de gun! Wer' you hit heem?"

Endicott shook his head. "I don't know. I saw him, and shot, and he fell." The half-breed was bending over the man on the ground.

"You shoot heem on he's head," he approved, "dat pret' good place." He bent lower and a sibilant sound reached the ears of Endicott and the girl. After a moment the man stood up and came toward them smiling. "A'm fin' out if she dead," he explained, casually. "A'm speet de tobac' juice in he's eye. If she wink she ain' dead. Purdy, she don' wink no mor'. Dat damn good t'ing."

Again Alice Marcum shuddered as Endicott spoke: "Can you find our horses?" he asked. "I must go to town and give myself up."

"*Oui*, A'm git de hoss' a'right. Better you tak' 'em an' skeep off. A'm git on dat posse an' you bet we no ketch. A'm lak' you fine."

"No! No!" Endicott exclaimed. "If I have killed a man I shall stand trial for it. I won't sneak away like a common murderer. I know my act was no crime, let the decision of the jury be what it may."

The half-breed regarded him with a puzzled frown. "You mean you lak' fer git arres'?" he asked in surprise.

"Why, of course! I——" the other interrupted with a laugh.

"A'right. Dat de kin' Sam Moore she lak' fer arres'. Sam, she layin' back here a ways. She dipity sher'ff, an' we'n we com' on dem hoss', Sam she git to fink 'bout he's wife an' kids. He don' fink 'bout dem mooch only w'en he git dronk, or git scairt. Den he lov' 'em lak' hell, an' he grab de beeg belly-ache, so dey don' got for feel sorry 'bout heem gittin' keel."

Slipping his own gun into its holster, the half-breed turned and walked toward the spot where he had left the deputy, and as he walked he threw open the cylinder of the officer's gun and removed the cartridges.

"Sam!" he called sharply. Cautiously a head raised from behind a sage bush. "How long you t'ink dat tak' you git well? Wan man he lak' for git arres' w'en you git time."

“Shut up! Don’t talk so loud! D’you want to git us killed? Which one got it?”

“Purdy. De pilgrim shoot heem ‘cause he run off wit’ he’s girl.”

“Pilgrim! What pilgrim! An’ what girl? Ain’t that Tex Benton’s horse, an’ Cinnabar Joe’s _____?”

“Uh-huh, A’m bor’ heem Tex boss for ketch Purdy. An’, Ba goss, he shoot heem on he’s head after Purdy draw’d!”

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Moore stared aghast. "What? A pilgrim done that? Not on yer life! He may look an' act like a pilgrim but, take it from me, he's a desperate character if he got Purdy after he draw'd. It's worsen than if it was Tex. *He* might of took pity on us, knowin' about the fambly. But a stranger, an' one that kin git a man like Jack Purdy! O-o-o-o, my stummick! Bat, I'm 'fraid I'm a-passin' away! These spells is a-killin' me—an' what'll become of the woman an' the kids?"

The half-breed grinned: "Mebbe-so you kin' pass back agin, Sam. He ain' got no gun."

Sam Moore ceased to writhe, and sat abruptly erect. "Ain't got no gun!" he exclaimed. "What did he shoot Purdy with?"

"My gun. He giv' it back to me. A'm bor' heem dat gun li'l while ago."

The deputy sprang to his feet. "Quick, now, Bat!" he roared loudly. "You slip these irons on him, an' I'll catch up the horses. Don't take no chances!" He tossed the half-breed a pair of hand-cuffs, and started after his own horse. "Kill him if he makes a crooked move. Tell him you're actin' under my authority an' let him understand we're hard men to tamper with—us sheriffs. We don't stand fer no foolin'."

In Curly Hardee's dance-hall Tex Benton leaned against the wall and idly watched the couples weave in and out upon the floor to the whining accompaniment of the fiddles and the clanging piano.

Apparently the cowboy's interest centred solely upon the dancers, but a close observer would have noticed the keen glance with which he scanned each new arrival—noticed too, that after a few short puffs on a cigarette the man tossed it to the floor and immediately rolled another, which is not in the manner of a man with a mind at ease.

The Texan saw Endicott enter the room, watched as the man's eyes swept the faces of dancers and spectators, and smiled as he turned toward the door.

"Three of us," mused the cowboy, with the peculiar smile still twisting the corners of his lips, "Purdy, an' me, an' the pilgrim. Purdy's work's so coarse he'll gum his own game, an' that's where I come in. An' the pilgrim—I ain't quite figgered how he stacks up." The cowpuncher glanced at his watch. "It's time they showed up long ago. I wonder what's keepin' em." Suddenly he straightened himself with a jerk: "Good Lord! I wonder if — But no, not even Purdy would try *that*. Still, if he knows I know he tried to dope me he'll be figgerin' on pullin' his freight anyhow, an'—" The man's lips tightened and, elbowing his way to the door he stepped onto the street and hurried to the Headquarters saloon. Cinnabar Joe was behind the bar, apparently none the worse for his dose of chloral, and in answer to a swift signal, followed the Texan to the rear of the room.

"Does Purdy know I'm wise to his dope game?"

The bartender nodded: “Yes, I told him you must of switched the glasses.”

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"I saw him leadin' your horse rigged up with your side-saddle acrost the flats awhile back."

Again the bartender nodded: "He borrowed the outfit fer a gal of his'n he said come in on the train. Wanted to take her fer a ride."

"Where'd they go?" The words whipped viciously.

"Search me! I've had my hands full to keep track of what's goin' on in here, let alone outside."

Without a word the Texan stepped out the back door and hastened toward the horse corral behind the livery stable. Circling its fence to the head of the alley, he stared in surprise at the spot where he and Bat Lajune had tied their horses. The animals were gone, and cursing the half-breed at every step, he rushed to the street, and catching up the reins of a big roan that stood in a group of horses, swung into the saddle and headed out onto the trail.

"Women are fools," he muttered savagely. "It beats hell what even the sensible ones will fall for!"

At the up-bend of the trail he halted abruptly and listened. From the shadows of the coulee ahead came the sound of voices and the soft scraping of horses' feet. He drew the roan into a cottonwood thicket and waited.

"Somethin' funny here. Nobody ever come to a dance ridin' at a walk," he muttered, and then as the little cavalcade broke into the bright moonlight at a bend of the trail, his eyes widened with surprise. In front rode Bat Lajune with Purdy's horse snubbed to his saddle-horn, and immediately following him were the girl and Endicott riding side by side. Tex saw that the girl was crying, and that Endicott's hands were manacled, and that he rode the missing horse. Behind them rode Sam Moore, pompously erect, a six-shooter laid across the horn of his saddle, and a scowl of conceited importance upon his face that would have evoked the envy of the Kaiser of Krautland. The figure appealed to the Texan's sense of humour and waiting until the deputy was exactly opposite his place of concealment, he filled his lungs and leaned forward in his saddle.

"Y-e-e-e-o-w!" The sound blared out like the shrill of doom. The officer's six-shooter thudded upon the ground, his hands grasped the horn of the saddle, his spurs dug into his horse's flanks and sent the animal crashing between the girl and Endicott and caused Purdy's horse to tear loose from the half-breed's saddle-horn.

"Stand 'em off, Bat!" shrieked the deputy as he shot past, "I'm a-goin' fer help!" and away he tore, leaning far over his horse's neck, with Purdy's horse, the stirrups lashing his sides, dashing madly in his wake.

A moment later Tex pushed his mount into the trail where the girl, drawn close to Endicott, waited in fearful expectation. The half-breed met him with a grin.

Rapidly, with many ejaculations interspersing explosive volleys of half-intelligible words, Bat acquainted the Texan with the progress of events. The cowpuncher listened without comment until the other had finished. Then he turned to Endicott.

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"Where'd you learn to shoot?" he asked abruptly.

"I never learned. Until tonight I never had a pistol in my hand."

"You done damned well—to start out with," commented the Texan dryly.

"But, oh, it's horrible!" sobbed the girl, "and it's all my fault!"

"I reckon that's right. It looks like a bad mix-up all around."

"Oh, why didn't you tell me what a *beast* he was? You knew all the time. And when you insulted him I thought you were *horrid*! And I thought he was so noble when he refrained from shooting you."

"No. He wasn't noble, none noticeable—Purdy wasn't. An' as for me tellin' you about him—answer me square: Would you have believed me?"

The girl's eyes fell before his steady gaze.

"No," she faltered, "I wouldn't. But isn't there something we can do? Some way out of this awful mess?"

The Texan's eyes flashed a glint of daring. He was thinking rapidly. Endicott moved his horse closer to the cowboy. "Can't you manage to get *her* away—onto a train some place so she can avoid the annoyance of having to testify at the trial, and submit to the insulting remarks of your sheriff?"

The girl interrupted him: "Winthrop Adams Endicott, if you dare to even think *such* a thing—I'll never speak to you again! Indeed he *won't* take me away or put me on any train! I got you into this, and I won't budge one inch until you get out of it. What do I care for a little annoyance—and as for the sheriff, I'll say 'boo' at him in the dark and he'll die."

There was a gleam of approval in the eyes of the Texan as his lips twisted into their peculiar cynical smile. "Spunky little devil," he thought to himself. "There's a chance to pull a play here somewhere that'll make me solid with her all right. I got to have time to think." Aloud he said: "Just you leave things to me. I'll get a line on what's what. But you both got to do as I say, an' no augerin' about it neither. It looks from here as if things could be straightened out if someone don't go to work an' ball the jack. An' as for Sam passin' insultin' remarks no more—he won't. Here he comes now with about half Wolf River for a posse." The cowboy turned to Endicott: "You go 'long with 'em an' lay low 'til you hear from Bat, there, or me. Then you do as we say, an' don't ask no questions."

The rumble of horses' feet sounded from the direction of the little town and the Texan whispered to Bat: "Find out where they lock him up. An' when the excitement dies down you find me. I ain't a-goin' to lose sight of *her*—see." The half-breed grinned his understanding and Tex swung his horse in close beside the girl and awaited the coming of the posse.

With a yell the onrushing cowboys whom the deputy had recruited from the dance-hall spied the little group and, thundering up at full gallop, formed a closely packed circle about them. Recognizing the deputy who was vociferously urging his horse from the rear, Tex forced his way through the circle and called him aside.

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"Say, Sam," he drawled, in a tone that caused the deputy's hair to prickle at its roots; "about some an' sundry insultin' remarks you passed agin' the lady, yonder——"

"No, I never——"

"That'll be about all the lyin' you need to do now. An' just let this sink in. You can lock up the pilgrim where you damn please. But the lady goes to the hotel. If you aim to hold her as a witness you can appoint a guard—an' I'm the guard. D'you get me? 'Cause if there's any misunderstandin' lingerin' in them scrambled aigs you use fer brains, I'll just start out by tellin' the boys what a hell of a brave arrest you pulled off, an' about the nervy stand you made agin' odds to guard your prisoners when I yipped at you from the brush. Then, after they get through havin' their fun out of you, I'll just waste a shell on you for luck—see?"

"Sure, Tex, that sounds reasonable," the other rattled on in evident relief. "Fact is, I be'n huntin' fer you ever sense I suspicioned they'd be'n a murder. 'If I c'd only find Tex,' I says to myself, I says, 'he'd be worth a hull posse hisself.' Jest you go ahead an' night-herd the lady. I'll tell her myself so's it'll be official. An' me an' the rest of the boys here, we'll take care of the pilgrim, which he ain't no pilgrim at all, but a desperate desperado, or he couldn't never have got Jack Purdy the way he done."

The Texan grinned and, forcing his horse through the crowd, reached the girl's side where he was joined a few moments later by the deputy. Despite her embarrassing situation Alice Marcum could scarce restrain a smile at the officer's sudden obsequious deference. Stetson in hand, he bowed awkwardly. "Excuse me, mom, but, as I was goin' on to say in reference of any remarks I might of passed previous, I found out subsequent I didn't mean what I was sayin', which I misunderstood myself complete. But as I was goin' on to say, mom, the State of Montany might need you fer a witness in this here felonious trial, so if you'll be so kind an' go to the *hotel* along of Tex here whom he's the party I've tolled off fer to guard you, an' don't stand no monkey business neither. What I mean is," he hastened to add, catching a glance from the Texan's eye, "don't be afraid to ask fer soap or towels if there hain't none in yer room, an' if yer cold holler fer an extry blanket er two. The State's a-payin' fer it, an' yer board, too, an' if they don't fill you up every meal you set up a yell an' I'll see 't they do." The deputy turned abruptly away and addressed the cowboys: "Come on, boys, let's git this character under lock an' key so I kin breathe easier."

Even Endicott joined in the laugh that greeted the man's words and, detaining a cowpuncher to ride on either side of the prisoner, the officer solemnly led the way toward town.

CHAPTER VIII

ONE WAY OUT

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As the horses traversed the two miles of winding trail, Alice Marcum glanced from time to time at the Texan who rode silently at her side. The man's face was grave and he seemed entirely oblivious to her presence. Only once did she venture to speak to him.

"I suppose I ought to thank you, Mr.——"

"Tex'll do," supplied the man, without even the courtesy of a glance.

"—for the very changed attitude of the sheriff, and for the fact that I am to be lodged in the hotel instead of the jail."

The girl thought the Texan's lips drew into their peculiar smile, but he gave no further evidence of having heard and rode on in silence, with his attention apparently fixed upon the tips of his horse's ears. At the edge of town the crowd, with Endicott in its midst, swerved toward the railroad and the girl found herself alone with her jailer. She drew up her horse sharply and glanced back toward the prisoner.

"This way," said a voice close beside her; "we'll go to the hotel, I guess there's enough of 'em to see that the pilgrim gets locked up safe."

"But I—I want to speak to him. To tell him——"

"Never mind what you want to tell him. It'll keep, I reckon."

At the door of the wooden hotel the cowpuncher swung from his horse. "You wait here a minute; I'll go fetch Jennie. She's prob'ly over to the dance. She'll fix you up with a room an' see that you get what you want."

"But my bag?"

"Yer what?"

"My bag—with all my things in it. I left it in the car."

"Oh, yer war-bag! All right, I'll get that after I've got Jennie cut out an' headed this way."

He stepped into the dance-hall next door and motioned to a plump, round-faced girl who was dancing with a young cowboy. At the conclusion of the dance the girl laughingly refused to accompany her partner to the bar, and made her way toward the Texan.

"Say, Jennie," the man said, after drawing her aside; "there's a girl over to the hotel and I want you to go over an' fix her up with a room. Give her Number 11. It's handy to the side door."

The girl's nose went up and the laughing eyes flashed scornfully. "No, you don't, Tex Benton! What do you think I am? An' what's more, you don't pull nothin' like that around there. That hotel's run decent, an' it's goin' to stay decent or Hank can get someone else fer help. They's some several of the boys has tried it sence I be'n there but they never tried it but onct. *An' that goes!*" The girl turned away with a contemptuous sniff.

"Jennie!" The Texan was smiling. "This is a little different case, I reckon."

"They're all different cases," she retorted. "But everything's be'n tried from a sister come on a unexpected visit, to slippin' me five—Cinnabar Joe tended to that one's case hisself, an' he done a good job, too. So you might's well save yer wind 'cause there ain't nothin' you can think up to say that'll fool me a little bit. I ain't worked around hotels fer it's goin' on six years fer nothin', an' I wouldn't trust no man—cowboys an' drummers least of all."

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"Listen, Jennie, I ain't tryin' to tell you I wouldn't. Only this time, I ain't. If I was, don't you suppose I've got sense enough not to go to you to help me with it?" The girl waited with all outward appearance of skepticism for him to proceed. "This girl went ridin' with Jack Purdy—he borrowed the side-saddle from Cinnabar——"

"Did Cinnabar loan him that saddle fer any such——?"

"Hold on, now, Cinnabar don't know nothin' about it. Purdy wants to borrow his side-saddle an' Joe says sure."

"He might of know'd if Purdy wanted it, it wasn't fer no good. You're all bad enough, goodness knows, but he was the worst of the lot. I hate Purdy an' you bet he cuts a big circle when he sees me comin'."

"Well, he won't no more," answered the Texan dryly. "Purdy's dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes. He took a pilgrim's girl out on the bench an' the pilgrim got wise to it an' dug out after 'em. Got there just in time an' took a shot at Purdy an' got him."

"Land sakes! I'm glad he did! If they was a few more pilgrims like him that would get about half the rest of you, maybe the others would turn decent, or take to the brush."

The Texan laughed. "Anyway Purdy's dead, an' they've got the pilgrim locked up, an' the girl's held fer a witness, an' I told Sam Moore I'd take a shot at him if he locked her up wherever he's goin' to lock up the pilgrim—in the wool-warehouse I reckon. Anyhow, he told her to go to the hotel an' specified me fer a guard."

"Oh, he did, did he? Well jest you wait 'til I get my hat. I guess maybe she'll be safer with *two* guards." With a meaning look the girl hurried away and a moment later returned and followed the Texan from the room.

"Why was you so anxious she was to have Number 11, if what you've told me is on the level?" she asked, as they approached the hotel.

"I don't know, yet, exactly. But I've got a hunch they'll be somethin' doin' a little later."

"Uh-huh, an' I'll be right there when it's doin', too. An' you can bet your last blue one on that!"

Alice Marcum swung unassisted to the ground as the two approached. And as she glanced into the wide, friendly eyes of the girl she felt deeply grateful to the Texan for bringing a woman. Then the woman was speaking: "Come right along in the house. I'm Jennie Dodds, an' I'll see't you get settled comfortable. Tex, he told me all about it.

Land sakes! I bet you feel proud! Who'd a thought any pilgrim could a got Jack Purdy! Where's your grip?"

"Gosh! I plumb forgot!" exclaimed the cowboy, and started for his horse. "I'll be back with yer war-bag in a minute." A few moments later, he returned to the hotel carrying a leather bag.

"I'm goin' to kind of slip around among the boys a bit. I've be'n doin' some thinkin' an maybe we can figger a way out. I don't quite like the way things is shapin' up. I'll be wantin' most likely to see you in a while——"

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"We'll both be here," interrupted Jennie. "*Both* of us. We'll be in Number 11."

Outside the hotel the Texan paused to roll and light a cigarette, and as he blew the smoke from his lungs, he smiled cynically.

"Purdy's work was so damn coarse he got just what was comin' to him. There's only me an' the pilgrim, now—an' it's me an' him for it. I ain't plumb got the girl sized up yet. If she's straight—all right. She'll stay straight. If she ain't—— They say everything's fair in love an' war, an' bein' as it's my deal the pilgrim's got to go up against a stacked deck. An' if things works out right, believe me, he's a-goin' to know he's be'n somewhere by the time he gets back—if he ever does get back."

For the third time that evening he entered the dance-hall and avoiding the dancers made his way leisurely toward the bar that ran along one side of the room.

"Hello, Tex, ain't dancin'? Say, they're tellin' how a pilgrim killed Jack Purdy. Yes, an' they got him locked up down in the wool-warehouse. What's yourn?" The cowboy ranged himself beside the Texan.

"A little red liquor, I reckon." The men poured their drinks and the Texan glanced toward the other: "You ain't mournin' none over Purdy, Curly?"

"Who, me?" the man laughed. "Not what you c'd notice, I ain't. An' they's plenty others ain't, too. I don't hear no lamentations wailin' a-bustin' in on the festchivities. It was over the pilgrim's girl. They say how Purdy tried to——"

"Yes, he did. But the pilgrim got there first. I been thinkin', Curly. It's plumb shameful for to hold the pilgrim for doin' what one of us would of had to do sooner or later. Choteau County has stood for him about as long as it could, an' a damn sight longer than it ought to. His work was gettin' so rotten it stunk, I could tell you about a sage-brush corral an' some runnin'-iron work over on the south slope——"

"Yes," broke in the other, "an' there's a hell of a lot of I X an' Bear Paw Pool cows that show'd up, brandin' time, 'thout no calves."

The Texan nodded: "Exactly. Now, what I was goin' on to say: The grand jury don't set for a couple or three months yet. An' when they do, they'll turn the pilgrim loose so quick it'll make yer head swim. Then, there's the girl. They'll hold her for a witness—not that they'd have to, 'cause she'll stay on her own hook. Now what's the use of them bein' took down to Benton an' stuck in jail? Drink up, an' have another."

"Not none," agreed Curly, as he measured out his liquor to an imaginary line half-way up the glass. "But how'd you figger to fix it?"

“Well,” answered the Texan, as his lips twisted into their peculiar smile; “we might get the right bunch together an’ go down to the wool-warehouse an’ save the grand jury the trouble.”

The other stared at him in amazement: “You mean bust him out?”

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Tex laughed: "Sure. Lord! Won't it be fun seein' Sam Moore puttin' up a scrap to save his prisoner?"

"But, how'd we git away with him? All Sam w'd do is git a posse an' take out after him an' they'd round him up 'fore he got to Three-mile. Or if we went along we'd git further but they'd git us in the end an' then we'd be in a hell of a fix!"

"Your head don't hurt you none, workin' it that way, does it?" grinned Tex. "I done thought it all out. We'll get the boys an' slip down to the warehouse an' take the pilgrim out an' slip a noose around his neck an' set him on a horse an' ride out of town a-cussin' him an' a-swearin' to lynch him. He won't know but what we aim to hang him to the first likely cottonwood, an' we'll have a lot of fun with him. An' no one else won't know it, neither. Then you-all ride back an' pertend to keep mum, but leak it out that we done hung him. They won't be no posse hunt for him then an' I'll take him an' slip him acrost to the N. P. or the C. P. R. an' let him go. It's too good a chanct to miss. Lordy! Won't the pilgrim beg! An' Sam Moore—he'll be scairt out of a year's growth!"

"But, the girl," objected Curly.

"Oh, the girl—well, they'll turn her loose, of course. They ain't nothin' on her except for a witness. An' if they ain't no prisoner they won't need no witness, will they?"

"That's right," assented the other. "By gosh, Tex, what you can't think up, the devil wouldn't bother with. That's sure some stunt. Let's get the boys an' go to it!"

"You get the boys together. Get about twenty of the live ones an' head 'em over to the Headquarters. I'll go hunt up a horse for the pilgrim an' be over there in half an hour."

Curly passed from man to man, whom he singled out from among the dancers and onlookers, and the Texan slipped unobserved through the door and proceeded directly to the hotel. On the street he met Bat.

"De pilgrim, she lock up in de woolhouse an' Sam Moore she stan' 'long de door wit two revolver an' wan big rifle."

"All right, Bat. You look alive now, an' catch up Purdy's horse an' see that you get a good set of bridle reins on him, an' find the girl's horse an' get holt of a pack-horse somewheres an' get your war-bag an' mine an' our blankets onto him, an' go down to the store an' get a couple more pairs of blankets, an' grub enough fer a week for four, an' get that onto him, an' have all them horses around to the side door of the hotel in twenty minutes, or I'll bust you wide open an' fill your hide with prickly pears."

The half-breed nodded his understanding and slipped onto his horse as the Texan entered the hotel. Passing through the office where a coal-oil lamp burned dimly in a

wall-bracket, he stepped into the narrow hallway and paused with his eyes on the bar of yellow light that showed at the bottom of the door of Number 11.

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"Most any fool thing would do to tell the girl. But I've got to make it some plausible to put it acrost on Jennie. I'm afraid I kind of over-played my hand a little when I let her in on this, but—damn it! I felt kind of sorry for the girl even if it was her own fool fault gettin' into this jack-pot. I thought maybe a woman could kind of knock off the rough edges a little. Well, here goes!" He knocked sharply, and it was a very grave-faced cowboy who stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. "I've be'n doin' quite some feelin' out of the public pulse, as the feller says, an' the way things looks from here, the pilgrim is sure in bad. You see, the jury is bound to be made up of cow-men an' ranchers with a sheep-man or two mixed in. An' they're all denizens that Choteau County is infested with. Now a stranger comin' in that way an' kind of pickin' one of us off, casual, like a tick off'n a dog's ear, it won't be looked on with favour——"

Jennie interrupted, with a belligerent forefinger wagging almost against the Texan's nose: "But that Jack Purdy needed killin' if ever any one did. He was loose an'——"

"Yes," broke in Tex, "he was. I ain't here to pronounce no benediction of blessedness on Purdy's remains. But, you got to recollect that most of the jury, picked out at random, is in the same boat—loose, an' needin' killin', which they know as well as you an' me do, an' consequent ain't a-goin' to establish no oncomfortable precedent. Suppose any pilgrim was allowed to step off'n a train any time he happened to be comin' through, an' pick off a loose one? What would Choteau County's or any other county's he-population look like in a year's time, eh? It would look like the hair-brush out here in the wash-room, an' you could send in the votin' list on a cigarette paper. No, sir, the pilgrim ain't got a show if he's got to face a jury. There's only one way out, an' there's about fifteen or twenty of the boys that's willin' to give him a chance. We're a-goin' to bust him out of jail an' put him on a horse an' run him up some cottonwood coulee with a rope around his neck."

Alice Marcum, who had followed every word, turned chalk-white in the lamplight as she stared wide-eyed at the Texan, with fingers pressed tight against her lips, while Jennie placed herself protectingly between them and launched into a perfect tirade.

"Hold on, now." Both girls saw that the man was smiling and Jennie relapsed into a warlike silence. "A rope necktie ain't a-goin' to hurt no one as long as he keeps his heft off'n it. As I was goin' on to say, we'll run him up this coulee an' a while later the boys'll ride back to town in the same semmey-serious mood that accompanies such similar enterprises. They won't do no talkin' an' they won't need to. Folks will naturally know that justice has be'n properly dispensed with, an' that their taxes won't raise none owin' to county funds bein' misdirected in prosecutin'

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a public benefactor—an' they'll be satisfied. The preacher'll preach a long sermon condemnin' the takin' of human life without due process of law, an' the next Sunday he'll preach another one about the onchristian shootin' of folks without givin' 'em a chanct to repent—after they'd drawed—an' he'll use the lynchin' as a specimen of the workin's of the hand of the Lord in bringin' speedy justice onto the murderer.

"But they ain't be'n no lynchin' done. 'Cause the boys will turn the prisoner over to me an' I'll hustle him acrost to the N. P. an' let him get out of the country."

Alice Marcum leaped to her feet: "Oh, are you telling me the truth? How do I know you're not going to lynch him? I told him I'd stay with him and see him through!"

The Texan regarded her gravely: "You can," he said after a moment of silence. "I'll have Bat take you to Snake Creek crossing an' you can wait there 'til I come along with the pilgrim. Then we'll cut through the mountains an' hit down through the bad lands an'——"

"No you don't, Tex Benton!" Jennie was facing him again. "You're a smooth one all right. How long would it take you to lose the pilgrim there in the bad lands, even if you don't lynch him, which it ain't no cinch you ain't a-goin' to—then where would *she* be? No, sir, you don't pull nothin' like that off on me!"

"But I want to go!" cried Alice. "I want to be near him, and I'm not afraid."

The girl regarded her for a moment in silence. "I should think you'd had enough of cowpunchers for one night. But if you're bound to go I ain't got no right to hold you. I'd go along with you if I could, but I can't."

"I'm not afraid," she answered as her eyes sought the Texan's. "I've learned a lot in the past few hours."

"I guess you ain't learnt enough to hurt you none," retorted Jennie, with a trace of acid in her tone. "An' you'll learn a lot more 'fore you hit the N. P., or my name ain't Jennie Dodds. If you're bound to go you can take my outfit. I guess Tex'll see that my horse comes back, anyhow."

The cowpuncher grinned: "Thanks, Jennie, I'm right proud to know you think I wouldn't steal your horse." Once more he turned to the girl. "When the half-breed comes for you, you go with him. I've got to go on with the boys, now." Abruptly he left the room, and once more paused in the hall before passing through the office. "She's game, all right. An' the way she can look at a fellow out of those eyes of hers—— By God! Purdy *ought* to be'n killed!"

CHAPTER IX

THE PILGRIM

A group of saddle-horses stood before the Headquarters saloon, and as the Texan entered he was vociferously greeted by the twenty cowboys who crowded the bar.

“Come on, Tex, drink up!”

“Hell’ll be a-poppin’ down to the wool-warehouse.”

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"An', time we get there we won't be able to see Sam Moore fer dust." Curly raised his glass and the cowpunchers joined in uproarious song:

"We'll string him up to a cottonwood limb
An' dig his grave in under him,
We'll tromp down the clods, an' we won't give a damn
'Cause he'll never kill another cow-man,
Ah wi yi yippie i oo-o-!"

Without a break the Texan picked up the refrain, improvising words to fit the occasion:

"The sheriff's name, it's old Sam Moore,
He's standin' down by the jail-house door
With seventeen knives an' a gatlin' gun,
But you bet your boots we'll make him run
Ah wi yi yippie i o-o-o-!"

With whoops of approbation and a deafening chorus of yowls and catcalls, the cowpunchers crowded through the door. A moment later the bar-room was deserted and out in the street the night air resounded with the sound of snorting, trampling horses, the metallic jangle of spurs and bit chains, the creak of saddle-leather, and the terse, quick-worded observations of men mounting in the midst of the confusion of refractory horses.

"The sheriff's name, it's old Sam Moore!" roared a cowboy as he slammed into the saddle of a skew-ball black.

"Go git him!" howled another in exact imitation of Slim Maloney.

There was a thunder of hoofs as the whole crowd, headed by Tex and Curly swept down the street and across the flat toward the impromptu jail.

With a lighted lantern beside him, Sam Moore sat upon the strongly built unloading platform before the warehouse door, access to which was gained by means of a flight of six or eight plank steps at either end. Up these steps rode a couple of cowpunchers while the rest drew up sharply at the very edge of the platform. Hemmed in upon all sides the valiant deputy glanced fearfully into the faces of the horsemen. "Wha—What's up, boys? What's ailin' ye?" he managed to blurt out.

"Drop them guns an' give over the key!" commanded someone.

"Sure—sure, boys! I hain't aimin' to hurt no one. Yer all friends of mine an' what you say goes with me."

"Friends of yourn!" roared someone menacingly; "you're a liar, Sam! You ain't never seen nary one of us before! Git that!"

"Sure, sure thing, boys, I don't know who ye be. 'Tain't none of my business. I couldn't name none of you. You don't need to be scairt of me."

"You beat it, then, an' lose yerself an' don't yer go stirrin' up no rookus over to the dance, er we'll dangle you a little, too."

"Sure. I'm a-goin' now. I——"

"Fork over that key first!"

"Sure, Tex! Here it is——"

"Sure *who!*" rasped a voice close to the sheriff's ear.

"I mean—I said—— Here's the doggone key! I was thinkin' of a feller I know'd down to Wyomin'. Tex—Tex—Smith, er some such of a name it was. I mistrusted you was him, an' mebbe you be fer all I know. I don't savvy none of you whatever."

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"Get a move on, Sam!"

"Me! I'm gone! An' you boys remember when 'lection time comes, to vote fer a sheriff that's got disgression an' common sense." And with ludicrous alacrity, the deputy scrambled from the platform and disappeared into the deep blackness of the lumber-yard.

The Texan fitted the key into the huge padlock and a moment later the door swung open and a dozen cowpunchers swarmed in.

"Come on, pilgrim, an' try on yer necktie!"

"We'll prob'ly have to haul down all them wool-sacks an' drag him out from behind 'em."

"I think not. If I am the man you want I think you will find me perfectly able to walk." The pilgrim stood leaning against one of the wooden supporting posts, and as a cowboy thrust the lantern into his face he noted the eyes never faltered.

"Come along with us!" commanded the puncher, gruffly, as another stepped up and slipped the noose of a lariat-rope over his head.

"So I am to be lynched, am I?" asked the pilgrim in a matter-of-fact tone, as with a cowboy on either side he was hurried across the platform and onto a horse.

"This ain't no time to talk," growled another. "We'll give you a chanct to empty yer chest 'fore we string you up."

In the moonlight the prisoner's face showed very pale, but the cow-men saw that his lips were firmly set, and the hands that caught up the bridle reins did not falter. As the cavalcade started out upon the trail the Texan turned back, and riding swiftly to the hotel, found Bat waiting.

"You go in to Number 11 and tell the girl you're ready to start."

"You'm mean de pilgrim's girl?"

The Texan frowned and swore under his breath: "She ain't the pilgrim's girl, yet—by a damn sight! You take her an' the pack horse an' hit down the river an' cut up through old man Lee's horse ranch onto the bench. Then hit for Snake Creek crossin' an' wait for me."

The half-breed nodded, and the Texan's frown deepened as he leaned closer. "An' you see that you get her through safe an' sound or I'll cut off them ears of yours an' stake you out in a rattlesnake den to think it over." The man grinned and the frown faded from

the Texan's face. "You got to do me a good turn, Bat. Remember them four bits in Las Vegas!"

"A'm tak' de girl to Snake Creek crossin' a'right; you'm don' need for be 'fraid for dat."

The cowpuncher whirled and spurred his horse to overtake the cowboys who, with the prisoner in charge, were already well out upon the trail.

In front of the hotel the half-breed watched the flying horseman until he disappeared from sight.

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"A'm wonder if dat girl be safe wit' him, lak' she is wit' me—*bien*. A'm t'ink mebbe-so dat damn good t'ing ol' Bat goin' long. If she damn fine girl mebbe-so Tex, he goin' mar' her. Dat be good t'ing. But, by Gar! if he don' mar' her, he gon' leave her 'lone. Me—A'm lak' dat Tex fine, lak' me own brudder. He got de good heart. But w'en he drink de hooch, den A'm got for look after him. He don' care wan damn 'bout nuttin'. Dat four bit in Las Vegas, dats a'right. A'm fink 'bout dat, too. But, by Gar, it tak' more'n four bit in Las Vegas for mak' of Bat let dat girl git harm."

An atmosphere of depression pervaded the group of riders as they wound in and out of the cottonwood clumps and threaded the deep coulee that led to the bench. For the most part they preserved an owlsh silence, but now and then someone would break into a low, weird refrain and the others would join in with the mournful strain of "The Dying Cowboy."

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie-e-e,
Where the coyote howls and the wind blows free."

Or the dirge-like wail of the "Cowboy's Lament":

"Then swing your rope slowly and rattle your spurs lowly,
And give a wild whoop as you carry me along:
And in the grave throw me and roll the sod o'er me,
For I'm only a cowboy that knows he's done wrong."

"Shall we take him to Lone Tree Coulee?" asked one. Another answered disdainfully.

"Don't you know the lone tree's dead? Jest shrivelled up an' died after Bill Atwood was hung onto it. Some augers he worn't guilty. But it's better to play safe, an' string up all the doubtful ones, then yer bound to git the right one onct in a while."

"Swing over into Buffalo Coulee," commanded Tex. "There's a bunch of cottonwoods just above Hansen's old sheep ranch."

"We'll string him up to a cottonwood limb
An' dig his grave in under him——"

"Shut up!" ordered Curly, favouring the singer with a scowl. "Any one would think you was joyous-minded, which this here hangin' a man is plumb serious business, even if it hain't only a pilgrim!"

He edged his horse in beside the Texan's. "He don't seem tore up with terror, none. D'you think he's onto the racket?"

Tex shook his head, and with his eyes on the face of the prisoner which showed very white in the moonlight, rode on in silence.

“You mean you think he’s jest nach’ly got guts—an’ him a pilgrim?”

“How the hell do I know what he’s got?” snapped the other. “Can’t you wait till we get to Buffalo?”

Curly allowed his horse to fall back a few paces. “First time I ever know’d Tex to pack a grouch,” he mused, as his lips drew into a grin. “He’s sore ‘cause the pilgrim hain’t a-snifflin’ an’ a-carryin’-on an’ tryin’ to beg off. Gosh! If he turns out to be a reg’lar hand, an’ steps up an’ takes his medicine like a man, the joke’ll be on Tex. The boys never will quit joshin’ him—an’ he knows it. No wonder he’s sore.”

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The cowboys rode straight across the bench. Song and conversation had ceased and the only sounds were the low clink of bit chains and the soft rustle of horses' feet in the buffalo grass. At the end of an hour the leaders swung into an old grass-grown trail that led by devious windings into a deep, steep-sided coulee along the bottom of which ran the bed of a dried-up creek. Water from recent rains stood in brackish pools. Remnants of fence with rotted posts sagging from rusty wire paralleled their course. A dilapidated cross-fence barred their way, and without dismounting, a cowboy loosened the wire gate and threw it aside.

A deserted log-house, windowless, with one corner rotted away, and the sod roof long since tumbled in, stood upon a treeless bend of the dry creek. Abandoned implements littered the dooryard; a rusted hay rake with one wheel gone, a broken mower with cutter-bar drunkenly erect, and the front trucks of a dilapidated wagon.

The Texan's eyes rested sombrely upon the remnant of a rocking-horse, still hitched by bits of weather-hardened leather to a child's wheelbarrow whose broken wheel had once been the bottom of a wooden pail—and he swore, softly.

Up the creek he could see the cottonwood grove just bursting into leaf and as they rounded the corner of a long sheep-shed, whose soggy straw roof sagged to the ground, a coyote, disturbed in his prowling among the whitening bones of dead sheep, slunk out of sight in a weed-patch.

Entering the grove, the men halted at a point where the branches of three large trees interlaced. It was darker, here. The moonlight filtered through in tiny patches which brought out the faces of the men with grotesque distinctness and plunged them again into blackness.

Gravely the Texan edged his horse to the side of the pilgrim.

"Get off!" he ordered tersely, and Endicott dismounted.

"Tie his hands!" A cowboy caught the man's hands behind him and secured them with a lariat-rope.

The Texan unknotted the silk muffler from about his neck and folded it.

"If it is just the same to you," the pilgrim asked, in a voice that held firm, "will you leave that off?"

Without a word the muffler was returned to its place.

"Throw the rope over that limb—the big one that sticks out this way," ordered the Texan, and a cowpuncher complied.

“The knot had ort to come in under his left ear,” suggested one, and proceeded to twist the noose into place.

“All ready!”

A dozen hands grasped the end of the rope.

The Texan surveyed the details critically:

“This here is a disagreeable job,” he said. “Have you got anything to say?”

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Endicott took a step forward, and as he faced the Texan, his eyes flashed. "Have I got anything to say!" he sneered. "Would you have anything to say if a bunch of half-drunken fools decided to take the law into their own hands and hang you for defending a woman against the brutal attack of a fiend?" He paused and wrenched to free his hands but the rope held firm. "It was a wise precaution you took when you ordered my hands tied—a precaution that fits in well with this whole damned cowardly proceeding. And now you ask me if I have anything to say!" He glanced into the faces of the cowboys who seemed to be enjoying the situation hugely.

"I've got this to say—to you, and to your whole bunch of grinning hyenas: If you expect me to do any begging or whimpering, you are in for a big disappointment. There is one request I am going to make—and that you won't grant. Just untie my hands for ten minutes and stand up to me bare-fisted. I want one chance before I go, to fight you, or any of you, or all of you! Or, if you are afraid to fight that way, give me a pistol—I never fired one until tonight—and let me shoot it out with you. Surely men who swagger around with pistols in their belts, and pride themselves on the use of them, ought not to be afraid to take a chance against a man who has never but once fired one!" There was an awkward pause and the pilgrim laughed harshly: "There isn't an ounce of sporting blood among you! You hunt in packs like the wolves you are—twenty to one—and that one with a rope around his neck and his hands tied!"

"The odds is a little against you," drawled the Texan. "Where might you hail from?"

"From a place where they breed men—not curs."

"Ain't you afraid to die?"

"Just order your hounds to jerk on that rope and I'll show you whether or not I am afraid to die. But let me tell you this, you damned murderer! If any harm comes to that girl—to Miss Marcum—may the curse of God follow every last one of you till you are damned in a fiery hell! You will kill me now, but you won't be rid of me. I'll haunt you every one to your graves. I will follow you night and day till your brains snap and you go howling to hell like maniacs."

Several of the cowboys shuddered and turned away. Very deliberately the Texan rolled a cigarette.

"There is a box in my coat pocket, will you hand me one? Or is it against the rules to smoke?" Without a word the Texan complied, and as he held a match to the cigarette he stared straight into the man's eyes: "You've started out good," he remarked gravely. "I'm just wonderin' if you can play your string out." With which enigmatical remark he turned to the cowboys: "The drinks are on me, boys. Jerk off that rope, an' go back to town! An' remember, this lynchin' come off as per schedule."

Alone in the cottonwood grove, with little patches of moonlight filtering through onto the new-sprung grass, the two men faced each other. Without a word the cowboy freed the prisoner's hands.

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"Viewin' it through a lariat-loop, that way, the country looks better to a man than what it really is," he observed, as the other stretched his arms above his head.

"What is the meaning of all this? The lynching would have been an atrocious injustice, but if you did not intend to hang me why should you have taken the trouble to bring me out here?"

"'Twasn't no trouble at all. The main thing was to get you out of Wolf River. The lynchin' part was only a joke, an' that's on us. You bein' a pilgrim, that way, we kind of thought ____"

"A what?"

"A pilgrim, or tenderfoot, or greener or chechako, or counter-jumper, owin' to what part of the country you misfit into. We thought you wouldn't have no guts, an' we'd——"

"Any what?"

The Texan regarded the other hopelessly. "Oh hell!" he muttered disgustedly. "Can't you talk no English? Where was you raised?"

The other laughed. "Go on, I will try to follow you."

"I can't chop 'em up no finer than one syllable. But I'll shorten up the dose sufficient for your understandin' to grasp. It's this way: D'you know what a frame-up is?"

Endicott nodded.

"Well, Choteau County politics is in such a condition of onwee that a hangin' would be a reg'lar tonic for the party that's in; which it's kind of bogged down into an old maid's tea party. Felonious takin's-off has be'n common enough, but there hasn't no hangin's resulted, for the reason that in every case the hangee has got friends or relations of votin' influence. Now, along comes you without no votin' connections an' picks off Purdy, which he's classed amongst human bein's, an' is therefore felonious to kill. There ain't nothin' to it. They'd be poundin' away on the scaffold an' testin' the rope while the trial was goin' on. Besides which you'd have to linger in a crummy jail for a couple of months waitin' for the grand jury to set on you. A few of us boys seen how things was framed an' we took the liberty to turn you loose, not because we cared a damn about you, but we'd hate to see even a snake hung fer killin' Purdy which his folks done a wrong to humanity by raisin' him.

"The way the thing is now, if the boys plays the game accordin' to Hoyle, there won't be no posses out huntin' you 'cause folks will all think you was lynched. But even if they is a posse or two, which the chances is there will be, owin' to the loosenin' effect of spiritorious licker on the tongue, which it will be indulged in liberal when that bunch hits

town, we can slip down into the bad lands an' lay low for a while, an' then on to the N. P. an' you can get out of the country."

Endicott extended his hand: "I thank you," he said. "It is certainly white of you boys to go out of your way to help a perfect stranger. I have no desire to thrust my neck into a noose to further the ends of politics. One experience of the kind is quite sufficient."

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"Never mind oratin' no card of thanks. Just you climb up into the middle of that bronc an' we'll be hittin' the trail. We got quite some ridin' to do before we get to the bad lands—an' quite some after."

Endicott reached for the bridle reins of his horse which was cropping grass a few feet distant.

"But Alice—Miss Marcum!" With the reins in his hand he faced the Texan. "I must let her know I am safe. She will think I have been lynched and——"

"She's goin' along," interrupted the Texan, gruffly.

"Going along!"

"Yes, she was bound to see you through because what you done was on her account. Bat an' her'll be waitin' for us at Snake Creek crossin'."

"Who is Bat?"

"He's a breed."

"A what?"

"Wait an' see!" growled Tex. "Come on; we can't set here 'til you get educated. You'd ought to went to school when you was young."

Endicott reached for a stirrup and the horse leaped sidewise with a snort of fear. Again and again the man tried to insert a foot into the broad wooden stirrup, but always the horse jerked away. Round and round in a circle they went, while the Texan sat in his saddle and rolled a cigarette.

"Might try the other one," he drawled, as he struck a match. "Don't you know no better than to try to climb onto a horse on the right-hand side? You must of be'n brought up on G-Dots."

"What's a G-Dot?"

"There you go again. Do I look like a school-marm? A G-Dot is an Injun horse an' you can get on 'em from both sides or endways. Come on; Snake Creek crossin' is a good fifteen miles from here, an' we better pull out of this coulee while the moon holds."

Endicott managed to mount, and gathering up the reins urged his horse forward. But the animal refused to go and despite the man's utmost efforts, backed farther and farther into the brush.

“Just shove on them bridle reins a little,” observed the Texan dryly. “I think he’s swallerin’ the bit. What you got him all yanked in for? D’you think the head-stall won’t hold the bit in? Or ain’t his mouth cut back far enough to suit you? These horses is broke to be rode with a loose rein. Give him his head an’ he’ll foller along.”

A half-mile farther up the coulee, the Texan headed up a ravine that led to the level of the bench, and urging his horse into a long swinging trot, started for the mountains. Mile after mile they rode, the cowboy’s lips now and then drawing into their peculiar smile as, out of the corner of his eye he watched the vain efforts of his companion to maintain a firm seat in the saddle. “He’s game, though,” he muttered, grudgingly. “He rides like a busted wind-mill an’ it must be just tearin’ hell out of him but he never squawks. An’ the way he took that hangin’—— If he’d be’n raised right he’d sure made some tough hand. An’ pilgrim or no pilgrim, the guts is there.”

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CHAPTER X

THE FLIGHT

When the Texan had departed Bat Lajune eyed the side-saddle with disgust. "Dat damn t'ing, she ain' no good. A'm git de reg'lar saddle."

Slowly he pushed open the side door of the hotel and paused in the darkened hallway to stare at the crack of yellow light that showed beneath the door of Number 11.

"A'm no lak' dis fool 'roun' wit' 'omen." He made a wry face and knocked gingerly.

Jennie Dodds opened the door, and for a moment eyed the half-breed with frowning disfavour.

"Look a here, Bat Lajune, is this on the level? They say you're the squarest Injun that ever swung a rope. But Injun or white, you're a man, an' I wouldn't trust one as far as I could throw a mule by the tail."

"Mebbe-so you lak' you com' 'long an' see, eh?"

"I got somethin' else to do besides galavantin' 'round the country nights with cowboys an' Injuns."

The half-breed laughed and turned to Alice. "Better you bor' some pants for ride de horse. Me, A'm gon' git nudder saddle. 'Fore you ride little ways you bre'k you back."

"Go over to the livery barn an' tell Ross to put my reg'lar saddle on in place of the side-saddle, an' when you come back she'll be ready." Jennie Dodds slipped from the room as the outer door closed upon the half-breed's departure, and returned a few minutes later with her own riding outfit, which she tossed onto the bed.

"Jest you climb into them, dearie," she said. "Bat's right. Them side-saddles is sure the dickens an' all, if you got any ways to go."

"But," objected Alice, "I can't run off with all your things this way!" She reached for her purse. "I'll tell you, I'll buy them from you, horse and all!"

"No you won't, no such thing!" Jennie Dodds assumed an injured tone. "Pity a body can't loan a friend nuthin' without they're offered to git payed for it. You can send the clothes back when you're through with 'em. An' here's a sack. Jest stick what you need in that. It'll tie on behind your saddle, an' you can leave the rest of your stuff here in your grip an' I'll ship it on when you're ready for it. Better leave them night-gowns an' corsets an' such like here. You ain't goin' to find no use for 'em out there amongst the

prickly pears an' sage brush. Law me! I don't envy you your trip none! I'd jest like to know what for devilment that Tex Benton's up to. Anyways, you don't need to be afraid of him—like Purdy. But men is men, an' you got to watch 'em."

As the girl chattered on she helped Alice to dress for the trail and when the "war-bag" was packed and tied with a stout cord, the girl crossed to the window and drew back the shade.

"The Injun's back. You better be goin'." The girl slipped a small revolver from her pocket and pressed it into Alice's hand. "There's a pocket for it in the bloomers. Cinnabar Joe give it to me a long time ago. Take care of yourself an' don't be afraid to use it if you have to. An' mind you let me hear jest the minute you git anywheres. I'll be a-dyin' to know what become of you."

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Alice promised and as she passed through the door, leaned swiftly and kissed the girl squarely upon the lips.

“Good-bye,” she whispered. “I won’t forget you,” and the next moment she stepped out to join the waiting half-breed, who with a glance of approval at her costume, took the bag from her hand and proceeded to secure it behind the cante. The girl mounted without assistance, and snubbing the lead-rope of the pack-horse about the horn of his saddle, the half-breed led off into the night.

Hour after hour they rode in silence, following a trail that wound in easy curves about the bases of hillocks and small buttes, and dipped and slanted down the precipitous sides of deep coulees where the horses’ feet splashed loudly in the shallow waters of fords. As the moon dipped lower and lower, they rode past the darkened buildings of ranches nestled beside the creeks, and once they passed a band of sheep camped near the trail. The moonlight showed a sea of grey, woolly backs, and on a near-by knoll stood a white-covered camp-wagon, with a tiny lantern burning at the end of the tongue. A pair of hobbled horses left off snipping grass beside the trail and gazed with mild interest as the two passed, and beneath the wagon a dog barked. At length, just as the moon sank from sight behind the long spur of Tiger Butte, the trail slanted into a wide coulee from the bottom of which sounded the tinkle of running water.

“Dis Snake Creek,” remarked the Indian; “better you git off now an’ stretch you leg. Me, A’m mak’ de blanket on de groun’ an’ you ketch-um little sleep. Mebbe-so dem com’ queek—mebbe-so long tam’.”

Even as he talked the man spread a pair of new blankets beside the trail and walking a short distance away seated himself upon a rock and lighted a cigarette.

With muscles aching from the unaccustomed strain of hours in the saddle, Alice threw herself upon the blankets and pillowed her head on the slicker that the half-breed had folded for the purpose. Almost immediately she fell asleep only to awake a few moments later with every bone in her body registering an aching protest at the unbearable hardness of her bed. In vain she turned from one side to the other, in an effort to attain a comfortable position. With nerves shrieking at each new attitude, all thought of sleep vanished and the girl’s brain raced madly over the events of the past few hours. Yesterday she had sat upon the observation platform of the overland train and complained to Endicott of the humdrum conventionality of her existence! Only yesterday—and it seemed weeks ago. The dizzy whirl of events that had snatched her from the beaten path and deposited her somewhere out upon the rim of the world had come upon her so suddenly and with such stupendous import that it beggared any attempt to forecast its outcome. With a shudder she recalled the moment upon the verge of the bench when in a flash she had realized the true character

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of Purdy and her own utter helplessness. With a great surge of gratitude—and—was it only gratitude—this admiration and pride in the achievement of the man who had rushed to her rescue? Alone there in the darkness the girl flushed to the roots of her hair as she realized that it was for this man she had unhesitatingly and unquestioningly ridden far into the night in company with an unknown Indian. Realized, also, that above the pain of her tortured muscles, above the uncertainty of her own position, was the anxiety and worry as to the fate of Endicott. Where was he? Had Tex lied when he told her there would be no lynching? Even if he desired could he prevent the cowboys from wreaking their vengeance upon the man who had killed one of their number? She recalled with a shudder the cold cynicism of the smile that habitually curled the lips of the Texan. A man who could smile like that could lie—could do anything to gain an end. And yet—she realized with a puzzled frown that in her heart was no fear of him—no terror such as struck into her very soul at the sudden unmasking of Purdy. “It’s his eyes,” she murmured; “beneath his cynical exterior lies a man of finer fibre.”

Some distance away a match flared in the darkness and went out, and dimly by the little light of the stars Alice made out the form of the half-breed seated upon his rock beside the trail. Motionless as the rock itself the man sat humped over with his arms entwining his knees. A sombre figure, and one that fitted intrinsically into the scene—the dark shapes of the three horses that snipped grass beside the trail, the soft murmur of the waters of the creek as they purred over the stones, the black wall of the coulee, with the mountains rising beyond—all bespoke the wild that since childhood she had pictured, but never before had seen. Under any other circumstances the setting would have appealed, would have thrilled her to the soul. But now—over and over through her brain repeated the question: Where is he?

A horse nickered softly and raising his head, sniffed the night air. The Indian stepped from his rock and stood alert with his eyes on the reach of the back-trail. And then softly, almost inaudibly to the ears of the girl came the sound of horses’ hoofs pounding the trail in monotonous rhythm.

Leaping to her feet she rushed forward in time to see Bat catch up the reins of the three horses and slip noiselessly into the shelter of a bunch of scrub willows. In a moment she was at his side and the Indian thrust the reins into her hand.

“Better you wait here,” he whispered hurriedly. “Mebbe-so, som’wan else com’ ‘long. Me, A’m gon’ for look.” With the words the man blended into the shadows and, clutching the reins, the girl waited with every nerve drawn tense.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of the thudding hoofs. The riders had reached the dip of the trail now and the rhythmic pound of the horses’ feet changed to a syncopated shuffle as the animals made the steep descent. At the edge of the creek they paused

for a moment and then Alice, could hear the splash of their feet in the water and the deep sucking sound of horses drinking.

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A low peculiar whistle cut the air and the next moment a voice which the girl recognized as the Texan's sounded plainly through the dark.

"You got here, did you? Where's the girl?" Alice could not catch the answer but at the next words of the Texan she started forward tugging at the reins of the refractory cayuses.

"Come alive, now, an' get your outfit together. There's prob'ly a big posse out an' we got to scratch gravel some lively to keep ahead of 'em, which little item the future prosperity of all concerned, as the fellow says, depends on—not only the hangee here, but us accessories, the law bein' some specific in outlinin' the disposal of aiders an' abettors of felonious transmigrations."

The half-breed relieved her of the horses and Alice rushed to the side of Endicott who had reined his horse out of the water and dismounted stiffly.

"Oh, Winthrop!" she cried joyfully. "Then they didn't hang you, and——"

Endicott laughed: "No, they didn't hang me but they put a lot of local colour into the preliminaries. I certainly thought my time had come, when friend Tex here gave the word to throw off the rope." The girl flashed a grateful glance into the face of the Texan who sat his horse with the peculiar smile curling his lips.

"Oh, how can I ever thank you?" she cried impulsively. "I think you are just *splendid!* And I'll never, *never* distrust you again. I've been a perfect fool and——"

"Yes," answered the man gruffly, and Alice noticed that the smile was gone from his lips. "But you ain't out of the woods yet. Bat's got that horse packed an' as soon as Winthrop, there, can crawl up the side of that bronc we better be hittin' the trail. If we can make the timber at the head of Cow Creek divide by daylight, we can slip down into the bad lands tomorrow night."

Endicott painfully raised a foot to the stirrup, and the Texan turned abruptly to the girl.

"Can you make it?" he asked. She replied with an eager affirmative and the Texan shot her a glance of approval as he watched her mount, for well he knew that she must have fared very little better than Endicott in the matter of aching muscles.

Mile after mile the four rode in silence, Tex in the lead with Bat Lajune close by his side. An occasional backward glance revealed the clumsy efforts of the pilgrim to ease himself in the saddle, and the set look of determination upon the tired face of the girl.

"Winthrop ain't wearin' well," thought the cowboy as his lips twisted into a smile, "but what could you expect with a name like that? I'm afraid Winthrop is goin' to wish I hadn't interfered none with his demise, but he won't squawk, an' neither will she."

There's the makin's of a couple of good folks wasted in them two pilgrims," and he frowned darkly at the recollection of the note of genuine relief and gladness with which the girl had greeted Endicott; a frown that deepened at the girl's impulsive words to himself, "I think you are just splendid. I'll never distrust you again." "She's a fool!" he muttered under his breath. At his side the half-breed regarded him shrewdly from under the broad brim of his hat.

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"Dat girl she dam' fine 'oman. She got, w'at you call, de nerve."

"It's a good thing it ain't daytime," growled the Texan surlily, "or that there tongue of yours would get sun-burnt the way you keep it a-goin'."

Upon the crest of a high foothill that is a spur of Tiger Ridge, Tex swerved abruptly from the trail and headed straight for the mountains that loomed out of the darkness. On and on he rode, keeping wherever possible to the higher levels to avoid the fences of the nesters whose fields and pastures followed the windings of the creek bottoms.

Higher and higher they climbed and rougher grew the way. The scrub willows gave place to patches of bull pine and the long stretches of buffalo grass to ugly bare patches of black rock. In and out of the scrub timber they wended, following deep coulees to their sources and crossing steep-pitched divides into other coulees. The fences of the nesters were left far behind and following old game trails, or no trails at all, the Texan pushed unhesitatingly forward. At last, just as the dim outlines of the mountains were beginning to assume definite shape in the first faint hint of the morning grey, he pulled into a more extensive patch of timber than any they had passed and dismounting motioned the others to the ground.

While the Texan prepared breakfast, Bat busied himself with the blankets and when the meal was finished Alice found a tent awaiting her, which the half-breed had constructed by throwing the pack-tarp over a number of light poles whose ends rested upon a fallen tree-trunk. Never in her life, thought the girl, as she sank into the foot-thick mattress of pine boughs that underlay the blankets, had a bed felt so comfortable, so absolutely satisfying. But her conscious enjoyment of its comfort was short-lived for the sounds of men and horses, and the low souging of the wind in the pine-tops blended into one, and she slept. Endicott, too, fell asleep almost as soon as he touched the blankets which the half-breed had spread for him a short distance back from the fire, notwithstanding the scant padding of pine needles that interposed between him and mother earth.

Beside the fire the half-breed helped Tex wash the dishes, the while he regarded the cowpuncher shrewdly as if to fathom what was passing in his mind.

"Back in Wolf Rivaire, dey t'ink de pilgrim git hang. W'at for dey mak' de posse?" he asked at length. The Texan finished washing the tin plates, dried his hands, and rolled a cigarette, which he lighted deliberately with a brand from the fire.

"Bat," he said with a glance toward the sleeping Endicott, "me an' you has be'n right good friends for quite a spell. You recollect them four bits, back in Las Vegas—" The half-breed interrupted him with a grin and reaching into his shirt front withdrew a silver half-dollar which depended from his neck by a rawhide thong.

“Oui, A’m don’ git mooch chance to ferget dat four bit.”

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"Well, then, you got to help me through with this here, like I helped you through when you stole Fatty's horse." The half-breed nodded and Tex continued: "When that outfit goes up against the Wolf River hooch you can bet someone's going to leak it out that there wasn't no reg'lar bony-fido hangin' bee. That'll start a posse, an' that's why we got to stay *cached* good an' tight till this kind of blows over an' gives us a chance to slip acrost the Misszoo. Even if it don't leak out, an' any one should happen to spot the pilgrim, that would start a posse, *pronto*, an' we'd get ours for helpin' him to elope."

"'Spose dey git de pilgrim," persisted the half-breed, "de, w'at you call, de jury, dey say 'turn 'um loose' 'cause he keel dat Purdy for try to——"

Tex hurled his cigarette into the blaze. "You're a damn smart Injun, ain't you? Well, you just listen to me. I'm runnin' this here little outfit, an' there's reasons over an' above what I've orated, why the pilgrim is goin' to be treated to a good lib'ral dose of the rough stuff. If he comes through, he'll stack up pretty close to a top hand, an' if he don't—" The Texan paused and scowled into the fire. "An' if he don't it's his own damn fault, anyhow—an' there you are."

The half-breed nodded, and in the dark eyes the Texan noted a half-humorous, half-ominous gleam; "Dat, w'at you call, '*reason over an' 'bove*', she damn fine 'oman. A'm t'ink she lak' de pilgrim more'n you. But mebbe-so you show heem up for w'at you call, de yellow, you git her 'way, but—me, A'm no lak' I see her git harm." With which declaration the half-breed rose abruptly and busied himself with the horses, while the Texan, without bothering to spread his blankets, pulled his hat over his face and stretched out beside the fire.

CHAPTER XI

A RESCUE

When Alice Marcum opened her eyes the timber was in darkness. The moon had not yet topped the divide and through an opening in the trees the girl could see the dim outlines of an endless sea of peaks and ridges that stretched away to the eastward. The voice of the Texan sounded in her ears: "Come alive, now! We got to eat an' pull out of here in an hour's time if we're goin' to fetch the bad lands by daylight."

Peering around the edge of her shelter tent she could see him, coffee-pot in hand, standing beside the tiny flame that licked at the dry pine shavings of a newly kindled fire.

He turned and made his way to the creek that burbled over the rocks a short way down the ravine and Alice drew on her riding-boots and joined Endicott who had made his way painfully toward the fire where he stood gazing ruefully at the begrimed wreck of a

white collar which he held in his hand. The Texan returned and placed the coffee-pot close against the tiny blaze.

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"When you get through invoicin' yer trooso, Winthrop, it wouldn't delay us none if you'd grasp that there hand-ax an' carve out a little fire-fodder." He glanced up at Alice. "An' if cookin' of any kind has be'n inclooded in your repretwa of accomplishments, you might sizzle up a hunk of that sow-belly, an' keep yer eye on this here pot. An' if Winthrop should happen to recover from his locomotive attacksyou an' hack off a limb or two, you can get a little bigger blaze a-goin' an', just before that water starts to burn, slop in a fistful of java. You'll find some dough-gods an' salve in one of them canvas bags, an' when you're all set, holler. I'll throw the kaks on these cayuses, an' Bat, he can wrastle with the pack."

Alice looked into the Texan's face with a peculiar little puckering of the brows, and laughed: "See here, Mr. Tex," she said, "of course, I know that java must be coffee, but if you will kindly render the rest of your remarks a little less caliginous by calling the grub by its Christian name, maybe I'll get along better with the breakfast."

The Texan was laughing now, a wholesome, hearty laugh in which was no trace of cynicism, and the girl felt that for the first time she had caught a glimpse of the real man, the boyish, whole-hearted man that once or twice before she had suspected existed behind the mask of the sardonic smile. From that moment she liked him and at the breezy whimsicality of his next words she decided that it would be well worth the effort to penetrate the mask.

"The dude, or dictionary, names for the above specified commodities is bacon, biscuits, an' butter. An' referrin' back to your own etymological spasm, the word 'grub' shows a decided improvement over anything you have uttered previous. I had expected 'food' an' wouldn't have hardly batted an' eye at 'viands,' an' the caliginous part of it is good, only, if you aim to obfuscate my convolutions you'll have to dig a little deeper. Entirely irrelevant to syntax an' the allied trades, as the feller says, I'll add that them leggin's of yours is on the wrong legs, an' here comes Winthrop with a chip."

Turning abruptly, the man made his way toward the horses, and as Endicott approached with an armful of firewood, the contrast between the men was brought sharply to the girl's notice. The Texan, easy and lithe of movement as an animal born to the wild, the very tilt of his soft-brimmed hat and the set of his clothing bespeaking conscious mastery of his environment—a mastery that the girl knew was not confined to the subduing of wild cattle and horses and the following of obscure trails in the nighttime. Never for a moment had the air of self-confidence deserted him. With the same easy assurance that he had flung his loop about the shoulders of the Mayor of Wolf River he had carried off the honours of the tournament, insulted Purdy to his face, dictated to the deputy sheriff, and planned and carried out the release of Endicott from the grip of the law. And what was most surprising of all, never had he shown a trace of the boorish embarrassment or self-consciousness which, up to the moment of his brutal attack upon her, had characterized the attitude of Purdy. And the girl realized that beneath his

picturesque slurring and slashing of English, was a familiarity with words that had never been picked up in the cow-country.

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Endicott tossed down his wood, and Alice could not help but notice the sorry appearance of the erstwhile faultlessly dressed gentleman who stood collarless and unshaven, the once delicately lined silk shirt filthy with trail dust, and the tailored suit wrinkled and misshapen as the clothing of a tramp. She noted, too, that his movements were awkward and slow with the pain of overtaxed muscles, and that the stiff derby hat he had been forced to jam down almost to the tops of his ears had left a grimy red band across his forehead. She smiled as her eyes swept the dishevelled and uncouth figure.

"I am glad," said Endicott with asperity, as he brushed the dirt and bits of bark from his coat, "that you find the situation so humorous. It must be highly gratifying to know that it is of your own making."

The tone roused the girl's anger and she glanced up as she finished lacing her leggings.

"Yes," she answered, sweetly, "it is—very. And one of the most amusing features is to watch how a man's disposition crabs with the mussing of his clothing. No wonder the men who live out here wear things that won't muss, or there wouldn't be but one left and he'd be just a concentrated chunk of unadulterated venom. Really, Winthrop, you do look horrid, and your disposition is perfectly nasty. But, cheer up, the worst is yet to come, and if you will go down to the creek and wash your hands, you can come back and help me with the grub. You can get busy and dig the dough-gods and salve out of that sack while I sizzle up the sow-belly."

Endicott regarded her with a frown of disapproval: "Why this preposterous and vulgar talk?"

"Adaptability to environment," piped the girl, glibly. "You can't get along by speaking New York in Montana, any easier than you can with English in Cincinnati."

Endicott turned away with a sniff of disgust, and the girl's lips drew into a smile which she meant to be an exact replica of the Texan's as she proceeded to slice strips of bacon into the frying-pan.

The meal was a silent affair, and during its progress the moon rose clear of the divide and hung, a great orange ball, above the high-flung peaks. Almost simultaneously with the rising of the moon, the wind rose, and scuds of cloud-vapour passed, low down, blurring the higher peaks.

"We got to get a move on," opined the Texan, with an eye on the clouds. "Throw them dishes into the pack the way they are, an' we'll clean 'em when we've got more time. There's a storm brewin' west of here an' we want to get as far as we can before she hits."

By the time the others were in the saddle, Bat was throwing the final hitch on his pack outfit, and with the Texan in the lead, the little cavalcade headed southward.

An hour's climb, during which they skirted patches of scrub pine, clattered over the loose rocks of ridges, and followed narrow, brush-choked coulees to their sources, found them on the crest of the Cow Creek divide.

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The wind, blowing half a gale from the south-east, whipped about their faces and roared and whistled among the rocks and scrub timber. Alice's eyes followed the Texan's glance toward the west and there, low down on the serried horizon she could see the black mass of a cloud bank.

"You can't tell nothin' about those thunderheads. They might hold off 'til along towards mornin', they might pile up on us in an hour, and they might not break at all," vouchsafed the man, as Alice reined in her horse close beside his.

"But the wind is from the other direction!"

"Yes, it generally is when the thunder-storms get in their work. If we can get past the Johnson fences we can take it easy an' camp most anywhere when the storm hits, but if we get caught on this side without no moonlight to travel by an' have to camp over tomorrow in some coulee, there's no tellin' who'll run onto us. This south slope's infested some plentiful by the riders of three or four outfits." He headed his horse down the steep descent, the others following in single file.

As the coulee widened Alice found herself riding by the Texan's side. "Oh, don't you just love the wild country!" she exclaimed, breaking a long interval of silence. "The plains and the mountains, the woods and the creeks, and the wonderful air——"

"An' the rattlesnakes, an' the alkali, an' the soap-holes, an' the quicksand, an' the cactus, an' the blisterin' sun, an' the lightnin', an' the rain, an' the snow, an' the ice, an' the sleet——"

The girl interrupted him with a laugh: "Were you born a pessimist, or has your pessimism been acquired?"

The Texan did not lift his eyes from the trail: "Earnt, I reckon, would be a better word. An' I don't know as it's pessimism, at that, to look in under the crust of your pie before you bite it. If you'd et flies for blueberries as long as I have, you'd——"

"I'd ask for flies, and then if there were any blueberries the surprise would be a pleasant one."

"Chances are, there wouldn't be enough berries to surprise you none pleasant. Anyhow, that would be kind of forcin' your luck. Follerin' the same line of reasoning a man ort to hunt out a cactus to set on so's he could be surprised pleasant if it turned out to be a Burbank one."

"You're hopeless," laughed the girl. "But look—the moonlight on the peaks! Isn't it wonderful! See how it distorts outlines, and throws a mysterious glamour over the dark patches of timber. Corot would have loved it."

The Texan shook his head: “No. It wouldn’t have got *to him*. He couldn’t never have got into the feel of stuff like that. Meakin did, and Remington, but it takes old Charlie Russell to pick it right out of the air an’ slop it onto canvas.”

Alice regarded the man in wonder. “You do love it!” she said. “Why should you be here if you didn’t love it?”

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"Bein' a cow-hand, it's easier to make a livin' here than in New York or Boston. I've never be'n there, but I judge that's the case."

"But you are a cow-hand from choice. You have an education and you could——"

"No. All the education I've got you could pile onto a dime, an' it wouldn't kill more'n a dozen men. Me an' the higher education flirted for a couple of years or so, way back yonder in Austin, but owin' to certain an' sundry eccentricities of mine that was frowned on by civilization, I took to the brush an' learnt the cow business. Then after a short but onmonotonous sojourn in Las Vegas, me an' Bat came north for our health. . . . Here's Johnson's horse pasture. We've got to slip through here an' past the home ranch in a quiet an' onobstrusive manner if we aim to preserve the continuity of Winthrop's spinal column."

"Can't we go around?" queried the girl.

"No. The coulee is fenced clean acrost an' way up to where even a goat couldn't edge past. We've got to slip through. Once we get past the big reservoir we're all right. I'll scout on ahead."

The cowboy swung to the ground and threw open the barbed-wire gate. "Keep straight on through, Bat, unless you hear from me. I'll be waitin' by the bunk-house. Chances are, them salamanders will all be poundin' their ear pretty heavy, bein' up all last night to the dance." He galloped away and the others followed at a walk. For an hour no one spoke.

"I thought that fence enclosed a pasture, not a county," growled Endicott, as he clumsily shifted his weight to bear on a spot less sore.

"*Oui*, dat hoss pasture she 'bout seven mile long. Den we com' by de ranch, an' den de reservoir, an' de hay fences." The half-breed opened a gate and a short distance down the creek Alice made out the dark buildings of the ranch. As they drew nearer the girl felt her heart race madly, and the soft thud of the horse's feet on the sod sounded like the thunder of a cavalry charge. Grim and forbidding loomed the buildings. Not a light showed, and she pictured them peopled with lurking forms that waited to leap out as they passed and throttle the man who had rescued her from the brutish Purdy. She was sorry she had been nasty to Endicott. She wanted to tell him so, but it was too late. She thought of the revolver that Jennie had given her, and slipping her hand into her pocket she grasped it by the butt. At least, she could do for him what he had done for her. She could shoot the first man to lay hands on him.

Suddenly her heart stood still and her lips pressed tight. A rider emerged from the black shadow of the bunk-house.

“Hands up!” The girl’s revolver was levelled at the man’s head, and the next instant she heard the Texan laugh softly.

“Just point it the other way, please, if it’s loaded. A fellow shot me with one of those once an’ I had a headache all the rest of the evenin’.” His horse nosed in beside hers. “It’s just as I thought,” he explained. “Everyone around the outfit’s dead to the world. Bein’ up all night dancin’, an’ most of the next day trailin’ home, you couldn’t get ’em up for a poker game—let alone hangin’ a pilgrim.”

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Alice's fear vanished the moment the Texan appeared. His air of absolute self-confidence in his ability to handle a situation compelled the confidence of others.

"Aren't your nerves ever shaken? Aren't you ever afraid?" she asked.

Tex smiled: "Nerve ain't in not bein' afraid," he answered evasively, "but in not lettin' folks know when you're afraid."

Another gate was opened, and as they passed around the scrub-capped spur of a ridge that projected into the widening valley, the girl drew her horse up sharply and pointed ahead.

"Oh! A little lake!" she cried enthusiastically. "See how the moonlight shimmers on the tiny waves."

Heavy and low from the westward came an ominous growl of thunder.

"Yes. An' there'll be somethin' besides moonlight a-shimmerin' around here directly. That ain't exactly a lake. It's Johnson's irrigation reservoir. If we could get about ten miles below here before the storm hits, we can hole up in a rock cave 'til she blows over. The creek valley narrows down to a canyon where it cuts through the last ridge of mountains.

"Hit 'er up a little, Bat. We'll try an' make the canyon!"

A flash of lightning illumined the valley, and glancing upward, Alice saw that the mass of black clouds was almost overhead. The horses were forced into a run as the hills reverberated to the mighty roll of the thunder. They were following a well-defined bridle trail and scarcely slackened their pace as they splashed in and out of the water where the trail crossed and recrossed the creek. One lightning flash succeeded another with such rapidity that the little valley was illuminated almost to the brightness of day, and the thunder reverberated in one continuous roar.

With the buildings of Johnson's ranch left safely behind, Alice's concern for Endicott's well-being cooled perceptibly.

"He needn't to have been so hateful, just because I laughed at him," she thought, and winced at a lightning flash. Her lips pressed tighter. "I hate thunder-storms—to be out in them. I bet we'll all be soaked and—" There was a blinding flash of light, the whole valley seemed filled with a writhing, twisting rope of white fire, and the deafening roar of thunder that came simultaneously with the flash made the ground tremble. It was as though the world had exploded beneath their feet, and directly in the forefront the girl saw a tall dead cottonwood split in half and topple sidewise. And in the same instant she caught a glimpse of Endicott's face. It was very white. "He's afraid," she gritted, and at the thought her own fear vanished, and in its place came a wild spirit of

exhilaration. This was life. Life in the raw of which she had read and dreamed but never before experienced. Her horse stopped abruptly. The Texan had dismounted and was pulling at the huge fragment of riven trunk that barred the trail.

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"We'll have to lead 'em around through the brush, there. We can't budge this boy."

Scattering rain-drops fell—huge drops that landed with a thud and splashed broadly.

"Get out the slickers, Bat. Quick now, or we're in for a wettin'." As he spoke the man stepped to Alice's side, helped her to the ground, and loosened the pack-strings of her saddle. A moment later he held a huge oilskin of brilliant yellow, into the sleeves of which the girl thrust her arms. There was an odour as of burning sulphur and she sniffed the air as she buttoned the garment about her throat.

The Texan grinned: "Plenty close enough I'll say, when you get a whiff of the hell-fire. Better wait here 'til I find a way through the brush. An' keep out of reach of the horse's heels with that slicker on. You can't never trust a cayuse, 'specially when they can't more'n half see. They're liable to take a crack at you for luck."

Grasping his bridle reins the Texan disappeared and by the lightning flashes she could see him forcing his way through the thicket of willows. The scattering drops changed to a heavy downpour. The moonlight had long since been obliterated and the short intervals between the lightning flashes were spaces of intense blackness. A yellow-clad figure scrambled over the tree trunk and the cowboy took the bridle reins from her hand.

"You slip through here. I'll take your horse around."

On the other side, the cowboy assisted her to mount, and pulling his horse in beside hers, led off down the trail. The rain steadily increased in volume until the flashes of lightning showed only a grey wall of water, and the roar of it blended into the incessant roar of the thunder. The horses splashed into the creek and wallowed to their bellies in the swirling water.

The Texan leaned close and shouted to make himself heard.

"They don't make 'em any worse than this. I've be'n out in some considerable rainstorms, take it first an' last, but I never seen it come down solid before. A fish could swim anywheres through this."

"The creek is rising," answered the girl.

"Yes, an' we ain't goin' to cross it many more times. In the canyon she'll be belly-deep to a giraffe, an' we got to figure a way out of the coulee 'fore we get to it."

Alice was straining her ears to catch his words, when suddenly, above the sound of his voice, above the roar of the rain and the crash and roll of thunder, came another sound—a low, sullen growl—indefinable, ominous, terrible. The Texan, too, heard the sound and, jerking his horse to a standstill, sat listening. The sullen growl deepened into a loud rumble, indescribably horrible. Alice saw that the Texan's face was drawn into a

tense, puzzled frown. A sudden fear gripped her heart. She leaned forward and the words fairly shrieked from her lips.

“It’s the reservoir!”

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The Texan whirled to face the others whose horses had crowded close and stood with drooping heads.

"The reservoir's let go!" he shouted, and pointed into the grey wall of water at right angles to their course. "Ride! Ride like hell an' save yourselves! I'll look after her!" The next instant he whirled his horse against the girl's.

"Ride straight ahead!" he roared. "Give him his head an' hang on! I'll stay at his flank, an' if you go down we'll take a chance together!"

Slipping the quirt from the horn of his saddle the cowboy brought it down across her horse's flank and the animal shot away straight into the opaque grey wall. Alice gave the horse a loose rein, set her lips, and gripped the horn of her saddle as the brute plunged on.

The valley was not wide. They had reached a point where its sides narrowed to form the mouth of the canyon. The pound of the horse's feet was lost in the titanic bombilation of the elements—the incessant crash and rumble of thunder and the ever increasing roar of rushing waters. At every jump the girl expected her frantic horse to go down, yet she was conscious of no feeling of fear. She glanced over her shoulder, but the terrific downpour acted as a curtain through which her eyes could not penetrate with the aid even of the most vivid flashes of lightning. Yet she knew that the Texan rode at her flank and that the others followed—Endicott and Bat, with his pack-horse close-snubbed to his saddle-horn. Suddenly the girl felt her horse labouring. His speed slackened perceptibly. As abruptly as it started the rain stopped; and she saw that water was swirling about his knees. Saw also by the aid of a lightning flash that throughout its width the valley was a black sea of tossing water. Before her the bank was very close and she jerked her horse toward a point where the perpendicular sides of a cutbank gave place to a narrow plane that slanted steeply upward. It seemed to the girl that the steep ascent would be impossible for the horses but it was the only chance. She glanced backward. The Texan was close behind, and following him were the others, their horses wallowing to their bellies. She had reached the hill and so steep was its pitch that her horse seemed perpendicular to the earth's surface. She leaned over the horn and twisted her fingers into his mane as the animal, his feet clear of the water, clawed and scrambled like a cat to gain the top. Another moment and he had pulled himself over the edge and the girl leaped to the ground. The Texan had not followed to the top but had halted his horse at the edge of the water that was mounting steadily higher. Bat swung in with his pack horse and with his quirt Tex forced them up the embankment. Endicott's horse was all but swimming. The water came above the man's knees as the animal fought for footing. The Texan leaned far out and, grasping the bridle, drew him in to the bank and quirted him to the top. Then, as the three watched, he headed his own horse upward. Scarcely had the animal come clear of the water when the eager watchers saw that something was wrong.

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"De cinch—she bus'!" cried the half-breed excitedly. "Dat dam' Purdy cut de cinch an' A'm trade Tex mine for ride de outlaw, an' we trade back. *Voila!*" As the man talked, he jerked the coiled rope from his saddle and rushed to the edge. Alice, too, crowded to the bank, her hands tight clenched as she saw the man, the saddle gone from under him, clinging desperately to the bridle reins, his body awash in the black waters. Saw also that his weight on the horse's head was causing the animal to quit the straight climb and to plunge and turn erratically. It was evident that both horse and rider must be hurled into the flood. The fury of the storm had passed. The rumble of thunder was distant now. The flashes of lightning came at greater intervals, and with a pale glow instead of the dazzling brilliance of the nearer flashes. Through a great rift in the cloud-bank the moon showed, calm and serene above the mad rush of black waters.

For a single instant Alice gazed into the up-turned face of the Texan, and in that instant she saw his lips curve into the familiar cynical smile. Then he calmly let go the reins and slipped silently beneath the black water, as the released horse scrambled to the top. Beside her, Endicott uttered an oath and, tearing at the buttons of his slicker, dashed the garment to the ground. His coat followed, and stooping he tore the shoes from his feet and poised on the very edge of the flood. With a cry she sprang to his side and gripped his arm, but without a word he shook her roughly away, and as a dark form appeared momentarily upon the surface of the flood he plunged in.

Alice and Bat watched as the moonlight showed the man swimming with strong, sure strokes toward the spot where a moment before the dark form had appeared upon the surface. Then he dived, and the swift-rushing water purled and gurgled as it closed over the spot where he had been. Rope in hand, Bat, closely followed by the girl, ran along the edge of the bank, both straining their eyes for the first sign of movement upon the surface of the flood. Would he never come up? The slope up which the horses had scrambled steepened into a perpendicular cut-bank at no great distance below, and if the current bore the two men past that point the girl knew instinctively that rescue would be impossible and they would be swept into the vortex of the canyon.

There was a cry from Bat, and Alice, struggling to keep up, caught a blur of motion upon the surface some distance below. A few steps brought them opposite to the point, where, scarcely thirty feet from the bank, two forms were struggling violently. Suddenly an arm raised high, and a doubled fist crashed squarely against the jaw of a white, upturned face. The half-breed poised an instant and threw his rope. The wide loop fell true and a moment later Endicott succeeded in passing it under the arms of the unconscious Texan. Then the rope drew taut and the halfbreed braced to the pull as the men were forced shoreward by the current.

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With a cry of relief, Alice rushed to the aid of the half-breed, and grasping the rope, threw her weight into the pull. But her relief was short-lived, for when the forms in the water touched shore it was to brush against the side of the cut-bank with tea feet of perpendicular wall above them. And worse than, that, unhardened to the wear of water, the bank was caving off in great chunks as the current gnawed at its base. A section weighing tons let go with a roar only a few yards below, and Bat and the girl worked as neither had ever worked before to tow their burden upstream to the sloping bank. But the force of the current and the conformation of the bank, which slanted outward at an angle that diminished the force of the pull by half, rendered their efforts in vain.

“You stan’ back!” ordered Bat sharply, as a section of earth gave way almost beneath their feet, but the girl paid no attention, and the two redoubled their efforts.

In the water, Endicott took in the situation at a glance. He realized that the strain of the pull was more than the two could overcome. Realized also that each moment added to the Jeopardy of the half-breed and the girl. There was one chance—and only one. Relieved of his weight, the unresisting form of the Texan could be dragged to safety—and he would take that chance.

“*Non! Non!*” The words were fairly hurled from the half-breed’s lips, as he seemed to divine what was passing in Endicott’s mind. But Endicott gave no heed. Deliberately he let go the rope and the next moment was whirled from sight, straight toward the seething vortex of the canyon, where the moonlight revealed dimly in the distance only a wild rush of lashing waters and the thrashing limbs of uprooted trees.

CHAPTER XII

TEX DOES SOME SCOUTING

The moon hung low over the peaks to the westward when the Texan opened his eyes. For some moments he stared about him in bewilderment, his gaze travelling slowly from the slicker-clad form of the girl, who sat close beside him with her face buried in her arms, to the little group of horses that stood huddled dejectedly together. With an effort he struggled to his elbow, and at the movement, the girl raised her head and turned a very white face toward him.

Shivering with cold, the Texan raised himself to a sitting posture. “Where’s Bat?” he asked. “An’ why ain’t he onsaddled those horses, an’ built a fire? I’m froze stiff.”

“Bat has gone to—to find Winthrop,” answered the girl, with a painful catch in her voice. “He wouldn’t wait, and I had no matches, and yours were all wet, and I couldn’t loosen the cinches.”

Tex passed his hand over his forehead, as if trying to remember, and his fingers prodded tenderly at his jaw. "I recollect bein' in the water, an' the pilgrim was there, an' we were scrappin' an' he punched me in the jaw. He carries a whallop up his sleeve like the kick of a mule. But what we was scrappin' about, an' where he is now, an' how I come here, is somethin' I don't savvy."

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Step by step the girl detailed what had happened while the Texan listened in silence. "And now," she concluded, "he's gone. Just when—" her voice broke and once more she buried her face in her arms. Tex saw that she was sobbing silently. He felt for his "makings" and drew from his pocket a little sack of soggy tobacco and some wet papers. He returned them to his pocket and rose to his feet.

"You're cold," he said softly. "There's dry matches in the pack. I'll make a fire an' get those wet saddles off the horses."

Alice did not look up and the man busied himself with the pack. A few minutes later she felt his fingers upon her shoulder. He pointed toward a fire that crackled cheerfully from the depths of a bull pine thicket. "I fixed you up a shelter tent and spread your blankets. The tarp kep' 'em tolerable dry. Go over there an' get off those clothes. You must be wet through—nothin' short of a divin' suit would have kep' that rain out!"

"But——"

He forestalled the objection. "There won't be any one to bother you. I'm goin' down the creek."

The girl noticed that his horse, saddled with Endicott's saddle stood close behind her.

"I didn't mean that!" she exclaimed. "But you are cold—chilled to the bone. You need the fire more than I do."

The man shook his head: "I'll be goin' now," he said. "You'd better make you some coffee."

"You're going to—to——"

Tex nodded: "Yes. To find the pilgrim. If he's alive I'll find him. An' if he ain't I'll find him. An' when I do, I'll bring him back to you." He turned abruptly, swung onto his horse, and Alice watched him as he disappeared down the valley, keeping to the higher ground. Not until she was alone did the girl realize how miserably cold and uncomfortable she was. She rose stiffly, and walking slowly to the edge of the bank, looked out over the little valley. The great reservoir had run out in that first wild rush of water and now the last rays of moonlight showed only wide, glistening pools, and the creek subsided to nearly its normal proportions. With a shudder she turned toward the fire. Its warmth felt grateful. She removed the slicker and riding costume and, wrapping herself, squaw-like, in a blanket, sat down in the little shelter tent. She found that the Texan had filled the coffee pot and, throwing in some coffee, she set it to boil.

"He's so thoughtful, and self-reliant, and—and competent," she murmured. "And he's brave, and—and picturesque. Winthrop is brave, too—just as brave as he is, but—he isn't a bit picturesque." She relapsed into silence as she rummaged in the bag for a

cup, and the sugar, and a can of milk. The moon sank behind the ridge and the girl replenished her fire from the pile of wood the Texan had left within reach of her hand. She drank her coffee and her eyes sought to penetrate the blackness beyond the

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firelight. Somewhere out there in the dark—she shuddered as she attempted to visualize *what* was somewhere out there in the dark. And then a flash of memory brought with it a ray of hope that cheered her immeasurably. “Why, he was a champion swimmer in college,” she said aloud. “He was always winning cups and things. And he’s strong, and brave—and yet——” Vividly to her mind came the picture of the wildly rushing flood with its burden of tossing trees, and the man being swept straight into the gurge of it. “I’ll tell him he’s brave—and he’ll spoil it all by saying that it was the only *practical* thing to do.” “Oh,” she cried aloud, “I could love him if it were not for his deadly practicability—even if I should have to live in Cincinnati.” And straightway fell to comparing the two men. “Tex is absurdly unconventional in speech and actions, and he has an adorable disregard for laws and things. He’s just a big, irresponsible boy—and yet, he makes you feel as if he always knew exactly what to do and how to do it. And he is brave, too, with a reckless, devil-may-care sort of bravery that takes no thought of cost or consequences. He knew, when he let go his bridle reins, that he couldn’t swim a stroke—and he smiled and didn’t care. And he’s gentle and considerate, too.” She remembered the look in his eyes when he said: “You are cold,” and blushed furiously.

It seemed hours she sat there staring into the little fire and listening for sounds from the dark. But the only sounds that came to her were the sounds of the feeding horses, and in utter weariness she lay back with her head upon a folded blanket, and slept.

When the Texan swung onto his horse after having made the girl comfortable for her long vigil, a scant half-hour of moonlight was left to him. He gave the horse his head and the animal picked his way among the loose rocks and scrub timber that capped the ridge. When darkness overtook him he dismounted, unsaddled, and groped about for firewood. Despite its recent soaking the resinous bull pine flared up at the touch of a match, and with his back to a rock-wall, the cowboy sat and watched the little flames shoot upward. Once more he felt for his “makings” and with infinite pains dried out his papers and tobacco.

“It’s the chance I be’n aimin’ to make for myself,” he mused, as he drew the grey smoke of a cigarette deep into his lungs, “to get Bat an’ the pilgrim away—an’ I ride off and leave it.” The cigarette was consumed and he rolled another. “Takin’ a slant at himself from the inside, a man kind of gets a line on how damned ornery folks can get. Purdy got shot, an’ everyone said he got just what was comin’ to him—— Me, an’ everyone else—an’ he did. But when you get down to cases, he wasn’t no hell of a lot worse’n me, at that. We was both after the same thing—only his work was coarser.” For hours the man sat staring into his fire, the while he rolled and smoked many cigarettes.

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"Oh, hell!" he exclaimed, aloud. "I can't turn nester, an' even if I did, she couldn't live out in no mud-roof shack in the bottom of some coulee! Still, she—— There I go again, over the same old trail. This here little girl has sure gone to my head—like a couple of jolts of hundred-proof on an empty stummick. Anyhow, she's a damn sight safer'n ever she was before, an'—I'll bet the old man *would* let me take that Eagle Creek ranch off his hands, an' stake me to a little bunch of stock besides, if I went at him right. If it wasn't for that damn pilgrim! Bat was right. He holds the edge on me—but he's a man." The cowboy glanced anxiously toward the east where the sky was beginning to lighten with the first hint of dawn. He rose, trampled out his fire, and threw the saddle onto his horse. "I've got to find him," he muttered, "if Bat ain't found him already. I don't know much about this swimmin' business but if he could have got holt of a tree or somethin' he might have made her through."

Now riding, now dismounting to lead his horse over some particularly rough outcropping of rocks, or through an almost impenetrable tangle of scrub, the man made his way over the divide and came down into the valley amid a shower of loose rock and gravel, at a point some distance below the lower end of the canyon.

The mountains were behind him. Only an occasional butte reared its head above the sea of low foothills that stretched away into the bad lands to the southward. The sides of the valley flattened and became ill-defined. Low ridges and sage-topped foothills broke up its continuity, so that the little creek that started so bravely from the mountains ended nowhere, its waters being sucked in by the parched and thirsting alkali soil long before it reached the bad lands.

As his horse toiled ankle-deep in the soft whitish mud, Tex's eyes roved over the broadened expanse of the valley. Everywhere were evidences of the destructive force of the flood. Uprooted trees scattered singly and in groups, high-flung masses of brush, hay, and inextricably tangled barbed-wire from which dangled fence-posts marked every bend of the creek bed. And on every hand the bodies of drowned cattle dotted the valley.

"If I was Johnson," he mused, as his eyes swept the valley, "I'd head a right smart of ranch hands down here heeled with a spade an' a sexton's commission. These here late lamented dogies'll cost him somethin' in damages." From force of habit the man read the brands of the dead cattle as he rode slowly down the valley. "D bar C, that's old Dave Cromley's steer. An' there's a T U, an' an I X cow, an' there's one of Charlie Green's, an' a yearlin' of Jerry Keerful's, an' a quarter-circle M,—that belongs over the other side, they don't need to bother with that one, an' there's a——"

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Suddenly he drew himself erect, and rising to stand in the stirrups, gazed long and intently toward a spot a quarter of a mile below, where a thin column of smoke curled over the crest of a low ridge. Abruptly he lost interest in the brands of dead cattle and headed his horse at a run toward a coulee, that gave between two sage covered foothills only a short distance from the faint column of smoke. "That might be Bat, an' then again it mightn't," he muttered. "It can't be the pilgrim without Bat's along, 'cause he wouldn't have no dry matches. An' if it's any one else—" he drew up sharply in the shelter of a thicket, dismounted, and made his way on foot to the summit of the ridge. Removing his hat, he thrust his head through a narrow opening between two sage bushes, and peered into the hollow beyond. Beside a little fire sat Bat and the pilgrim, the latter arrayed in a suit of underwear much abbreviated as to arms and legs, while from the branches of a broken tree-top drawn close beside the blaze depended a pair of mud-caked trousers and a disreputably dirty silk shirt. The Texan picked his way down the hill, slipping and sliding in the soft mud.

"Breakfast about ready?" he asked, with a grin.

"Breakfas'! *Voila!* A'm lak' A'm got som' breakfas', you bet! Me—A'm gon' for cut de chonk of meat out de dead steer but de pilgrim say: '*Non*, dat bes' we don' eat de damn drowned cattle—dat better we sta've firs'!"

Tex laughed: "Can't stand for the drowned ones, eh? Well I don't know as I blame you none, they might be some soggy." Reaching into his shirt-front he produced a salt bag which he tossed to Endicott. "Here's some sinkers I fetched along. Divide 'em up. I've et. It ain't no great ways back to camp——"

"How is she—Miss Marcum? Did she suffer from the shock?"

"Nary suffer. I fixed her up a camp last night back in the timber where we all landed, an' then came away."

"She spent the night alone in the timber!" cried Endicott.

The Texan nodded. "Yes. There ain't nothin' will bother her. I judged it to be the best way." Endicott's hand shot out and the cowboy's met it in a firm grip. "I reckon we're fifty-fifty on that," he said gravely. "How's the swimmin'?"

Endicott laughed: "Fine—only I didn't have to do a great deal of it. I staged a little riding contest all my own, part of the way on a dead cow, and the rest of it on this tree-trunk. I didn't mind that part of it—that was fun, but it didn't last over twenty minutes. After the tree grounded, I had to tramp up and down through this ankle-deep mud to keep from freezing. I didn't dare to go any place for fear of getting lost. I thought at first, when the water went down I would follow back up the valley, but I couldn't find the sides and after one or two false starts I gave it up. Then Bat showed up at daylight and

we managed to build a fire.” Endicott divided the biscuits and proceeded to devour his share.

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Tex rolled a cigarette. "Say," he drawled, when he had lighted it with a twig from the fire, "what the hell did you whallop me in the jaw for? I seen it comin' but I couldn't dodge, an' when she hit—it seemed like I was all tucked away in my little crib, an' somewhere, sweet voices was singin'."

"I had to do it," laughed Endicott. "It was that, or both of us going to the bottom. You were grabbing for my arms and legs."

"I ain't holdin' it against you," grinned Tex. "The arms an' legs is yours, an' you're welcome to 'em. Also I'm obliged to you for permittin' me to tarry a spell longer on this mundane spear, as the fellow says, even if I can't chew nothin' harder'n soup."

"Would you mind rolling me a cigarette," grinned Endicott, as he finished the last of the biscuits. "I never tried it, and I am afraid I would bungle the job." Without hesitation the Texan complied, deftly interposing his body so that the pilgrim could not see that the tobacco he poured into the paper was the last in his sack. He extended the little cylinder. "When you get that lit, you better crawl into them clothes of yours an' we'll be hittin' the back-trail. Out here in the open ain't no place for us to be."

Endicott surveyed his sorry outfit with disfavour. "I would rather stick to the B.V.D.'s, if it were practical."

"B.V.D., B.V.D.," repeated the Texan. "There ain't no such brand on this range. Must be some outfit south of here—what did you say about it?"

"I said my B.V.D.'s," he indicated his under-garments; "these would be preferable to those muddy trousers and that shirt."

"Oh, that's the brand of your longerie. Don't wear none myself, except in winter, an' then thick ones. I've scrutinized them kind, though, more or less thorough—hangin' on lines around nesters' places an' home ranches, when I'd be ridin' through. Never noticed none with B.V.D. on 'em, though. The brand most favoured around here has got XXXX FLOUR printed acrost the broad of 'em, an' I've always judged 'em as belongin' to the opposin' sect."

Endicott chuckled as he gingerly arrayed himself in the damp garments and when he was dressed, Tex regarded him quizzically: "Them belongin's of yourn sure do show neglect, Win." Endicott started at the word. It was the first time any one had abbreviated his name, and instantly he remembered the words of Alice Marcum: "If you keep on improving some day somebody is going to call you Win." He smiled grimly. "I must be improving," he muttered, under his breath, "I would pass anywhere for a tramp." From beyond the fire Tex continued his scrutiny, the while he communed with himself: "Everything's fair, et cetry, as the fellow says, an' it's a cinch there ain't no girl

goin' to fall no hell of a ways for any one rigged out like a last year's sheepherder. But, damn it! he done me a good turn—an' one that took guts to do. 'Tain't no use in chasin'

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the devil around the stump—— If I can get that girl I'm a-goin' to get her! If I do I'll wire in some creek an' turn nester or do any other damned thing that's likewise mean an' debasin' that she wants me to—except run sheep. But if the pilgrim's got the edge, accordin' to Bat's surmise, he's got it fair an' square. The cards is on the table. It's him or me for it—but from now on the game's on the level."

Aloud he said: "Hope you don't mind havin' your name took in vain like I done, but it's a habit of mine to get names down to a workin' basis when I've got to use 'em frequent. Bat, there, his folks started him off with a name that sounded like the Nicene Creed, but we bobbed her down for handy reference, an' likewise I ain't be'n called Horatio since the paternal roof-tree quit sproutin' the punitive switch. But, to get down to cases, you fellows have got to hike back to the camp an' hole up 'til dark. There's bound to be someone ridin' this here coulee an' you got to keep out of sight. I'm goin' to do a little scoutin', an' I'll join you later. It ain't only a couple of miles or so an' you better hit for the high ground an' cross the divide. Don't risk goin' through the canyon."

Endicott glanced apprehensively at his mud encased silk socks, the feet of which were already worn through in a dozen places.

"Where's your slippers!" asked Tex, catching the glance.

"My shoes? I threw them away last night before I took to the water."

"It's just as well. They wasn't any good anyhow. The ground's soft with the rain, all you got to watch out for is prickly pears an' rattlesnakes. You'll be close to camp before the rocks get bad an' then Bat can go hunt up your slippers an' fetch 'em out to you." The Texan started for his horse. At the top of the ridge he turned: "I'll stop an' tell her that you'll be along in a little bit," he called, and swinging into the saddle, struck off up the creek.

The habitual cynical smile that curled his lips broadened as he rode. "This here Johnson, now, he likes me like he likes a saddle-galded boil, ever since I maintained that a rider was hired to ride, an' not to moil, an' quit his post-hole-diggin', hay-pitchin', tea-drinkin' outfit, short-handed. I ain't had no chance to aggravate him real good, outside of askin' him how his post-holes was winterin' through, when I'd meet up with him on the trail, an' invitin' him to go over to the Long Horn to have a snort of tea, a time or two, down to Wolf River."

At the up-slanting bank where they had sought refuge from the valley he dismounted, wrenched his own saddle out of the mud, and examined the broken cinch. "If the pilgrim hadn't saved me the trouble, I'd of sure had to get Purdy for that," he muttered, and looked up to encounter the eyes of the girl, who was watching him from the top of the

bank. Her face was very white, and the sight stirred a strange discomfort within him. "I bet she wouldn't turn no such colour for me, if I'd be'n drowned for a week," he thought, bitterly.

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"You—didn't find him?" The words came with an effort.

The Texan forced a smile: "I wouldn't have be'n here if I hadn't. Or rather Bat did, an' I found the two of 'em. He's all to the mustard an' none the worse for wear, except his clothes—they won't never look quite the same, an' his socks need mendin' in sixty or seventy spots. They'll be along directly. You run along and fix 'em up some breakfast an' keep out of sight. I'm goin' to do a little scoutin' an', maybe, won't be back 'til pretty near dark."

"But you! Surely, you must be nearly starved!" The relief that flashed into her face at the news of Endicott's safety changed to sincere concern.

"I ain't got time, now."

"Please come. The coffee is all ready and it won't take but a minute to fry some bacon."

The Texan smiled up at her. "If you insist," he said. The girl started in surprise at the words, and the man plunged immediately into the vernacular of the cow-country as he followed her into the timber. "Yes. A cup of Java wouldn't go bad, but I won't stop long. I want to kind of circulate along the back-trail a ways to see if we're bein' followed." He took the cup of coffee from her hand and watched as she sliced the bacon and threw it into the frying pan. "Did you ever figure on turnin' nester?" he asked abruptly.

The girl looked at him inquiringly: "Nester?" she asked. "What's a nester?"

Tex smiled: "Nesters is folks that takes up a claim an' fences off a creek somewheres, an' then stays with it 'til, by the grace of God, they either starve to death, or get rich."

Alice laughed: "No, I never thought of being a nester. But it would be loads of fun. That is, if——"

The Texan interrupted her almost rudely: "Yes, an' if they didn't, it would just naturally be hell, wouldn't it?" He gulped down the last of his coffee, and, without waiting for the bacon, strode out of the timber, mounted his horse, and rode away.

At the reservoir site he drew rein and inspected the ruined dirt-and-rock dam. Fresh dirt, brush, and rock had already been dumped into the aperture, and over on the hillside a group of men was busy loading wagons. He let himself into the ranch enclosure, rode past the bunk-house and on toward the big house that sat well back from the other buildings in the centre of a grove of trees. A horse stood saddled beside the porch, and through the open door Tex could hear a man's voice raised in anger: "Why in hell ain't it ready? You might of knowed I'd want it early today, havin' to git out at daylight! You wouldn't give a damn if I never got nothin' to eat!" The door banged viciously cutting off a reply in a woman's voice, and a man strode across the porch, and snatched up the reins of the waiting horse.

“What’s the matter, Johnson, your suspenders galdin’ you this mornin’?”

The man scowled into the face of the cow-puncher who sat regarding him with an irritating grin.

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"What do you want around here? If you want a job go turn your horse into the corral an' git out there an' git to work on that resevoy."

"No, Johnson, I don't want a job. I done had one experience with this outfit, an' I fired you for a boss for keeps."

"Get offen this ranch!" roared the man, shaking a fist, and advancing one threatening step, "or I'll have you throw'd off!"

Tex laughed: "I don't aim to stick around no great while. Fact is, I'm in somethin' of a hurry myself. I just stopped in to give you a chanct to do me a good turn. I happened to be down this way an': 'there's Johnson,' I says to myself, 'he's so free an' open-handed, a man's welcome to anything he's got,' so I stopped in."

The ranchman regarded him with an intent scowl: "'Sth' matter with you, you drunk?"

"Not yet. But I got a friend out here in the hills which he's lost his slippers, an' tore his pants, an' got his shirt all dirty, an' mislaid his hat; an' knowin' you'd be glad to stake him to an outfit I come over, him bein' about your size an' build."

The ranchman's face flushed with anger: "What the hell do I care about you an' your friends. Git offen this ranch, I tell you!"

"Oh, yes, an' while you're gettin' the outfit together just you slip in a cinch, an' a quart or two of *hooch*, case we might get snake-bit."

Beside himself with rage, the man raised his foot to the stirrup. As if suddenly remembering something he paused, lowered his foot, and regarded the cowboy with an evil leer: "Ah-ha, I've got it now!" he moved a step nearer. "I was at the dance night before last to Wolf River." He waited to note the effect of the words on his hearer.

"Did you have a good time? Or did the dollar you had to shell out for the ticket spoil all the fun?"

"Never mind what kind of a *time* I had. But they's plenty of us knows you was the head leader of the gang that took an' lynched that pilgrim."

"That's right," smiled the man coolly. "Beats the devil, how things gets spread around, don't it? An' speakin' of news spreading that way—I just came up the creek from down below the canyon. You must have had quite a bit of water in your reservoir when she let go, Johnson, judgin' by results."

"What do you mean?"

"You ain't be'n down the creek, then?"

“No, I ain’t. I’m goin’ now. I had to git the men to work fixin’ the dam.”

“What I mean is this! There’s about fifty head of cattle, more or less, that’s layin’ sprinkled around on top of the mud. Amongst which I seen T U brands, and I X, an’ D bar C, an’ quite a few nester brands. When your reservoir let go she sure raised hell with other folks’ property. Of course, bein’ away down there where there ain’t any folks, if I hadn’t happened along it might have been two or three weeks before any one would have rode through, an’ you could have run a bunch of ranch hands down an’ buried ’em an’ no one would have be’n any wiser——”

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"You're lyin'!" There was a look of fear in the man's eyes,

Tex shrugged: "You'll only waste a half a day ridin' down to see for yourself," he replied indifferently.

Johnson appeared to consider, then stepped close to the Texan's side: "They say one good turn deserves another. Meanin' that you shet up about them cattle an' I'll shet up about seein' you."

"That way, it wouldn't cost you nothin' would it, Johnson? Well, it's a trade, if you throw in the aforementioned articles of outfit I specified, to boot."

"Not by a damn sight! You got the best end of it the way it is. Lynchin' is murder!"

"So it is," agreed the Texan. "An' likewise, maintainin' weak reservoirs that lets go an' drowns other folks' cattle is a public nuisance, an' a jury's liable to figger up them damages kind of high—'specially again' you, Johnson, bein' ornery an' rotten-hearted, an' tight-fisted, that way, folks don't like you."

"It means hangin' fer you!"

"Yes. But it means catchin' first. I can be a thousan' miles away from here, in a week, but you're different. All they got to do is grab the ranch, it's good for five or six thousan' in damages, all right. Still if you don't want to trade, I'll be goin'." He gathered up his reins.

"Hold on! It's a damned hold-up, but what was it you wanted?"

The Texan checked off the items on his gloved fingers: "One pair of pants, one shirt, one hat, one pair of boots, same size as yourn, one pair of spurs, one silk muffler, that one you've got on'll do, one cinch, half a dozen packages of tobacco, an' one bottle of whiskey. All to be in good order an' delivered right here within ten minutes. An' you might fetch a war-bag to pack 'em in. Hurry up now! 'Cause if you ain't back in ten minutes, I'll be movin' along, an' when I pass the word to the owners of them cattle it's goin' to raise their asperity some obnoxious."

With a growl the man disappeared into the house to return a few minutes later with a sack whose sides bulged.

"Dump 'em out an' we'll look 'em over!" ordered the Texan and the man complied.

"All right. Throw 'em in again an' hand 'em up."

When he had secured the load by means of his pack strings he turned to the rancher.

“So long, Johnson, an’ if I was you I wouldn’t lose no time in attendin’ to the last solemn obsequies of them defunk dogies. I’ll never squeal, but you can’t tell how soon someone else might come a-ridin’ along through the foot-hills.”

CHAPTER XIII

A BOTTLE OF “HOOCH”

It was well past the middle of the afternoon when the Texan rode up the steep incline and unsaddled his horse. The occupants of the camp were all asleep, the girl in her little shelter tent, and Bat and Endicott with their blankets spread at some little distance away. Tex carried the outfit he had procured from Johnson into the timber, then crawled cautiously to the pilgrim’s side, and awoke him without arousing the others.

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"Hey, Win, wake up," he whispered as the man regarded him through a pair of sleepy eyes. "Come on with me. I got somethin' to show you." Tex led the way to the war-bag. "Them clothes of yours is plum despicable to look at," he imparted, "so I borrowed an outfit from a friend of mine that's about your size. Just crawl into 'em an' see how they fit."

Five minutes later the cowboy viewed with approval the figure that stood before him, booted and spurred, with his mud-caked garments replaced by corduroy trousers and a shirt of blue flannel against which the red silk muffler made a splotch of vivid colouring.

"You look like a sure enough top hand, now," grinned the Texan. "We'll just take a drink on that." He drew the cork from the bottle and tendered it to Endicott, who shook his head.

"No, thanks. I never use it."

The Texan stared at him in surprise. "Do you mean you've got the regular habit of not drinkin', or is it only a temporary lapse of duty?"

Endicott laughed: "Regular habit," he answered.

The other drank deeply of the liquor and returned the cork. "You ought to break yourself of that habit, Win, there's no tellin' where it'll lead to. A fellow insulted me once when I was sober an' I never noticed it. But laying aside your moral defects, them whiskers of yours is sure ornamental to a scandalous degree. Wait, I'll fetch my razor, an' you can mow 'em." He disappeared, to return a few moments later with a razor, a cake of hand-soap, and a shaving brush.

"I never have shaved my self," admitted Endicott, eyeing the articles dubiously.

"Who have you shaved?"

"I mean, I have always been shaved by a barber."

"Oh!" The cowboy took another long pull at the bottle. "Well, Win, the fact is them whiskers looks like hell an' has got to come off." He rolled up his sleeves. "I ain't no barber, an' never shaved a man in my life, except myself, but I'm willin' to take a chance. After what you've done for me I'd be a damn coward not to risk it. Wait now 'til I get another drink an' I'll tackle the job an' get it over with. A man can't never tell what he can do 'til he tries."

Endicott viewed the cowboy's enthusiasm with alarm. "That's just what I was thinking, Tex," he hastened to say, as the other drew the cork from the bottle. "And it is high time I learned to shave myself, anyway. I have never been where it was necessary before. If you will just sit there and tell me how, I will begin right now."



“Alright, Win, you can’t never learn any younger. First off, you wet your face in the creek an’ then soap it good. That soap ain’t regular shavin’ soap, but it’ll do. Then you take the brush an’ work it into a lather, an’ then you shave.”

“But,” inquired the man dubiously, “don’t you have towels soaked in hot water, and——”

“Towels an’ hot water, hell! This ain’t no barber shop, an’ there ain’t no gin, or whatever they rub on your face after you get through, either. You just shave an’ knock the soap off your ears an’ that’s all there is to it.”

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After much effort Endicott succeeded in smearing his face with a thin, stringy lather, and gingerly picked up the razor. The Texan looked on in owlish solemnity as the man sat holding the blade helplessly.

“What you doin’, Win, sayin’ the blessin’? Just whet her on your boot an’ sail in.”

“But where do I begin?”

The Texan snorted disgustedly. “Your face ain’t so damn big but what an hour or two reminiscence ought to take you back to where it starts. Begin at your hat an’ work down over your jaw ’til you come to your shirt, an’ the same on the other side, takin’ in your lip an’ chin in transit, as the feller says. An’ hold it like a razor, an’ not like a pitchfork. Now you got to lather all over again, ’cause it’s dry.”

Once more Endicott laboriously coaxed a thin lather out of the brown hand-soap, and again he grasped the razor, this time with a do-or-die determination.

“Oughtn’t I have a mirror?” he asked doubtfully.

“A mirror! Don’t you know where your own face is at? You don’t need no mirror to eat with, do you? Well, it’s the same way with shavin’. But if you got to have ocular evidence, just hang out over the creek there where it’s still.”

The operation was slow and painful. It seemed to Endicott as though each separate hair were being dragged out by its roots, and more than once the razor edge drew blood. At last the job was finished, he bathed his smarting face in the cold water, and turned to the Texan for approval.

“You look like the second best bet in a two-handed cat fight,” he opined, and producing his book of cigarette papers, proceeded to stick patches of tissue over various cuts and gashes. “Takin’ it by an’ large, though, it ain’t so bad. There’s about as many places where you didn’t go close enough as there is where you went too close, so’s it’ll average somewhere around the skin level. Anyway it shows you tried to look respectable—an’ you do, from your neck down—an’ your hat, too.”

“I am certainly obliged to you,” laughed Endicott, “for going to all that trouble to provide me with clothing. And by the way, did you learn anything—in regard to posses, I mean?”

The Texan nodded sombrely: “Yep. I did. This here friend of mine was on his way back from Wolf River when I met up with him. ‘Tex,’ he says, ‘where’s the pilgrim?’ I remains noncommittal, an’ he continues, ‘I layed over yesterday to enjoy Purdy’s funeral, which it was the biggest one ever pulled off in Wolf River—not that any one give a damn about Purdy, but they’ve drug politics into it, an’ furthermore, his’n was the only corpse to show for the whole celebration, it bein’ plumb devoid of further casualties.’” The cowpuncher

paused, referred to his bottle, and continued: "It's just like I told you before. There can't no one's election get prejudiced by hangin' you, an' they've made a kind of issue out of it.

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There's four candidates for sheriff this fall an' folks has kind of let it be known, sub rosy, that the one that brings you in, gathers the votes. In the absence of any corpse delecti, which in this case means yourn, folks refuses to assume you was hung, so each one of them four candidates is right now scouring the country with a posse. All this he imparts to me while he was throwin' that outfit of clothes together an' further he adds that I'm under suspicion for aidin' an' abettin', an' that means life with hard labour if I'm caught with the goods—an', Win, you're the goods. Therefore, you'll confer a favour on me by not getting caught, an' incidentally save yourself a hangin'. Once we get into the bad lands we're all to the good, but even then you've got to keep shy of folks. Duck out of sight when you first see any one. Don't have nothin' to say to no one under no circumstances. If you do chance onto someone where you can't do nothin' else you'll have to lie to 'em. Personal, I don't favour lyin' only as a last resort, an' then in moderation. Of course, down in the bad lands, most of the folks will be on the run like we are, an' not no more anxious for to hold a caucus than us. You don't have to be so particular there, 'cause likely all they'll do when they run onto you will be to take a shot at you, an' beat it. We've got to lay low in the bad lands about a week or so, an' after that folks will have somethin' else on their mind an' we can slip acrost to the N. P."

"See here, Tex, this thing has gone far enough." There was a note of determination in Endicott's voice as he continued: "I cannot permit you to further jeopardize yourself on my account. You have already neglected your business, incurred no end of hard work, and risked life, limb, and freedom to get me out of a scrape. I fully appreciate that I am already under heavier obligation to you than I can ever repay. But from here on, I am going it alone. Just indicate the general direction of the N. P. and I will find it. I know that you and Bat will see that Miss Marcum reaches the railway in safety, and——"

"Hold on, Win! That oration of yourn ain't got us no hell of a ways, an' already it's wandered about four school-sections off the trail. In the first place, it's me an' not you that does the permittin' for this outfit. I've undertook to get you acrost to the N. P. I never started anythin' yet that I ain't finished. Take this bottle of *hooch* here—I've started her, an' I'll finish her. There's just as much chance I won't take you acrost to the N. P., as that I won't finish that bottle—an' that's damn little.

"About neglectin' my business, as you mentioned, that ain't worryin' me none, because the wagon boss specified particular an' onmistakeable that if any of us misguided sons of guns didn't show up on the job the mornin' followin' the dance, we might's well keep on ridin' as far as that outfit was concerned, so it's undoubtable that the cow business is bein' carried on satisfactory durin' my temporary absence.

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"Concernin' the general direction of the N. P., I'll enlighten you that if you was to line out straight for Texas, it would be the first railroad you'd cross. But you wouldn't never cross it because interposed between it an' here is a right smart stretch of country which for want of a worse name is called the bad lands. They's some several thousan' square miles in which there's only seven water-holes that a man can drink out of, an' generally speakin' about five of them is dry. There's plenty of water-holes but they're poison. Some is gyp an' some is arsnic. Also these here bad lands ain't laid out on no general plan. The coulees run hell-west an' crossways at their littlest end an' wind up in a mud crack. There ain't no trails, an' the inhabitants is renegades an' horse-thieves which loves their solitude to a murderous extent. If a man ain't acquainted with the country an' the horse-thieves, an' the water-holes, his sojourn would be discouragin' an' short.

"All of which circumlocutin' brings us to the main point which is that *she* wouldn't stand for no such proceedin'. As far as I can see that settles the case. The pros an' cons that you an' me could set here an' chew about, bein' merely incidental, irreverent, an' by way of passin' the time."

Endicott laughed: "You are a philosopher, Tex."

"A cow-hand has got to be."

"But seriously, I could slip away without her knowing it, then the only thing you could do would be to take her to the railway."

"Yes. Well, you try that an' you'll find out who's runnin' this outfit. I'll trail out after you an' when I catch you, I'll just naturally knock hell out of you, an' that's all there'll be to it. You had the edge on me in the water but you ain't on land. An' now that's settled to the satisfaction of all parties concerned, suppose me an' you slip over to camp an' cook supper so we can pull out right after sundown."

The two made their way through the timber to find Alice blowing herself red in the face in a vain effort to coax a blaze out of a few smouldering coals she had scraped from beneath the ashes of the fire.

"Hold on!" cried the Texan, striding toward her, "I've always maintained that buildin' fires is a he-chore, like swearin', an' puttin' the baby to sleep. So, if you'll just set to one side a minute while I get this fire a-goin' an' Win fetches some water, you can take holt an' do the cookin' while we-all get the outfit ready for the trail."

Something in the man's voice caused the girl to regard him sharply, and her eyes shifted for a moment to his companion who stood in the background. There was no flash of recognition in the glance, and Endicott, suppressing a laugh, turned his face away, picked up the water pail, and started toward the creek.

“Who is that man?” asked the girl, a trifle nervously, as he disappeared from view.

“Who, him?” The Texan was shaving slivers from a bull pine stick. “He’s a friend of mine. Win’s his name, an’ barrin’ a few little irregularities of habit, he ain’t so bad.” The cowboy burst into mournful song as he collected his shavings and laid them upon the coals:

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"It's little Joe, the wrangler, he'll wrangle never more,
His days with the *remuda* they are o'er;
'Twas a year ago last April when he rode into our camp,
Just a little Texas stray, and all alo-o-o-n-e."

Alice leaned toward the man in sudden anger:

"You've been drinking!" she whispered.

Tex glanced at her in surprise: "That's so," he said, gravely. "It's the only way I can get it down."

She was about to retort when Endicott returned from the creek and placed the water pail beside her.

"Winthrop!" she cried, for the first time recognizing him. "Where in the world did you get those clothes, and what is the matter with your face?"

Endicott grinned: "I shaved myself for the first time."

"What did you do it with, some barbed wire?"

"Looks like somethin' that was left out in the rain an' had started to peel," ventured the irrepressible Tex.

Alice ignored him completely. "But the clothes? Where did you get them?"

Endicott nodded toward the Texan. "He loaned them to me!"

"But—surely they would never fit him."

"Didn't know it was necessary they should," drawled Tex, and having succeeded in building the fire, moved off to help Bat who was busying himself with the horses.

"Where has he been?" asked the girl as the voice of the Texan came from beyond the trees:

"It happened in Jacksboro in the spring of seventy-three,
A man by the name of Crego come steppin' up to me,
Sayin', 'How do you do, young fellow, an' how would you like to go
An' spend one summer pleasantly, on the range of the buffalo-o-o?'"

"I'm sure I don't know. He came back an hour or so ago and woke me up and gave me this outfit and told me my whiskers looked like the infernal regions and that I had better shave—even offered to shave me, himself."

"But he has been drinking. Where did he get the liquor?"

"The same place he got the clothes, I guess. He said he met a friend and borrowed them," smiled Endicott.

"Well, it's nothing to laugh at. I should think you'd be ashamed to stand there and laugh about it."

The man stared at her in surprise. "I guess he won't drink enough to hurt him any. And—why, it was only a day or two ago that you sat in the dining car and defended their drinking. You even said, I believe, that had you been a man you would have been over in the saloon with them."

"Yes, I did say that! But that was different. Oh, I think men are *disgusting*! They're either *bad*, or just plain *dumb*!"

"We left old Crego's bones to bleach on the range of the buffalo—
Went home to our wives an' sweethearts, told others not to go,
For God's forsaken the buffalo range, and the damned old buffalo-o-o!"

"At least our friend Tex does not seem to be stricken with dumbness," Endicott smiled as the words of the buffalo skinner's song broke forth anew. "Do you know I have taken a decided fancy to him. He's——"

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"I'd run along and play with him then if I were you," was the girl's sarcastic comment. "Maybe if you learn how to swear and sing some of his beautiful songs he'll give you part of his whiskey." She turned away abruptly and became absorbed in the preparation of supper, and Endicott, puzzled as he was piqued, at the girl's attitude, joined the two who were busy with the pack. "He's just perfectly stunning in that outfit," thought Alice as she watched him disappear in the timbers. "Oh, I don't know—sometimes I wish—" but the wish became confused somehow with the sizzling of bacon. And with tight-pressed lips, she got out the tin dishes.

"What's the matter, Win—steal a sheep?" asked the Texan as he paused, blanket in hand, to regard Endicott.

"What?"

"What did *you* catch hell for? You didn't imbibe no embalmin' fluid." Endicott grinned and the cowboy finished rolling his blanket.

"Seems like we're in bad, some way. She didn't say nothin' much, but I managed to gather from the way she looked right through the place where I was standin' that I could be got along without for a spell. Her interruptin' me right in the middle of a song to impart that I'd be'n drinkin' kind of throw'd me under the impression that the pastime was frowned on, but the minute I seen you comin' through the brush like you was sneaking off at recess, I know'd you was included in the boycott an' that lets the booze out. Seein's our conscience is clear, it must be somethin' *she* done that she's took umbrage at, as the feller says, an' the best thing we can do is to overlook it. I don't know as I'd advise tellin' her so, but we might just kind of blend into the scenery onobtrusive 'til the thaw comes. In view of which I'll just take a little drink an' sing you a song I heard down on the Rio Grande." Thrusting his arm into the end of his blanket roll, the Texan drew forth his bottle and, taking a drink, carefully replaced it. "This here song is *The Old Chisholm Trail*, an' it goes like this:

"Come along; boys, and listen to my tale,
I'll tell you of my troubles on the old Chisholm trail.

Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya, youpy ya,
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya.

I started up the trail October twenty-third,
I started up the trail with the 2-U herd.

Oh, a ten dollar hoss and a forty dollar saddle—
And I'm goin' to punchin' Texas cattle.

I woke up one morning on the old Chisholm trail,
Rope in my hand and a cow by the tail.

I'm up in the mornin' afore daylight
And afore I sleep the moon shines bright.

Old Ben Bolt was a blamed good boss,
But he'd go to see the girls on a sore-backed hoss.

Old Ben Bolt was a fine old man
And you'd know there was whiskey wherever he'd land.

My hoss throwed me off at the creek called Mud,
My hoss throwed me off round the 2-U herd.

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Last time I saw him he was going cross the level
A-kicking up his heels and a-runnin' like the devil.

It's cloudy in the west, a-lookin' like rain,
An' my damned old slicker's in the wagon again.

Crippled my hoss, I don't know how,
Ropin' at the horns of a 2-U cow.

We hit Caldwell and we hit her on the fly,
We bedded down the cattle on the hill close by.

No chaps, no slicker, and it's pourin' down rain,
An' I swear, by God, I'll never night-herd again.

Feet in the stirrups and seat in the saddle,
I hung and rattled with them long-horn cattle.

Last night I was on guard and the leader broke the ranks,
I hit my horse down the shoulders and I spurred him in the flanks.

The wind commenced to blow, and the rain began to fall.
Hit looked, by grab, like we was goin' to lose 'em all.

I jumped in the saddle and grabbed holt the horn,
Best blamed cow-puncher ever was born.

I popped my foot in the stirrup and gave a little yell,
The tail cattle broke and the leaders went to hell.

I don't give a damn if they never do stop;
I'll ride as long as an eight-day clock.

Foot in the stirrup and hand on the horn,
Best damned cowboy ever was born.

I herded and I hollered and I done very well
Till the boss said, 'Boys, just let 'em go to hell.'

Stray in the herd and the boss said kill it,
So I shot him in the rump with the handle of the skillet.

We rounded 'em up and put 'em on the cars,
And that was the last of the old Two Bars.



Oh, it's bacon and beans most every day,—
I'd as soon be a-eatin' prairie hay.

I'm on my best horse and I'm goin' at a run,
I'm the quickest shootin' cowboy that ever pulled a gun.

I went to the wagon to get my roll,
To come back to Texas, dad-burn my soul.

I went to the boss to draw my roll,
He had it figgered out I was nine dollars in the hole.

I'll sell my outfit just as soon as I can,
I won't punch cattle for no damned man.

Goin' back to town to draw my money,
Goin' back home to see my honey.

With my knees in the saddle and my seat in the sky,
I'll quit punchin' cows in the sweet by and by.

Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya, youpy ya,
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya."

As the last words of the chorus died away both men started at the sound of the girl's voice.

"Whenever you can spare the time you will find your supper ready," she announced, coldly, and without waiting for a reply, turned toward the camp. Endicott looked at Tex, and Tex looked at Endicott.

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“Seems like you done raised hell again, Win. Standin’ around listenin’ to ribald songs, like you done, ain’t helped our case none. Well, we better go eat it before she throws it away. Come on, Bat, you’re included in the general gloom. Your face looks like a last year’s circus bill, Win, with them patches of paper hangin’ to it. Maybe that’s what riled her. If I thought it was I’d yank ’em off an’ let them cuts bleed no matter how bad they stung, just to show her my heart’s in the right place. But that might not suit, neither, so there you are.”

Alice sat well back from the fire as the three men poured their coffee and helped themselves to the food.

“Ain’t you goin’ to join us in this here repast?” asked Tex, with a smile.

“I have eaten, thank you.”

“You’re welcome—like eight dollars change for a five-spot.”

In vain Endicott signalled the cowboy to keep silent. “Shove over, Win, you’re proddin’ me in the ribs with your elbow! Ain’t Choteau County big enough to eat in without crowdin’? ’Tain’t as big as Tom Green County, at that, no more’n Montana is as big as Texas—nor as good, either; not but what the rest of the United States has got somethin’ to be said in its favour, though. But comparisons are orderous, as the Dutchman said about the cheese. Come on, Win, me an’ you’ll just wash up these dishes so Bat can pack ’em while we saddle up.”

A half-hour later, just as the moon topped the crest of a high ridge, the four mounted and made their way down into the valley.

“We got to go kind of easy for a few miles ’cause I shouldn’t wonder if old man Johnson had got a gang out interrin’ defunck bovines. I’ll just scout out ahead an’ see if I can locate their camp so we can slip past without incurrin’ notoriety.”

“I should think,” said Alice, with more than a trace of acid in her tone, “that you had done quite enough scouting for one day.”

“In which case,” smiled the unabashed Texan, “I’ll delegate the duty to my trustworthy retainer an’ side-kicker, the ubiquitous an’ iniquitous Baterino St. Cecelia Julius Caesar Napoleon Lajune. Here, Bat, fork over that pack-horse an’ take a siyou out ahead, keepin’ a lookout for posses, post holes, and grave-diggers. It’s up to you to see that we pass down this vale of tears, unsight an’ unsung, as the poet says, or off comes your hind legs. Amen.”

The half-breed grinned his understanding and handed over the lead-rope with a bit of homely advice. “You no lak’ you git find, dat better you don’ talk mooch. You ain’ got to



sing no mor', neider, or ba Goss! A'm tak' you down an' stick you mout' full of rags, lak' I done down to Chinook dat tam'. Dat *hooch* she mak' noise 'nough for wan night, *sabe*?"

"That's right, Bat. Tombstones and oysters is plumb raucous institutions to what I'll be from now on." He turned to the others with the utmost gravity. "You folks will pardon any seemin' reticence on my part, I hope. But there's times when Bat takes holt an' runs the outfit—an' this is one of 'em."

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CHAPTER XIV

ON ANTELOPE BUTTE

After the departure of Bat it was a very silent little cavalcade that made its way down the valley. Tex, with the lead-horse in tow, rode ahead, his attention fixed on the trail, and the others followed, single file.

Alice's eyes strayed from the backs of her two companions to the mountains that rolled upward from the little valley, their massive peaks and buttresses converted by the wizardry of moonlight into a fairyland of wondrous grandeur. The cool night air was fragrant with the breath of growing things, and the feel of her horse beneath her caused the red blood to surge through her veins.

"Oh, it's grand!" she whispered, "the mountains, and the moonlight, and the spring. I love it all—and yet—" She frowned at the jarring note that crept in, to mar the fulness of her joy. "It's the most wonderful adventure I ever had—and romantic. And it's *real*, and I ought to be enjoying it more than I ever enjoyed anything in all my life. But, I'm not, and it's all because—I don't see why he had to go and drink!" The soft sound of the horses' feet in the mud changed to a series of sharp clicks as their iron shoes encountered the bare rocks of the floor of the canyon whose precipitous rock walls towered far above, shutting off the flood of moonlight and plunging the trail into darkness. The figures of the two men were hardly discernible, and the girl started nervously as her horse splashed into the water of the creek that foamed noisily over the canyon floor. She shivered slightly in the wind that sucked chill through the winding passage, although back there in the moonlight the night had been still. Gradually the canyon widened. Its walls grew lower and slanted from the perpendicular. Moonlight illumined the wider bends and flashed in silver scintillations from the broken waters of the creek. The click of the horses' feet again gave place to the softer trampling of mud, and the valley once more spread before them, broader now, and flanked by an endless succession of foothills.

Bat appeared mysteriously from nowhere, and after a whispered colloquy with Tex, led off toward the west, leaving the valley behind and winding into the maze of foothills. A few miles farther on they came again into the valley and Alice saw that the creek had dwindled into a succession of shallow pools between which flowed a tiny trickle of the water. On and on they rode, following the shallow valley. Lush grass overran the pools and clogged the feeble trickle of the creek. Farther on, even the green patches disappeared and white alkali soil showed between the gnarled sage bushes. Gradually the aspect of the country changed. High, grass-covered foothills gave place to sharp pinnacles of black lava rock, the sides of the valley once more drew together, low, and broken into ugly cutbanks of dirty grey. Sagebrush and prickly pears furnished the only

vegetation, and the rough, broken surface of the country took on a starved, gaunt appearance.

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Alice knew instinctively that they were at the gateway of the bad lands, and the forbidding aspect that greeted her on every side as her eyes swept the restricted horizon caused a feeling of depression. Even the name “bad lands” seemed to hold a foreboding of evil. She had not noticed this when the Texan had spoken it. If she had thought of it at all, it was impersonally—an undesirable strip of country, as one mentions the Sahara Desert. But, now, when she herself was entering it—was seeing with her own eyes the grey mud walls, the bare black rocks, and the stunted sage and cactus—the name held much of sinister portent.

From a nearby hillock came a thin weird scream—long-drawn and broken into a series of horrible cackles. Instantly, as though it were the signal that loosed the discordant chorus of hell, the sound was caught up, intensified and prolonged until the demonical screams seemed to belch from every hill and from the depths of the coulees between.

Unconsciously, the girl spurred her horse which leaped past Endicott and Bat and drew up beside the Texan, who was riding alone in the forefront.

The man glanced into the white frightened face: “Coyotes,” he said, gravely. “They won’t bother any one.”

The girl shuddered. “There must be a million of them. What makes them howl that way?”

“Most any other way would be better, wouldn’t it. But I reckon that’s the way they’ve learnt to, so they just keep on that way.”

Alice glanced at him sharply, but in the moonlight his clean-cut profile gave no hint of levity.

“You are making fun of me!”

He turned his head and regarded her thoughtfully. “No. I wouldn’t do that, really. I was thinkin’ of somethin’ else.”

“You are a very disconcerting young man. You are unspeakably rude, and I ought to be furiously angry.”

The Texan appeared to consider. “No. You oughtn’t to do that because when something important comes up you ain’t got anything back, an’ folks won’t regard you serious. But you wouldn’t have been even peeved if you knew what I was thinkin’ about.”

“What was it?” The instant the question left her lips the girl wished she could have recalled it.

There was a long pause and Alice began to hope that the man had not heard her question. Then he turned a very grave face toward her and his eyes met hers squarely. "I was thinkin' that maybe, sometime, you'd get to care enough about me to marry me. Sounds kind of abrupt an' off-hand, don't it? But it ain't. I've been thinkin' about it a lot. You're the first woman I've seen since—well, since way back yonder, that I'd ever marry. The only one that stacks up to the kind of people mine are, an' that I was back there. Of course, there'd be a lot of readjustin' but that would work out—it always does when the right kind of folks takes holt to put anything through. I've got some recreations an'

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pastimes that ain't condoned by the pious. I gamble, an' swear, an' smoke, an' lie, an' drink. But I gamble square, swear decent an' hearty, lie for fun, but never in earnest, an' drink to a reasonable degree of hilarity. My word is good with every man, woman, an' child in the cow country. I never yet went back on a friend, nor let up on an enemy. I never took underhand advantage of man or woman, an' I know the cow business. For the rest of it, I'll go to the old man an' offer to take the Eagle Creek ranch off his hands an' turn nester. It's a good ranch, an' one that rightly handled would make a man rich—provided he was a married man an' had somethin' to get rich for. I don't want you to tell me now, you won't, or you will. We've got a week or so yet to get acquainted in. An', here's another thing. I know, an' you know, down deep in your heart, that you're goin' to marry either Win, or me. Maybe you know which. I don't. But if it is him, you'll get a damned good man. He's square an' clean. He's got nerve—an' there ain't no bluff about it, neither. Wise men don't fool with a man with an eye like his. An' he wants you as bad as I do. As I said, we've got a week or more to get acquainted. It will be a week that may take us through some mighty tough sleddin', but that ain't goin' to help you none in choosin', because neither one of us will break—an' you can bet your last stack of blue ones on that."

The girl's lips were pressed very tight, and for some moments she rode in silence.

"Do you suppose I would ever marry a man who deliberately gets so drunk he sings and talks incessantly——"

"You'd be safer marryin' one that got drunk deliberately, than one who done it inadvertent when he aimed to stay sober. Besides, there's various degrees of drunkenness, the term bein' relative. But for the sake of argument admittin' I was drunk, if you object to the singin' and talkin', what do you recommend a man to do when he's drunk?"

"I utterly despise a man that gets drunk!" The words came with an angry vehemence, and for many minutes the Texan rode in silence while the bit chains clinked and the horses' hoofs thudded the ground dully. He leaned forward and his gloved hand gently smoothed his horse's mane. "You don't mean just exactly that," he said, with his eyes on the dim outline of a butte that rose high in the distance. Alice noticed that the bantering tone was gone from his voice, and that his words fell with a peculiar softness. "I reckon, though, I know what you do mean. An' I reckon that barrin' some little difference in viewpoint, we think about alike. . . . Yonder's Antelope Butte. We'll be safe to camp there till we find out which way the wind blows before we strike across."

Deeper and deeper they pushed into the bad lands, the huge bulk of Antelope Butte looming always before them, its outline showing distinctly in the light of the sinking moon. As far as the eye could see on every side the moonlight revealed only black

lava-rock, deep black shadows that marked the courses of dry coulees, and enormous mud-cracks—and Antelope Butte.

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As the girl rode beside the cowboy she noticed that the cynical smile was gone from the clean-cut profile. For miles he did not speak. Antelope Butte was near, now.

"I am thirsty," she said. A gauntleted hand fumbled for a moment with the slicker behind the cantle, and extended a flask.

"It's water. I figured someone would get thirsty."

The girl drank from the flask and returned it: "If there are posses out won't they watch the water-holes? You said there are only a few in the bad lands."

"Yes, they'll watch the water-holes. That's why we're goin' to camp on Antelope Butte—right up on top of it."

"But, how will we get water?"

"It's there."

"Have you been up there?" The girl glanced upward. They were already ascending the first slope, and the huge mass of the detached mountain towered above them in a series of unscaleable precipices.

"No. But the water's there. The top of the Butte hollows out like a saucer, an' in the bowl there's a little sunk spring. No one much ever goes up there. There's a little scragglin' timber, an' the trail—it's an old game trail—is hard to find if you don't know where to look for it. A horse-thief told me about it."

"A horse-thief! Surely, you are not risking all our lives on the word of a horse-thief!"

"Yes. He was a pretty good fellow. They killed him, afterwards, over near the Mission. He was runnin' off a bunch of Flourey horses."

"But a man who would steal would lie!"

"He didn't lie to me. He judged I done him a good turn once. Over on the Marias, it was—an' he said: 'If you're ever on the run, hit for Antelope Butte.' Then he told me about the trail, an' the spring that you've got to dig for among the rocks. He's got a grub *cache* there, too. He won't be needin' it, now." The cowboy glanced toward the west. "The moon ought to just about hold 'til we get to the top. He said you could ride all the way up." Without an instant's hesitation he headed his horse for a huge mass of rock fragments that lay at the base of an almost perpendicular wall. The others followed in single file. Bat bringing up the rear driving the pack-horse before him. Alice kept her horse close behind the Texan's which wormed and twisted in and out among the rock fragments that skirted the wall. For a quarter of a mile they proceeded with scarcely a perceptible rise and then the cowboy turned his horse into a deep fissure that slanted



upward at a most precarious angle seemingly straight into the heart of the mountain. Just when it seemed that the trail must end in a blind pocket, the Texan swung into a cross fissure so narrow that the stirrups brushed either side. So dark was it between the towering rock walls that Alice could scarcely make out the cowboy's horse, although at no time was he more than ten or fifteen feet in advance. After innumerable windings the fissure

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led once more to the face of the mountain and Tex headed his horse out upon a ledge that had not been discernible from below. Alice gasped, and for a moment it seemed as though she could not go on. Spread out before her like a huge relief map were the ridges and black coulees of the bad lands, and directly below—hundreds of feet below—the gigantic rock fragments lay strewn along the base of the cliff like the abandoned blocks of a child. She closed her eyes and shuddered. A loose piece of rock on the narrow trail, a stumble, and—she could feel herself whirling down, down, down. It was the voice of the Texan—confident, firm, reassuring—that brought her once more to her senses.

“It’s all right. Just follow right along. Shut your eyes, or keep ’em to the wall. We’re half-way up. It ain’t so steep from here on, an’ she widens toward the top. I’m dizzy-headed, too, in high places an’ I shut mine. Just give the horse a loose rein an’ he’ll keep the trail. There ain’t nowhere else for him to go.”

With a deadly fear in her heart, the girl fastened her eyes upon the cowboy’s back and gave her horse his head. And as she rode she wondered at this man who unhesitatingly risked his life upon the word of a horse-thief.

Almost before she realized it the ordeal was over and her horse was following its leader through a sparse grove of bull pine. The ascent was still rather sharp, and the way strewn with boulders, and fallen trees, but the awful precipice, with its sheer drop of many hundreds of feet to the black rocks below, no longer yawned at her stirrup’s edge, and it was with a deep-drawn breath of relief that she allowed her eyes once again to travel out over the vast sweep of waste toward the west where the moon hung low and red above the distant rim of the bad lands.

The summit of Antelope Butte was, as the horse-thief had said, an ideal camping place for any one who was “on the run.” The edges of the little plateau, which was roughly circular in form, rose on every side to a height of thirty or forty feet, at some points in an easy slope, and at others in a sheer rise of rock wall. The surface of the little plane showed no trace of the black of the lava rock of the lower levels but was of the character of the open bench and covered with buffalo grass and bunch grass with here and there a sprinkling of prickly pears. The four dismounted and, in the last light of the moon, surveyed their surroundings.

“You make camp, Bat,” ordered the Texan, “while me an’ Win hunt up the spring. He said it was on the east side where there was a lot of loose rock along the edge of the bull pine. We’ll make the camp there, too, where the wood an’ water will be handy.”

Skirting the plateau, Tex led the way toward a point where a few straggling pines showed gaunt and lean in the rapidly waning moonlight.

“It ought to be somewheres around here,” he said, as he stopped to examine the ground more closely. “He said you had to pile off the rocks ’til you come to the water an’ then mud up a catch-basin.” As he talked, the cowboy groped among the loose rocks on his hands and knees, pausing frequently to lay his ear to the ground. “Here she is!” he exclaimed at length. “I can hear her drip! Come on, Win, we’ll build our well.”

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Alice stood close beside her horse watching every move with intense interest.

"Who would have thought to look for water there?" she exclaimed.

"I knew we'd find it just as he said," answered the Texan gravely. "He was a good man, in his way—never run off no horses except from outfits that could afford to lose 'em. Why, they say, he could have got plumb away if he'd shot the posse man that run onto him over by the Mission. But he knew the man was a nester with a wife an' two kids, so he took a chance—an' the nester got him."

"How could he?" cried the girl, "after——"

The Texan regarded her gravely. "It was tough. An' he probably hated to do it. But he was a sworn-in posse man, an' the other was a horse-thief. It was just one of those things a man's got to do. Like Jim Larkin, when he was sheriff, havin' to shoot his own brother, an' him hardly more'n a kid that Jim had raised. But he'd gone plumb bad an' swore never to be taken alive, so Jim killed him—an' then he resigned. There ain't a man that knows Jim, that don't know he'd rather a thousan' times over had the killin' happen the other way 'round. But he was a man. He had it to do—an' he done it."

Alice shuddered: "And then—what became of him, then?"

"Why, then, he went back to ranchin'. He owns the Bar X horse outfit over on the White Mud. This here, Owen—that was his brother's name—was just like a son to him. Jim tried to steer him straight, but the kid was just naturally a bad egg. Feelin' it the way he does, a lesser man might of squinted down the muzzle of his own gun, or gone the whiskey route. But not him. To all appearances he's the same as he always was. But some of us that know him best—we can see that he ain't *quite* the same as before—an' he never will be."

There were tears in the girl's eyes as the man finished.

"Oh, it's all wrong! It's cruel, and hard, and brutal, and wrong!"

"No. It ain't wrong. It's hard, an' it's cruel, maybe, an' brutal. But it's right. It ain't a country for weaklings—the cow country ain't. It's a country where, every now an' then, a man comes square up against something that he's got to do. An' that something is apt as not to be just what he don't want to do. If he does it, he's a man, an' the cow country needs him. If he don't do it, he passes on to where there's room for his kind—an' the cow country don't miss him. A man earns his place here, it ain't made for him—often he earns the name by which he's called. I reckon it's the same all over—only this is rawer."

"Here's the water! And it is cold and sweet," called Endicott who had been busily removing the loose rock fragments beneath which the spring lay concealed.

The Texan's interest centred on matters at hand: "You Bat, you make a fire when you've finished with the horses." He turned again to the girl: "If you'll be the cook, Win an' I'll mud up a catch-basin an' rustle some firewood while Bat makes camp. We got to do all our cookin' at night up here. A fire won't show above the rim yonder, but in the daytime someone might see the smoke from ten mile off."

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"Of course, I'll do the cooking!" assented the girl, and began to carry the camp utensils from the pack that the half-breed had thrown upon the ground. "The dough-gods are all gone!" she exclaimed in dismay, peering into a canvas bag.

"Mix up some bakin'-powder ones. There's flour an' stuff in that brown sack."

"But—I don't know how!"

"All right. Wait 'til I get Win strung out on this job, an' I'll make up a batch."

He watched Endicott arrange some stones: "Hey, you got to fit those rocks in better'n that. Mud ain't goin' to hold without a good backin'."

The cowboy washed his hands in the overflow trickle and wiped them upon his handkerchief. "I don't know what folks does all their lives back East," he grinned; "Win, there, ain't barbered none to speak of, an' the Lord knows he ain't no stone-mason."

Alice did not return the smile, and the Texan noticed that her face was grave in the pale starlight. For the first time in her life the girl felt ashamed of her own incompetence.

"And I can't cook, and——"

"Well, that's so," drawled Tex, "but it won't be so tomorrow. No one but a fool would blame any one for not doin' a thing they've never learnt to do. They might wonder a little how-come they never learnt, but they wouldn't hold it against 'em—not 'til they've had the chance." Bat was still busy with the horses and the cowboy collected sticks and lighted a small fire, talking, as he worked with swift movements that accomplished much without the least show of haste. "It generally don't take long in the cow country for folks to get their chance. Take Win, there. Day before yesterday he was about the greenest pilgrim that ever straddled a horse. Not only he didn't know anything worth while knowin', but he was prejudiced. The first time I looked at him I sized him up—almost. 'There's a specimen,' I says to myself—while you an' Purdy was gossipin' about the handkerchief, an' the dance, an' what a beautiful rider he was—that's gone on gatherin' refinement 'til it's crusted onto him so thick it's probably struck through.' But just as I was losin' interest in him, he slanted a glance at Purdy that made me look him over again. There he stood, just the same as before—only different." The Texan poured some flour into a pan and threw in a couple of liberal pinches of baking-powder.

Alice's eyes followed his every movement, and she glanced toward the spring that Endicott had churned into a mud hole. The cowboy noted her glance. "It would be riled too much even if we strained it," he smiled, "so we'll just use what's left in that flask. It don't take much water an' the spring will clear in time for the coffee."

"And some people never do learn?" Alice wanted to hear more from this man's lips concerning the pilgrim. But the Texan mustn't know that she wanted to hear.

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“Yes, some don’t learn, some only half learn, an’ some learn in a way that carries ’em along ’til it comes to a pinch—they’re the worst. But, speakin’ of Win, after I caught that look, the only surprise I got when I heard he’d killed Purdy was that he *could* do it—not that he *would*. Then later, under certain circumstances that come to pass in a coulee where there was cottonwoods, him an’ I got better acquainted yet. An’ then in the matter of the reservoir—but you know more about that than I do. You see what I’m gettin’ at is this: Win can saddle his own horse, now, an’ he climbs onto him from the left side. The next time he tackles it he’ll shave, an’ the next time he muds up a catch-basin he’ll mud it right. Day before yesterday he was about as useless a lookin’ piece of bric-a-brac as ever draw’d breath—an’ look at him now! There ain’t been any real change. The man was there all the time, only he was so well disguised that no one ever know’d it—himself least of all. Yesterday I saw him take a chew off Bat’s plug—an’ Bat don’t offer his plug promiscuous. He’ll go back East, an’ the refinement will cover him up again—an’ that’s a damned shame. But he won’t be just the same. It won’t crust over no more, because the prejudice is gone. He’s chewed the meat of the cow country—an’ he’s found it good.”

Later, long after the others had gone to sleep, Alice lay between her blankets in the little shelter tent, thinking.

CHAPTER XV

THE TEXAN HEARS SOME NEWS

Bat had pitched the tent upon a little knoll, screened by a jutting shoulder of rock from the sleeping place of the others. When Alice awoke it was broad daylight. She lay for a few moments enjoying the delicious luxury of her blankets which the half-breed had spread upon a foot-thick layer of boughs. The sun beat down upon the white canvas and she realized that it was hot in the tent. The others must have been up for hours and she resented their not having awakened her. She listened for sounds, but outside all was silence and she dressed hurriedly. Stepping from the tent, she saw the dead ashes of the little fire and the contents of the packs apparently undisturbed, covered with the tarp. She glanced at her watch. It was half past nine. Suddenly she remembered that dawn had already begun to grey the east when they retired. She was the first one up! She would let the others sleep. They needed it. She remembered the Texan had not slept the day before, but had ridden away to return later with the clothing for Endicott—and the whiskey.

“I don’t see why he has to drink!” she muttered, and making her way to the spring, dipped some water from the catch-basin and splashed it over her face and arms. The cold water dispelled the last vestige of sleepiness and she stood erect and breathed deeply of the crystal air. At the farther side of the bowl-like plateau the horses grazed contentedly, and a tiny black and white woodpecker flew from tree to tree pecking busily

at the bark. Above the edge of the rim-rocks the high-flung peaks of the Bear Paws belied the half-night's ride that separated them from the isolated Antelope Butte.

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"What a view one should get from the edge!" she exclaimed, and turning from the spring, made her way through the scraggly timber to the rock wall beyond. It was not a long climb and five minutes later she stood panting with exertion and leaned against an upstanding pinnacle of jagged rock. For a long time she stood wonder-bound by the mighty grandeur of the panorama that swept before her to lose itself somewhere upon the dim horizon. Her brain grasped for details. It was all too big—too unreal—too unlike the world she had known. In sheer desperation, for sight of some familiar thing, her eyes turned toward the camp. There was the little white tent, and the horses grazing beyond. Her elevation carried her range of vision over the jutting shoulder of rock, and she saw the Texan sitting beside his blankets drawing on his boots. The blankets were mounded over the forms of the others, and without disturbing them, the cowboy put on his hat and started toward the spring. At the sight of the little tent he paused and Alice saw him stand staring at the little patch of white canvas. For a long time he stood unmoving, and then, impulsively, his two arms stretched toward it. The arms were as quickly withdrawn. The Stetson was lifted from his head and once more it seemed a long time that he stood looking at the little tent with the soft brim of his Stetson crushed tightly in his hand.

Evidently, for fear of waking her, the man did not go to the spring, but retraced his steps and Alice saw him stoop and withdraw something from his war-bag. Thrusting the object beneath his shirt, he rose slowly and made his way toward the rim-rock, choosing for his ascent a steep incline which, with the aid of some rock ledges, would bring him to the top at a point not ten yards from where she stood.

It was with a sense of guilt that she realized she had spied upon this man, and her cheeks flushed as she cast about desperately for a means to escape unseen. But no such avenue presented itself, and she drew back into a deep crevice of her rock pinnacle lest he see her.

A grubby, stunted pine somehow managed to gain sustenance from the stray earth among the rock cracks and screened her hiding-place. The man was very close, now. She could hear his heavy breathing and the click of his boot heels upon the bare rocks. Then he crossed to the very verge of the precipice and seated himself with his feet hanging over the edge. For some moments he sat gazing out over the bad lands, and then his hand slipped into the front of his shirt and withdrew a bottle of whiskey.

The girl's lips tightened as she watched him from behind her screen of naked roots and branches. He looked a long time at the bottle, shook it, and held it to the sun as he contemplated the little beads that sparkled at the edge of the liquor line. He read its label, and seemed deeply interested in the lines of fine print contained upon an oval sticker that adorned its back. Still holding the bottle, he once more stared out over the bad lands. Then he drew the cork and smelled of the liquor, breathing deeply of its fragrance, and turning, gazed intently toward the little white tent beside the stunted pines.

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Alice saw that his eyes were serious as he set the bottle upon the rock beside him. And then, hardly discernible at first, but gradually assuming distinct form, a whimsical smile curved his lips as he looked at the bottle.

“Gosh!” he breathed, softly, “ain’t you an’ I had some nonsensical times? I ain’t a damned bit sorry, neither. But our trails fork here. Maybe for a while—maybe for ever. But if it is for ever, my average will be right honourable if I live to be a hundred.” Alice noticed how boyish the clean-cut features looked when he smiled that way. The other smile—the masking, cynical smile—made him ten years older. The face was once more grave, and he raised the bottle from the rock. “So long,” he said, and there was just that touch of honest regret in his voice with which he would have parted from a friend. “So long. I’ve got a choice to make—an’ I don’t choose you.”

The hand that held the bottle was empty. There was a moment of silence and then from far below came the tinkle of smashing glass. The Texan got up, adjusted the silk scarf at his neck, rolled a cigarette, and clambering down the sharp descent, made his way toward the grazing horses. Alice watched for a moment as he walked up to his own horse, stroked his neck, and lightly cuffed at the ears which the horse laid back as he playfully snapped at his master’s hand. Then she scrambled from her hiding-place and hurried unobserved to her tent, where she threw herself upon the blankets with a sound that was somehow very like a sob.

When the breakfast of cold coffee and biscuits was finished the Texan watched Endicott’s clumsy efforts to roll a cigarette.

“Better get you a piece of twine to do it with, Win,” he grinned; “you sure are a long ways from home when it comes to braidin’ a smoke. Saw a cow-hand do it once with one hand. In a show, it was in Cheyenne, an’ he sure was some cowboy—in the show. Come out onto the flats one day where the boys was breakin’ a bunch of Big O Little O horses—‘after local colour,’ he said.” The Texan paused and grinned broadly. “Got it too. He clum up into the middle of a wall-eyed buckskin an’ the doc picked local colour out of his face for two hours where he’d slid along on it—but he could roll a cigarette with one hand. There, you got one at last, didn’t you? Kind of humped up in the middle like a snake that’s swallowed a frog, but she draws all right, an’ maybe it’ll last longer than a regular one.” He turned to Alice who had watched the operation with interest.

“If you-all don’t mind a little rough climbin’, I reckon, you’d count the view from the rim-rocks yonder worth seein’.”

“Oh, I’d love it!” cried the girl, as she scrambled to her feet.

“Come on, Win,” called the Texan, “I’ll show you where God dumped the tailin’s when He finished buildin’ the world.”

Together the three scaled the steep rock-wall. Alice, scorning assistance, was the first to reach the top, and once more the splendour of the magnificent waste held her speechless.

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For some moments they gazed in silence. Before them, bathed in a pale amethyst haze that thickened to purple at the far-off edge of the world, lay the bad lands resplendent under the hot glare of the sun in vivid red and black and pink colouring of the lava rock. Everywhere the eye met the flash and shimmer of mica fragments that sparkled like the facets of a million diamonds, while to the northward the Bear Paws reared cool and green, with the grass of the higher levels reaching almost to the timber line.

"Isn't it wonderful?" breathed the girl. "Why do people stay cooped up in the cities, when out here there is—this?" Endicott's eyes met hers, and in their depths she perceived a newly awakened fire. She was conscious of a strange glow at her heart—a mighty gladness welled up within her, permeating her whole being. "He has awakened," her brain repeated over and over again, "he has——"

The voice of the Texan fell upon her ears softly as from a distance, and she turned her eyes to the boyish faced cow-puncher who viewed life lightly and who, she had learned, was the thorough master of his wilderness, and very much a man.

"I love it too," he was saying. "This bad land best of all. What with the sheep, an' the nesters, the range country must go. But barbed-wire can never change this," his arm swept the vast plain before him. "I suppose God foreseen what the country was comin' to," he speculated, "an' just naturally stuck up His 'keep off' sign on places here an' there—the Sahara Desert, an' Death Valley, an' the bad lands. He wanted somethin' left like He made it. Yonder's the Little Rockies, an' them big black buttes to the south are the Judith, an' you can see—way beyond the Judith—if you look close—the Big Snowy Mountains. They're more than a hundred miles away."

The cowboy ceased speaking suddenly. And Alice, following his gaze, made out far to the north-eastward a moving speck. The Texan crouched and motioned the others into the shelter of a rock. "Wish I had a pair of glasses," he muttered, with his eyes on the moving dot.

"What is it?" asked the girl.

"Rider of some kind. Maybe the I X round-up is workin' the south slope. An' maybe it's just a horse-thief. But it mighn't be either. Guess I'll just throw the hull on that cayuse of mine an' siyou down and see. He's five or six miles off yet, an' I've got plenty of time to slip down there. Glad the trail's on the west side. You two stay up here, but you got to be awful careful not to show yourselves. Folks down below look awful little from here, but if they've got glasses you'd loom up plenty big, an' posse men's apt to pack glasses." The two followed him to camp and a few moments later watched him ride off at a gallop and disappear in the scrub that concealed the mouth of the precipitous trail.

Hardly had he passed from sight than Bat rose and, walking to his saddle, uncoiled his rope.

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"Where are you going?" asked Endicott as the half-breed started toward the horses.

"Me, oh, A'm trail long behine. Mebbe-so two kin see better'n wan."

A few minutes later he too was swallowed up in the timber at the head of the trail, and Alice and Endicott returned to the rim-rocks and from a place of concealment watched with breathless interest the course of the lone horseman.

After satisfying himself he was unobserved, the Texan pushed from the shelter of the rocks at the foot of the trail and, circling the butte, struck into a coulee that led south-eastward into the bad lands. A mile away he crossed a ridge and gained another coulee which he followed northward.

"If he's headin' into the bad lands I'll meet up with him, an' if he's just skirtin' 'em, our trails'll cross up here a piece," he reasoned as his horse carried him up the dry ravine at a steady walk. Presently he slanted into a steep side coulee that led upward to the crest of a long flat ridge. For a moment he paused as his eyes swept the landscape and then suddenly a quarter of a mile away a horseman appeared out of another coulee. He, too, paused and, catching sight of the Texan, dug in his spurs and came toward him at a run.

The cowboy's brows drew into a puzzled frown as he studied the rapidly approaching horseman. "Well, I'll be damned!" he grinned, "ain't he the friendly young spirit! His ma had ought to look after him better'n that an' teach him some manners. The idea of any one chargin' up to a stranger that way in the bad lands! One of these days he's a-goin' to run up again' an abrupt foreshortin' of his reckless young career." The rider was close now and the Texan recognized a self-important young jackass who had found work with one of the smaller outfits.

"It's that mouthy young short-horn from the K 2," he muttered, disgustedly. "Well, he'll sure cut loose an' earful of small talk. He hates himself, like a peacock." The cowboy pulled up his horse with a vicious jerk that pinked the foam at the animal's mouth and caused a little cloud of dust to rise into the air. Then, for a moment, he sat and stared.

"If you was in such a hell of a hurry," drawled the Texan, "you could of rode around me. There's room on either side."

The cowboy found his voice. "Well, by gosh, if it ain't Tex! How they stackin', old hand?"

"Howdy," replied the Texan, dryly.

"You take my advice an' lay low here in the bad lands an' they won't ketch you. I said it right in the Long Horn yeste'day mornin'—they was a bunch of us lappin' 'em up. Old Pete was there—an' I says to Pete, I says, 'Take it from me they might ketch all the rest

of 'em but they won't never ketch Tex!' An' Pete, he says, 'You're just right there, Joe,' an' then he takes me off to one side, old Pete does, an' he says, 'Joe,' he says, 'I've got a ticklish job to be done, an' I ain't got another man I kin bank on puttin' it through.'"

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The Texan happened to know that Mr. Peter G. Kester, owner of the K 2, was a very dignified old gentleman who left the details of his ranch entirely in the hands of his foreman, and the idea of his drinking in the Long Horn with his cowboys was as unique as was hearing him referred to as "Old Pete."

"What's ailin' him?" asked the Texan. "Did he lose a hen, or is he fixin' to steal someone's mewl?"

"It's them Bar A saddle horses," continued the cowboy, without noticing the interruption. "He buys a string of twenty three-year-olds offen the Bar A an' they broke out of the pasture. They range over here on the south slope, an' if them horse-thieves down in the bad lands has got 'em they're a-goin' to think twict before they run off any more K 2 horses, as long as I'm workin' fer the outfit."

"Are you aimin' to drive twenty head of horses off their own range single handed?"

"Sure. You can do it easy if you savvy horses."

The Texan refrained from comment. He wanted to know who was supposed to be interested in catching him, and why. Had someone told the truth about the lynching, and was he really wanted for aiding and abetting the pilgrim's escape?

"I reckon that's true," he opined. "They can't get me here in the bad lands."

The other laughed: "You bet they can't! Say, that was some ride you put up down to Wolf River. None of us could have done better."

"Did you say they was headin' this way?"

"Who?"

"Who would I be thinkin' about now, I wonder?"

"Oh! Naw! They ain't ready to make any arrests yet. The grand jury set special an' returned a lot of indictments an' you're one of 'em, but the districk attorney, he claims he can't go ahead until he digs up the cripus delinky——"

"The what?"

"Oh, that's a nickname the lawyers has got fer a pilgrim."

"Wasn't one stranglin' enough for spreadin' out Purdy? What do they want of the pilgrim?"

“Spreadin’ out Purdy!” exclaimed the other, “don’t you know that Purdy didn’t stay spread? Wasn’t hardly hurt even. The pilgrim’s bullet just barely creased him, an’ when Sam Moore went back with a spring wagon to fetch his remains, Purdy riz up an’ started cussin’ him out an’ scairt Sam so his team run away an’ he lost his voice an’ ain’t spoke out loud since—an’ them’s only one of the things he done. So, you see, you done your lynching too previous, an’ folks is all stirred up about it, holdin’ that lawless acts has got to be put a stop to in Choteau County, an’ a pilgrim has got as good a right to live as the next one. They’re holdin’ that even if he had got Purdy it would of be’n a damn good thing, an’ they wasn’t no call to stretch a man for that. So the grand jury set, an’ the districk attorney has got a gang of men diggin’ up all the coulees for miles around, a-huntin’ for the pilgrim’s cripus delinkty so he kin go ahead with his arrests.”

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The eyes of the Texan were fixed on the mountains. He appeared not interested. Twenty feet away in a deep crevice at the edge of the coulee, Bat Lajune, who had overheard every word, was convulsed with silent mirth.

"You say they've dug up all the coulees? Red Rock an'—an' all, Buffalo, Six-mile, Woodpile, Miller's?" The Texan shot out the names with all appearance of nervous haste, but his eye was sombre as before as he noted the gleam of quick intelligence that flashed into the cowboy's eyes. "You're sure they dug up Buffalo?" he pressed shrewdly.

"Yes, I think they finished there."

The Texan gave a visible sigh of relief. "Say," he asked, presently, "do you know if they're fordin' at Cow Island this year?"

"Yes, the Two Bar reps come by that way."

"I'm right obliged to you. I reckon I'll head north, though. Canada looks good to me 'til this here wave of virtue blows over. So long."

"So long, Tex. An', say, there's some of us friends of yours that's goin' to see what we kin do about gettin' them indictments squashed. We don't want to see you boys doin' time fer stretchin' no pilgrim."

"You won't," answered the Texan. "Toddle along now an' hunt up Mr. Kester's horses. I want room to think." He permitted himself a broad smile as the other rode at a gallop toward the mountains, then turned his horse into the coulee he had just left and allowed him his own pace.

"So Purdy ain't dead," he muttered, "or was that damned fool lyin'? I reckon he wasn't lyin' about that, an' the grand jury, an' the district attorney." Again he smiled. "Let's see how I stack up, now: In the first place, Win ain't on the run, an' I am—or I'm supposed to be. But, as long as they don't dig Win up out of the bottom of some coulee, I'm at large for want of a party of the first part to the alleged felonious snuffin'-out. Gosh, I bet the boys are havin' fun watchin' that diggin'. If I was there I'd put in my nights makin' fresh-dug spots, an' my days watchin' 'em prospect 'em." Then his thoughts turned to the girl, and for miles he rode unheeding. The sun had swung well to the westward before the cowboy took notice of his surroundings. Antelope Butte lay ten or twelve miles away and he headed for it with a laugh. "You must have thought I sure enough was headin' for Cow Island Crossing didn't you, you old dogie chaser?" He touched his horse lightly with his spurs and the animal struck into a long swinging trot.

"This here's a mixed-up play all around," he muttered. "Win's worryin' about killin' Purdy—says it's got under his hide 'til he thinks about it nights. It ain't so much bein' on the

run that bothers him as it is the fact that he's killed a man." He smiled to himself: "A little worryin' won't hurt him none. Any one that would worry over shootin' a pup like Purdy ought to worry—whether he done it or not. Then, there's me. I start

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out with designs as evil an' triffin' as Purdy's—only I ain't a brute—an' I winds up by lovin' her. Yes—that's the word. There ain't no mortal use beatin' around the bush to fool myself. Spite of silk stockin's she's good clean through. I reckon, maybe, they're wore more promiscuous in the East. That Eagle Creek Ranch, if them corrals was fixed up a little an' them old cattle sheds tore down, an' the ditches gone over, it would be a good outfit. If it was taken hold of right, there wouldn't be a better proposition on the South Slope." Gloom settled upon the cowboy's face: "But there's Win. I started out to show him up." He smiled grimly. "Well, I did. Only not just exactly as I allowed to. Lookin' over the back-trail, I reckon, when us four took to the brush there wasn't only one damned skunk in the crowd—an' that was me. It's funny a man can be that ornery an' never notice it. But, I bet Bat knew. He's pure gold, Bat is. He's about as prepossessin' to look at as an old gum boot, but his heart's all there—an' you bet, Bat, he knows."

It was within a quarter of a mile of Antelope Butte that the Texan, riding along the bottom of a wide coulee met another horseman. This time there was no spurring toward him, and he noticed that the man's hand rested near his right hip. He shifted his own gun arm and continued on his course without apparently noticing the other who approached in the same manner.

Suddenly he laughed: "Hello, Curt!"

"Well, I'm damned if it ain't Tex! Thought maybe I was going to get the high-sign."

"Same here." Both men relaxed from their attitude of alertness, and Curt leaned closer.

"They ain't dug him up yet," he said, "but they sure are slingin' gravel. I hope to God they don't."

"They won't."

"Anything I can do?"

The Texan shook his head: "Nothin', thanks."

"Hot as hell fer June, ain't it."

"Yes; who you ridin' for?"

"K 2."

"K 2! Mister Kester moved his outfit over to the south slope?"

"Naw. I'm huntin' a couple of old brood mares Mister Kester bought offen the Bar A. They strayed away about a week ago."

"Alone?"

"Might better be," replied the cowboy in tones of disgust. "I've got that damned fool, Joe Ainslee, along—or ruther I had him. Bob Brumley's foreman of the K 2, now, an' he hired the Wind Bag in a moment of mental abortion, as the fellow says, an' he don't dast fire him for fear he'll starve to death. They wouldn't no other outfit have him around. An' I'm thinkin' he'll be damn lucky if he lives long enough to starve to death. Bob sent him along with me—said he'd do less harm than with the round-up, an' would be safer—me bein' amiable enough not to kill him offhand."

"Ain't you found your mares?"

Curt snorted: "Yes. Found 'em couple hours ago. An' now I've lost the Wind Bag. Them mares was grazin' right plumb in plain sight of where I'd sent him circlin', an' doggone if he not only couldn't find 'em, but he's lost hisself. An' if he don't show up pretty damn *pronto* he kin stay lost—an' the K 2 will win, at that."

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The Texan grinned: "Go get your mares, Curt. The short-horn has stampeded. I shouldn't wonder if he's a-foggin' it through the mountains right now to get himself plumb famous for tippin' off the district attorney where to do his minin'."

"You seen him!"

"Yes, we had quite a little pow-wow."

"You sure didn't let him git holt of nothin'!"

"Yes. He's about to bust with the information he gathered. An' say, he might of seen them mares an' passed 'em up. He ain't huntin' no brood mares, he's after twenty head of young saddle stock—forgot to mention there was any one with him. Said it was easy to run three-year-olds off their own range single handed if you savvied horses. Called Mister Kester 'Old Pete' an' told of an orgy they had mutual in the Long Horn."

Curt burst out laughing: "Can you beat it?"

"I suppose they'll have Red Rock Coulee all mussed up," reflected the Texan, with a grin.

"You wait 'til I tell the boys."

"Don't you. They'd hurt him. He's a-whirlin' a bigger loop than he can throw, the way it is."

Curt fumbled in his slicker and produced a flask which he tendered.

Tex shook his head: "No thanks, I ain't drinkin'."

"You ain't *what*?"

"No, I'm off of it"; he dismounted and tightened his cinch, and the other followed his example.

"Off of it! You ain't sick, or nothin'?"

"No. Can't a man——?"

"Oh, sure, he could, but he wouldn't, onless—you got your camp near here?"

Tex was aware the other was eyeing him closely.

"Tolerable."

"Let's go camp then. I left my pack horse hobbled way up on Last Water."

The Texan was thinking rapidly. Curt was a friend of long standing and desired to share his camp, which is the way of the cow country. Yet, manifestly this was impossible. There was only one way out and that was to give offence.

"No. I'm campin' alone these days."

A slow red mounted to the other's face and his voice sounded a trifle hard: "Come on up to mine, then. It ain't so far."

"I said I was campin' alone."

The red was very apparent now, and the other took a step forward, and his words came slowly:

"Peck Maguire told me, an' I shut his dirty mouth for him. But now I know it's true. You're ridin' with the pilgrim's girl."

At the inference the Texan whitened to the eyes. "*You're a damned liar!*" The words came evenly but with a peculiar venom.

Curt half drew his gun. Then jammed it back in the holster. "Not between friends," he said shortly, "but jest the same you're goin' to eat them words. It ain't a trick I'd think of you—to run off with a man's woman after killin' him. If he was alive it would be different. I'd ort to shoot it out with you, I suppose, but I can't quite forget that time in Zortman when you——"

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"Don't let that bother you," broke in the Texan with the same evenness of tone. "*You're a damned liar!*"

With a bound the man was upon him and Tex saw a blinding flash of light, and the next moment he was scrambling from the ground. After that the fight waxed fast and furious, each man giving and receiving blows that landed with a force that jarred and rocked. Then, the Texan landed heavily upon the point of his opponent's chin and the latter sank limp to the floor of the coulee. For a full minute Tex stood looking down at his victim.

"Curt can scrap like the devil. I'm sure glad he didn't force no gun play, I'd have hated to hurt him." He recovered the flask from the ground where the other had dropped it, and forced some whiskey between his lips. Presently the man opened his eyes.

"Feelin' better?" asked the Texan as Curt blinked up at him.

"Um-hum. My head aches some."

"Mine, too."

"You got a couple of black eyes, an' your lip is swol up."

"One of yours is turnin' black."

Curt regained his feet and walked slowly toward his horse. "Well, I'll be goin'. So long."

"So long," answered the Texan. He, too, swung into the saddle and each rode upon his way.

CHAPTER XVI

BACK IN CAMP

From their place of concealment high upon the edge of Antelope Butte, Alice Marcum and Endicott watched the movements of the three horsemen with absorbing interest. They saw the Texan circle to the south-eastward and swing north to intercept the trail of the unknown rider. They watched Bat, with Indian cunning, creep to his place of concealment at the edge of the coulee. They saw the riders disperse, the unknown to head toward the mountains at a gallop, and the Texan to turn his horse southward and ride slowly into the bad lands. And they watched Bat recover his own horse from behind a rock pinnacle and follow the Texan, always keeping out of sight in parallel coulees until both were swallowed up in the amethyst haze of the bad lands.

For an hour they remained in their lookout, pointing out to each other some new wonder of the landscape—a wind-carved pinnacle, the heliographic flashing of the mica, or some new combination in the ever-changing splendour of colours.

“Whew! But it’s hot, and I’m thirsty. And besides it’s lunch time.” Alice rose, and with Endicott following, made her way to the camp.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” she breathed, as they ate their luncheon. “This life in the open—the pure clean air—the magnificent world all spread out before you, beckoning you on, and on, and on. It makes a person strong with just the feel of living—the joy of it. Just think, Winthrop, of being able to eat left-over biscuits and cold bacon and enjoy it!”

Endicott smiled: “Haven’t I improved enough, yet, for ‘Win’?—Tex thinks so.”

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The girl regarded him critically. "I have a great deal of respect for Tex's judgment," she smiled.

"Then, dear, I am going to ask you again, the question I have asked you times out of number: Will you marry me?"

"Don't spoil it all, now, please. I am enjoying it so. Enjoying being here with just you and the big West. Oh, this is the real West—the West of which I've dreamed!"

Endicott nodded: "Yes, this is the West. You were right, Alice. California is no more the West than New York is."

"Don't you love it?" The girl's eyes were shining with enthusiasm.

"Yes. I love it," he answered, and she noticed that his face was very grave. "There must be something—some slumbering ego in every man that awakens at the voice of the wild places. Our complex system of civilization seems to me, as I sit here now, a little thing—a thing, somehow, remote—unnecessary, and very undesirable."

"Brooklyn seems very far away," murmured the girl.

"And Cincinnati—but not far enough away. We know they are real—that they actually exist." Endicott rose and paced back and forth. Suddenly he stopped before the girl. "Marry me, Alice, and I'll buy a ranch and we will live out here, and for us Brooklyn and Cincinnati need never exist. I do love it all, but I love you a thousand times more."

To Endicott's surprise the girl's eyes dropped before his gaze and rested for a long time upon the grazing horses—then abruptly she buried her face in her arms. The man had half expected a return to the light half-mocking raillery that had been her staunchest weapon, but there was nothing even remotely suggestive of raillery in the figure that huddled at his feet. Suddenly, his face became very grave: "Alice," he cried, bending over her, "is it because my hands are red? Because I have taken a human life, and am flying from the hand of the law like a common murderer?"

"No, no, no! Not that? I——"

Swiftly he gathered her into his arms, but she freed herself and shook her head in protest. "Don't please," she pleaded softly. "Oh, I—I can't choose."

"Choose!" cried Endicott. "Then there is—someone else? You have found—" he stopped abruptly and drew a long breath. "I see," he said, gently, "I think I understand."

The unexpected gentleness of the voice caused the girl to raise her head. Endicott stood as he had stood a moment before, but his gaze was upon the far mountains. The girl's eyes were wet with tears: "Yes, I—he loves me—and he asked me to marry him."

He said I would marry either you or him, and he would wait for me to decide—until I was sure.” Her voice steadied, and Endicott noticed that it held a trace of defensive. “He’s a dear, and—I know—way down in his heart he’s good—he’s——”

Endicott smiled: “Yes, little girl, he is good. He’s a man—every inch of him. And he’s a man among men. He’s honest and open hearted and human. There is not a mean hair in his head. And he stands a great deal nearer the top of his profession than I do to the top of mine. I have been a fool, Alice. I can see now what a complacent fool and a cad I must have been—when I could look at these men and see nothing but uncouthness. But, thank God, men can change——”

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Impulsively the girl reached for his hand: "No," she murmured, remembering the words of the Texan, "no, the man was there all the time. The real man that is *you* was concealed by the unreal man that is superficiality."

"Thank you, Alice," he said gravely. "And for your sake—and I say it in all sincerity—let the best man win!"

The girl smiled up into his face: "And in all sincerity I will say that in all your life you have never seemed so—so marryable as you do right now."

While Endicott cut a supply of fire-wood and tinkered about the spring, the girl made a complete circuit of the little plateau, and as the shadows began to lengthen they once more climbed to their lookout station. For an hour the vast corrugated plane before them showed no sign of life. Suddenly the girl's fingers clutched Endicott's arm and she pointed to a lone horseman who rode from the north.

"I wonder if he's the same one we saw before—the one who rode away so fast?"

"Not unless he has changed horses," answered Endicott. "The other rode a grey."

The man swung from his horse and seemed to be minutely studying the ground. Then he mounted and headed down the coulee at a trot.

"Look! There is Tex!" cried Endicott, and he pointed farther down the same coulee. A sharp bend prevented either rider from noticing the approach of the other.

"Oh, I wonder who it is, and what will happen when they see each other?" cried the girl. "Look! There is Bat. Near the top of that ridge. He's cutting across so he'll be right above them when they meet." She was leaning forward watching: breathlessly the movements of the three horsemen. "It is unreal. Just like some great spectacular play. You see the actors moving through their parts and you wonder what is going to happen next and how it is all going to work out."

"There! They see each other!" Endicott exclaimed. Each horseman pulled up, hesitated a moment, and rode on. Distance veiled from the eager onlookers the significant detail of the shifted gun arms. But no such preclusion obstructed Bat's vision as he lay flattened upon the rim of the coulee with the barrel of his six-gun resting upon the edge of a rock, and its sights lined low upon the stranger's armpit.

"They've dismounted," observed Alice, "I believe Tex is going to unsaddle."

"Tightening his cinch," ventured Endicott, and was interrupted by a cry from the lips of the girl.

“Look! The other! He’s going to shoot—— Why, they’re fighting!” Fighting they certainly were, and Endicott stared in surprise as he saw the Texan knocked down and then spring to his feet and attack his assailant with a vigour that rendered impossible any further attempt to follow the progress of the combat.

“Why doesn’t Bat shoot, or go down there and help him?” cried the girl, as with clenched fists she strained her eyes in a vain effort to see who was proving the victor.

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"This does not seem to be a shooting affair," Endicott answered, "and it is my own private opinion that Tex is abundantly able to take care of himself. Ah—he got him that time! He's down for the count! Good work, Tex, old man! A good clean knockout!"

The two watched as the men mounted and rode their several ways—the stranger swinging northward toward the mountains, and the Texan following along the south face of the butte.

"Some nice little meetings they have out here," grinned Endicott. "I wonder if the vanquished one was a horse-thief or just an ordinary friend."

Alice returned the smile: "You used to rather go in for boxing in college, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes. I can hold my own when it comes to fists——"

"And—you can shoot."

The man shook his head: "Do you know that was the first time I ever fired a pistol in my life. I don't like to think about it. And yet—I am always thinking about it! I have killed a man—have taken a human life. I did it without malice—without forethought. All I knew was that you were in danger, then I saw him fling you from him—the pistol was in my hand, and I fired."

"You need have no regrets," answered the girl, quickly. "It was his life or both of ours—worse than that—a thousand times worse."

Endicott was silent as the two turned toward the plateau. "Why, there's Bat's horse, trotting over to join the others, and unsaddled, too," cried Alice. "He has beaten Tex to camp. Bat is a dear, and he just adores the ground Tex walks on, or 'rides on' would be more appropriate, for I don't think he ever walked more than a hundred feet in his life."

Sure enough, when they reached camp there sat the half-breed placidly mending a blanket, with the bored air of one upon whom time hangs heavily. He looked up as Endicott greeted him.

"Mebbe-so dat better you don' say nuttin' 'bout A'm gon' 'way from here," he grinned. "Tex she com' 'long pret' queek, now. Mebbe-so he t'ink dat better A'm stay roun' de camp. But *Voila!* How A'm know he ain' gon for git hurt?"

"But he did——" Alice paused abruptly with the sentences unfinished, for the sound of galloping hoofs reached her ears and she looked up to see the Texan swing from his horse, strip off the saddle and bridle and turn the animal loose.

"Oh," she cried, as the man joined them after spreading his saddle blanket to dry. "Your eyes are swollen almost shut and your lip is bleeding!"

“Yes,” answered the cowboy with a contortion of the stiff, swollen lip that passed for a smile. “I rounded the bend in a coulee down yonder an’ run plumb against a hard projection.”

“They certainly are hard—I have run against those projections myself,” grinned Endicott. “You see, we had what you might call ringside seats, and I noticed that it didn’t take you very long to come back with some mighty stiff projecting yourself.”

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“Yes. Him pastin’ me between the eyes that way, I took as an onfriendly act, an’ one I resented.”

“That wallop you landed on his chin was a beautiful piece of work.”

“Yes, quite comely.” The cowboy wriggled his fingers painfully. “But these long-horns that’s raised on salt-horse an’ rawhide, maintains a jaw on ’em that makes iron an’ granite seem right mushy. I didn’t figure I’d recount the disturbance, aimin’ to pass it off casual regardin’ the disfigurin’ of my profile. But if you-all witnessed the debate, I might as well go ahead an’ oncork the details. In the first place, this warrior is a deputy that’s out after Win.”

The Texan glanced sharply at Bat who became suddenly seized with a fit of coughing, but the face of the half-breed was impassive—even sombre as he worked at the blanket. “It’s all owin’ to politics,” continued the cowpuncher, rolling and lighting a cigarette. “Politics, an’ the fact that the cow country is in its dotage. Choteau County is growin’ effeminate, not to say right down effete when a lynchin’, that by rights it would be stretching its importance even to refer to it in conversation, is raised to the dignity of a political issue. As everyone knows, a hangin’ is always a popular play, riddin’ the community of an ondesirable, an’ at the same time bein’ a warnin’ to others to polish up their rectitude. But it seems, from what I was able to glean, that this particular hangin’ didn’t win universal acclaim, owin’ to the massacre of Purdy not bein’ deplored none.”

Once more the half-breed emitted a strangling cough, and Tex eyed him narrowly. “Somethin’ seems to ail your throat.”

“*Oui, A’m swal’ de piece tabac’.*”

“Well just hang onto it ’til it gets a little darker an’ we’ll have supper,” said the Texan, dryly, and resumed.

“So there was some talk disparagin’ to the lynchin’, an’ the party that’s in, holdin’ its tenure by the skin of its teeth, an’ election comin’ on, sided in with public opinion an’ frowned on the lynchin’, not as a hangin’, you onderstand, but because the hangin’ didn’t redound none to their particular credit—it not being legal an’ regular. All this is brewed while the dance is goin’ on, an’ by breakfast time next mornin’, there bein’ a full quorum of Republican war chiefs on hand, they pulls a pow-wow an’ instructs their deputies to round up the lynchers. This is done, barrin’ a few that’s flitted, the boys bein’ caught unawares. Well, things begun lookin’ serious to ’em, an’ as a last resort they decided to fall back on the truth. So they admits that there ain’t no lynchin’. They tells how, after they’d got out on the bench a piece they got to thinkin’ that the demise of Purdy ain’t a serious matter, nohow, so they turned him loose. ‘Where is he, then?’ says a county commissioner. ‘Search us,’ replies the culprits. ‘We just turned him loose an’

told him to *vamoose*. We didn't stick around an' herd him!" Again Bat coughed, and the Texan glared at him.

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"Maybe a drink of water would help them lacerated pipes of yourn," he suggested, "an' besides it's dark enough so you can start supper a-goin'."

"But," said Endicott, "won't that get the boys all into serious trouble for aiding and abetting a prisoner to escape? Accessories after the fact, is what the law calls them."

"Oh Lord," groaned the Texan inwardly. "If I can steer through all this without ridin' into my own loop, I'll be some liar. This on top of what I told 'em in Wolf River, an' since, an' about Purdy's funeral—I dastn't bog down, now!"

"No," he answered, as he lighted another cigarette. "There comes in your politics again. You see, there was twenty-some-odd of us—an' none friendless. Take twenty-odd votes an' multiply 'em by the number of friends each has got—an' I reckon ten head of friends apiece wouldn't overshoot the figure—an' you've got between two hundred an' three hundred votes—which is a winnin' majority for any candidate among 'em. Knowin' this, they wink at the jail delivery an' cinch those votes. But, as I said before, hangin' is always a popular measure, an' as they want credit for yourn, they start all the deputies they got out on a still-hunt for you, judgin' it not to be hard to find a pilgrim wanderin' about at large. An' this party I met up with was one of 'em."

"Did he suspect that we were with you?" asked Alice, her voice trembling with anxiety.

"Such was the case—his intimation bein' audible, and venomous. I denied it in kind, an' one word leadin' to another, he called me a liar. To which statement, although to a certain extent veracious, I took exception, an' in the airy persiflage that ensued, he took umbrage to an extent that it made him hostile. Previous to this little altercation, he an' I had been good friends, and deemin', rightly, that it wasn't a shootin' matter, he undertook to back up his play with his fists, and he hauled off an' smote me between the eyes before I'd devined his intentions. Judgin' the move unfriendly, not to say right downright aggressive, I come back at him with results you-all noted. An' that's all there was to the incident of me showin' up with black eyes, an' a lip that would do for a pin cushion."

All during supper and afterward while the half-breed was washing the dishes, the Texan eyed him sharply, and several times caught the flash of a furtive smile upon the habitually sombre face.

"He knows somethin' mirthful," thought the cowboy, "I noticed it particular, when I was flounderin' up to my neck in the mire of deception. The old reprobate ain't easy amused, either."

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Alice retired early, and before long Endicott, too, sought his blankets. The moon rose, and the Texan strolled over to the grazing horses. Returning, he encountered Bat seated upon a rock at some distance from camp, watching him. The half-breed was grinning openly now, broadly, and with evident enjoyment. Tex regarded him with a frown: "For a Siwash you're plumb mirthful an' joyous minded. In fact I ain't noticed any one so wrapped up in glee for quite a spell. Suppose you just loosen up an' let me in on the frivolity, an' at the same time kind of let it appear where you put in the day. I mistrusted my packin' a pair of purple ones wouldn't give you the whoopin' cough, so I just sauntered over an' took a look at the cayuses. Yourn's be'n rode 'til he's sweat under the blanket—an' he ain't soft neither."

"*Oui*, A'm fol' 'long we'n you make de ride. A'm t'ink mebbe-so two better'n wan."

"Well, I was weaned right young, an' I don't need no governess. After this you——"

The half-breed shrugged: "A'm tink dat tam way back in Las Vegas dat dam' good t'ing ol' Bat fol' 'long, or else, ba Goss, you gon' to hell for sure."

"But that's no sign I've always got to be close-herded. Did you sneak up near enough to hear what the short-horn said?"

"*Oui*, A'm hear dat. She mak' me laugh lak' hell."

"Laugh! I didn't see nothin' so damn hilarious in it. What do you think about Purdy?"

"A'm tink dat dam' bad luck she no git keel." The half-breed paused and grinned: "De pilgrim she mak' de run for nuttin', an' you got to ke'p on lyin' an' lyin', an bye-m-bye you got so dam' mooch lies you git los'. So far, dat work out pret' good. De pilgrim gon' ke'p on de run, 'cause he no lak' for git stretch for politick, an' you git mor' chance for make de play for de girl."

"What do you mean?" The Texan's eyes flashed. "I just knocked the livin' hell out of one fellow for makin' a crack about that girl."

"*Oui*, A'm know 'bout dat, too. Dat was pret' good, but nex' tam dat better you start in fightin' fore you git knock clean across de coulee firs'. A'm lak dat girl. She dam' fine 'oman, you bet. A'm no lak' she git harm."

"See here, Bat," interrupted the Texan, "no matter what my intentions were when I started out, they're all right now."

"*Oui*, A'm know dat, 'bout two day."

"It's this way, I be'n thinkin' quite a bit the last couple of days there ain't a thing in hellin' around the country punchin' other folks' cattle for wages. It's time I was settlin' down. If



that girl will take a long shot an' marry me, I'm goin' to rustle around an' start an outfit of my own. I'll be needin' a man about your heft an' complexion to help me run it, too—savvy?"

The half-breed nodded slowly. "*Oui*, all de tam A'm say: 'Some tam Tex she queet de dam' foolin', an' den she git to be de beeg man.' I ain' tink you git dis 'oman, but dat don' mak' no differ', som' tam you be de beeg man yet. Som' nodder 'oman com' 'long _____"

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"To hell with some other woman!" flared the Texan. "I tell you I'll have that girl or I'll never look at another woman. There ain't another woman in the world can touch her. You think you're wise as hell, but I'll show you!"

The half-breed regarded him gloomily: "A'm tink dat 'oman de pilgrim 'oman."

"Oh, you do, do you? Well, just you listen to me. She ain't—not yet. It's me an' the pilgrim for her. If she ties to him instead of me, it's all right. She'll get a damn good man. Take me, an' all of a sudden throw me into the middle of *his* country, an' I doubt like hell if I'd show up as good as he did in mine. Whatever play goes on between me an' the pilgrim, will be on the square—with one deck, an' the cards on the table. There's only one thing I'm holdin' out on him, an' that is about Purdy. An' that ain't an onfair advantage, because it's his own fault he's worryin' about it. An' if it gives me a better chance with her, I'm goin' to grab it. An' I'll win, too. But, if I don't win, I don't reckon it'll kill me. Sometimes when I get to thinkin' about it I almost wish it would—I'm that damned close to bein' yellow."

Bat laughed. The idea of the Texan being yellow struck him as humorous. "I'm wonder how mooch more beeg lie you got for tell, eh?"

Tex was grinning now, "Search me. I had to concoct some excuse for getting 'em started—two or three excuses. An' it looks like I got to keep on concoctin' 'em to keep 'em goin'. But it don't hurt no one—lyin' like that, don't. It don't hurt the girl, because she's bound to get one of us. It don't hurt the pilgrim, because we'll see him through to the railroad. It don't hurt you, because you don't believe none of it. An' it don't hurt me, because I'm used to it—an' there you are. But that don't give you no license to set around an' snort an' gargle while I'm tellin' 'em. I got trouble enough keepin' 'em plausible an' entangled, without you keepin' me settin' on a cactus for fear you'll give it away. What you got to do is to back up my play—remember them four bits I give you way back in Los Vegas? Well, here's where I'm givin' you a chance to pay dividends on them four bits."

Bat grinned: "You go 'head an' mak' you play. You fin' out I ain't forgit dat four bit. She ain' mooch money—four bit ain'. But w'en she all you got, she wan hell of a lot . . . *bien!*"

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE BAD LANDS

It was well toward noon on the following day when the four finally succeeded in locating the grub cache of the departed horse-thief. Nearly two years had passed since the man had described the place to Tex and a two-year-old description of a certain small,

carefully concealed cavern in a rock-wall pitted with innumerable similar caverns is a mighty slender peg to hang hopes upon.

“It’s like searching for buried treasure!” exclaimed Alice as she pried and prodded among the rocks with a stout stick.

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"There won't be much treasure, even if we find the *cache*," smiled Tex. "Horse thievin' had got onpopular to the extent there wasn't hardly a livin' in it long before this specimen took it up as a profession. We'll be lucky if we find any grub in it."

A few moments later Bat unearthed the *cache* and, as the others crowded about, began to draw out its contents.

"Field mice," growled Tex, as the half-breed held up an empty canvas bag with its corner gnawed to shreds. Another gnawed bag followed, and another.

"We don't draw no flour, nor rice, not jerky, anyhow," said the puncher, examining the bags. "Nor bacon, either. The only chance we stand to make a haul is on the air-tights."

"What are air-tights?" asked the girl.

"Canned stuff—tomatoes are the best for this kind of weather—keep you from gettin' thirsty. I've be'n in this country long enough to pretty much know its habits, but I never saw it this hot in June."

"She feel lak' dat dam' Yuma bench, but here is only de rattlesnake. We don' got to all de tam hont de pizen boog. Dat ain' no good for git so dam' hot—she burn' oop de range. If it ain' so mooch danger for Win to git hang—" He paused and looked at Tex with owlsh solemnity. "A'm no lak we cross dem bad lands. Better A'm lak we gon' back t'rough de mountaine."

"You dig out them air-tights, if there's any in there, an' quit your croakin'!" ordered the cowboy.

And with a grin Bat thrust in his arm to the shoulder. One by one he drew out the tins—eight in all, and laid them in a row. The labels had disappeared and the Texan stood looking down at them.

"Anyway we have these," smiled the girl, but the cowboy shook his head.

"Those big ones are tomatoes, an' the others are corn, an' peas—but, it don't make any difference." He pointed to the cans in disgust: "See those ends bulged out that way? If we'd eat any of the stuff in those cans we'd curl up an' die, *pronto*. Roll 'em back, Bat, we got grub enough without 'em. Two days will put us through the bad lands an' we've got plenty. We'll start when the moon comes up."

All four spent the afternoon in the meagre shade of the bull pine, seeking some amelioration from the awful scorching heat. But it was scant protection they got, and no comfort. The merciless rays of the sun beat down upon the little plateau, heating the rocks to a degree that rendered them intolerable to the touch. No breath of air stirred.



The horses ceased to graze and stood in the scrub with lowered heads and wide-spread legs, sweating.

Towards evening a breeze sprang up from the southeast, but it was a breeze that brought with it no atom of comfort. It blew hot and stifling like the scorching blast of some mighty furnace. For an hour after the sun went down in a glow of red the super-heated rocks continued to give off their heat and the wind swept, sirocco-like, over the little camp. Before the after-glow had faded from the sky the wind died and a delicious coolness pervaded the plateau.

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"It hardly seems possible," said Alice, as she breathed deeply of the vivifying air, "that in this very spot only a few hours ago we were gasping for breath.

"You can always bank on the nights bein' cold," answered Tex, as he proceeded to build the fire. "We'll rustle around and get supper out of the way an' the outfit packed an' we can pull our freight as soon as it's light enough. The moon ought to show up by half-past ten or eleven, an' we can make the split rock water-hole before it gets too hot for the horses to travel. It's the hottest spell for June I ever saw and if she don't let up tomorrow the range will be burnt to a frazzle."

Bat cast a weather-wise eye toward the sky which, cloudless, nevertheless seemed filmed with a peculiar haze that obscured the million lesser stars and distorted the greater ones, so that they showed sullen and angry and dull like the malignant pustules of a diseased skin.

"A'm t'ink she gon' for bus' loose pret' queek."

"Another thunder storm and a deluge of rain?" asked Alice.

The half-breed shrugged: "I ain' know mooch 'bout dat. I ain' t'ink she feel lak de rain. She ain' feel good."

"Leave off croakin', Bat, an' get to work an' pack," growled the Texan. "There'll be plenty time to gloom about the weather when it gets here." An hour later the outfit was ready for the trail.

"Wish we had one of them African water-bags," said the cowboy, as he filled his flask at the spring. "But I guess this will do 'til we strike the water-hole."

"Where is that whiskey bottle?" asked Endicott. "We could take a chance on snake-bite, dump out the booze, and use the bottle for water."

The Texan shook his head: "I had bad luck with that bottle; it knocked against a rock an' got busted. So we've got to lump the snake-bite with the thirst, an' take a chance on both of 'em."

"How far is the water-hole?" Alice asked, as she eyed the flask that the cowboy was making fast in his slicker.

"About forty miles, I reckon. We've got this, and three cans of tomatoes, but we want to go easy on 'em, because there's a good ride ahead of us after we hit Split Rock, an' that's the only water, except poison springs, between here an' the old Miszoo."

Bat, who had come up with the horses, pointed gloomily at the moon which had just topped the shoulder of a mountain. "She all squash down. Dat ain' no good she look so

red.” The others followed his gaze, and for a moment all stared at the distorted crimson oblong that hung low above the mountains. A peculiar dull luminosity radiated from the misshapen orb and bathed the bad lands in a flood of weird murky light.

“Come on,” cried Tex, swinging into his saddle, “we’ll hit the trail before this old Python here finds something else to forebode about. For all I care the moon can turn green, an’ grow a hump like a camel just so she gives us light enough to see by.” He led the way across the little plateau and the others followed. With eyes tight-shut and hands gripping the saddle-horn, Alice gave her horse full rein as he followed the Texan’s down the narrow sloping ledge that answered for a trail. Nor did she open her eyes until the reassuring voice of the cowboy told her the danger was past.

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Tex led the way around the base of the butte and down into the coulee he had followed the previous day. “We’ve got to take it easy this trip,” he explained. “There ain’t any too much light an’ we can’t take any chances on holes an’ loose rocks. It’ll be rough goin’ all the way, but a good fast walk ought to put us half way, by daylight, an’ then we can hit her up a little better.” The moon swung higher and the light increased somewhat, but at best it was poor enough, serving only to bring out the general outlines of the trail and the bolder contour of the coulee’s rim. No breath of the wind stirred the air that was cold, with a dank, clammy coldness—like the dead air of a cistern. As she rode, the girl noticed the absence of its buoyant tang. The horses’ hoofs rang hollow and thin on the hard rock of the coulee bed, and even the frenzied yapping of a pack of coyotes, sounded uncanny and far away. Between these sounds the stillness seemed oppressive—charged with a nameless feeling of unwholesome portent. “It is the evil spell of the bad lands,” thought the girl, and shuddered.

Dawn broke with the moon still high above the western skyline. The sides of the coulee had flattened and they traversed a country of low-lying ridges and undulating rock-basins. As the yellow rim of the sun showed above the crest of a far-off ridge, their ears caught the muffled roar of wind. From the elevation of a low hill the four gazed toward the west where a low-hung dust-cloud, lowering, ominous, mounted higher and higher as the roar of the wind increased. The air about them remained motionless—dead. Suddenly it trembled, swirled, and rushed forward to meet the oncoming dust-cloud as though drawn toward it by the suck of a mighty vortex.

“Dat better we gon’ for hont de hole. Dat dust sto’m she raise hell.”

“Hole up, nothin’!” cried the Texan; “How are we goin’ to hole up—four of us an’ five horses, on a pint of water an’ three cans of tomatoes? When that storm hits it’s goin’ to be hot. We’ve just naturally got to make that water-hole! Come on, ride like the devil before she hits, because we’re goin’ to slack up considerable, directly.”

The cowboy led the way and the others followed, urging their horses at top speed. The air was still cool, and as she rode, Alice glanced over her shoulder toward the dust cloud, nearer now, by many miles. The roar of the wind increased in volume. “It’s like the roar of the falls at Niagara,” she thought, and spurred her horse close beside the Texan’s.

“Only seventeen or eighteen miles,” she heard him say, as her horse drew abreast. “The wind’s almost at our back, an’ that’ll help some.” He jerked the silk scarf from his neck and extended it toward her. “Cover your mouth an’ nose with that when she hits. An’ keep your eyes shut. We’ll make it all right, but it’s goin’ to be tough.” A mile further on the storm burst with the fury of

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a hurricane. The wind roared down upon them like a blast from hell. Daylight blotted out, and where a moment before the sun had hung like a burnished brazen shield, was only a dim lightening of the impenetrable fog of grey-black dust. The girl opened her eyes and instantly they seemed filled with a thousand needles that bit and seared and caused hot stinging tears to well between the tight-closed lids. She gasped for breath and her lips and tongue went dry. Sand gritted against her teeth as she closed them, and she tried in vain to spit the dust from her mouth. She was aware that someone was tying the scarf about her head, and close against her ear she heard the voice of the Texan: "Breathe through your nose as long as you can an' then through your teeth. Hang onto your saddle-horn, I've got your reins. An' whatever you do, keep your eyes shut, this sand will cut 'em out if you don't." She turned her face for an instant toward the west, and the sand particles drove against her exposed forehead and eyelids with a force that caused the stinging tears to flow afresh. Then she felt her horse move slowly, jerkily at first, then more easily as the Texan swung him in beside his own.

"We're all right now," he shouted at the top of his lungs to make himself heard above the roar of the wind. And then it seemed to the girl they rode on and on for hours without a spoken word. She came to tell by the force of the wind whether they travelled along ridges, or wide low basins, or narrow coulees. Her lips dried and cracked, and the fine dust and sand particles were driven beneath her clothing until her skin smarted and chafed under their gritty torture. Suddenly the wind seemed to die down and the horses stopped. She heard the Texan swing to the ground at her side, and she tried to open her eyes but they were glued fast. She endeavoured to speak and found the effort a torture because of the thick crusting of alkali dust and sand that tore at her broken lips. The scarf was loosened and allowed to fall about her neck. She could hear the others dismounting and the loud sounds with which the horses strove to rid their nostrils of the crusted grime.

"Just a minute, now, an' you can open your eyes," the Texan's words fell with a dry rasp of his tongue upon his caked lips. She heard a slight splashing sound and the next moment the grateful feel of water was upon her burning eyelids, as the Texan sponged at them with a saturated bit of cloth.

"The water-hole!" she managed to gasp.

"There's water here," answered the cowboy, evasively, "hold still, an' in a minute you can open your eyes." Very gently he continued to sponge at her lids. Her eyes opened and she started back with a sharp cry. The three men before her were unrecognizable in the thick masks of dirt that encased their faces—masks that showed only thin red slits for eyes, and thick, blood-caked excrescences where lips should have been.

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"Water!" Endicott cried, and Alice was sure she heard the dry click of his tongue against the roof of his mouth. The girl saw that they were in a cavern formed by a mud crack whose walls had toppled together. Almost at her feet was a small pool, its surface covered with a film of dust. Endicott stepped toward it, but the Texan barred the way.

"Don't drink that! It might be a poison spring—most of 'em are down here. It's the meanest death there is, the bellyache an' cramps that comes from drinkin' poison water. Watch the horses. If they will drink it, we can. He led his horse to the pool into which the animal thrust his nose half way to the eyes. Only a moment he held it there, then with a thrash of disappointment that sent the water splashing over the dust-coated rocks, he raised his head and stood with the water dripping in streams from his muzzle. He pawed at the ground, shook his head wrathfully, and turned in disgust from the water-hole.

"Poison," announced the Texan. "We can rinse out our mouths with it an' clean out our eyes an' wash our faces, an' do the same for the horses, but we can't swallow not even a drop of it, or us an' the angels will be swappin' experiences about this time tomorrow." He turned to Alice: "Ladies first. Just take your handkerchief an' wet it an' swab out your mouth an' when you're through there's a good drink of real water waitin' for you in the flask."

When she had done, the three men followed her example, and the Texan tendered the bottle:

"Take all you need, there's plenty," he said. But she would take only a swallow which she held in her mouth and allowed to trickle down her throat. Endicott did the same and Bat, whereupon the cowboy replaced the cork to the bottle and was about to return it to his slicker when the girl caught his arm.

"You didn't drink any!" she cried, but he overrode her protest.

"I ain't thirsty," he said almost gruffly. "You better catch you a little rest, because as soon as we get these horses fixed up, we're goin' to pull out of here." The girl assayed a protest, but Tex turned abruptly away and the three fell to work removing the caked dust from the eyes and nostrils of the horses, and rinsing out their mouths. When they finished, Tex turned to Bat.

"How far d'you reckon it is to the water-hole?" he asked.

The half-breed shrugged: "Mebbe-so fi' mile, mebbe-so ten. I ain' know dis place. A'm t'ink we los'."

“Lost!” snorted the Texan, contemptuously. “You’re a hell of an Injun, you are, to get lost in broad daylight in sight of the Bear Paws. I ain’t lost, if you are, an’ I tell you we camp at that water-hole tonight!”

Again the half-breed shrugged: “I ain’ see no mountaine. I ain’ see no mooch daylight, neider. Too mooch de dam’ dus’—too mooch san’—too mooch de win’ blow. If we com’ by de water-hole, A’m t’ink dat dam’ lucky t’ing.”

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Tex regarded him with disapproval: "Climb onto your horse, old Calamity Jane, an' we'll mosey along. A dry camp is better than this—at least nobody can crawl around in their sleep an' drink a snifter of poison." He helped Alice from the ground where she sat propped against a rock and assisted her to mount, being careful to adjust the scarf over her nose and mouth.

As the horses with lowered heads bored through the dust-storm the Texan cursed himself unmercifully. "This is all your fault, you damned four-flusher! You would run a girl—that girl, into a hole like this, would you? You low-lived skunk, you! You think you're fit to marry her, do you? Well, you ain't! You ain't fit to be mentioned in the same language she is! You'll get 'em all out of here or, by God, you'll never get out yourself—an' I'm right here to see that that goes! An' you'll find that water-hole, too! An' after you've found it, an' got 'em all out of this jack-pot, you'll h'ist up on your hind legs an' tell 'em the whole damn facts in the case, an' if Win jumps in an' just naturally mops up hell with you, it'll be just what you've got comin' to you—if he does a good job, it will." Mile after mile the horses drifted before the wind, heads hung low and ears drooping. In vain the Texan tried to pierce the impenetrable pall of flying dust for a glimpse of a familiar landmark. "We ought to be hittin' that long black ridge, or the soda hill by now," he muttered. "If we miss 'em both—God!"

The half-breed pushed his horse close beside him: "We mus' got to camp," he announced with his lips to the Texan's ear. "De hosses beginnin' to shake."

"How far can they go?"

"Camp now. Beside de cut-bank here. Dem hoss she got for res' queek or, ba Goss, she die."

Tex felt his own horse tremble and he knew the half-breed's words were true. With an oath he swung into the sheltered angle of the cut-bank along which they were travelling. Bat jerked the pack from the lead-horse and produced clothing and blankets, dripping wet from the saturation he had given them in the poison spring. While the others repeated the process of the previous camp, Bat worked over the horses which stood in a dejected row with their noses to the base of the cut-bank.

"We'll save the water an' make tomatoes do," announced the Texan, as with his knife he cut a hole in the top of a can. "This storm is bound to let up pretty quick an' then we'll hit for the waterhole. It can't be far from here. We'll tap two cans an' save one an' the water—the flask's half full yet."

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Never in her life, thought Alice, as she and Endicott shared their can of tomatoes, had she tasted anything half so good. The rich red pulp and the acid juice, if it did not exactly quench the burning thirst, at least made it bearable, and in a few minutes she fell asleep protected from the all pervading dust by one of the wet blankets. The storm roared on. At the end of a couple of hours Bat rose and silently saddled his horse. "A'm gon' for fin' dat water-hole," he said, when the task was completed. "If de sto'm stop, a'right. If it don' stop, you gon' on in de mornin'." He placed one of the empty tomato cans in his slicker, and as he was about to mount both Endicott and Tex shook his hand.

"Good luck to you, Bat," said Endicott, with forced cheerfulness. The Texan said never a word, but after a long look into the half-breed's eyes, turned his head swiftly away.

Both Tex and Endicott slept fitfully, throwing the blankets from their heads at frequent intervals to note the progress of the storm. Once during the night the Texan visited the horses. The three saddle animals stood hobbled with their heads close to the cut-bank, but the pack-horse was gone. "Maybe you'll find it," he muttered, "but the best bet is, you won't. I gave my horse his head for an hour before we camped, an' he couldn't find it." Tex sat up after that, with his back to the wall of the coulee. With the first hint of dawn Endicott joined him. The wind roared with unabated fury as he crawled to the cowboy's side. He held up the half-filled water flask and the Texan regarded him with red-rimmed eyes.

"This water," asked the man, "it's for her, isn't it?" Tex nodded. Without a word Endicott crawled to the side of the sleeping girl and gently drew the blanket from her face. He carefully removed the cork from the bottle and holding it close above the parched lips allowed a few drops of the warm fluid to trickle between them. The lips moved and the sleeping girl swallowed the water greedily. With infinite pains the man continued the operation doling the precious water out a little at a time so as not to waken her. At last the bottle was empty, and, replacing the blanket, he returned to the Texan's side. "She wouldn't have taken it if she had known," he whispered. "She would have made us drink some."

Tex nodded, with his eyes on the other's face.

"An' you're nothin' but a damned pilgrim!" he breathed, softly. Minutes passed as the two men sat silently side by side. The Texan spoke, as if to himself: "It's a hell of a way to die—for her."

"We'll get through somehow," Endicott said, hopefully.

Tex did not reply, but sat with his eyes fixed on the horses. Presently he got up, walked over and examined each one carefully. "Only two of 'em will travel, Win. Yours is all in." He saddled the girl's horse and his own, leaving them still hobbled. Then he walked over and picked up the empty tomato can and the bottle. "You've got to drink,"

he said, “or you’ll die—me, too. An’ maybe that water ain’t enough for her, either.” He drew a knife from his pocket and walked to Endicott’s horse.

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"What are you going to do?" cried the other, his eyes wide with horror.

"It's blood, or nothin'," answered the Texan, as he passed his hand along the horse's throat searching for the artery.

Endicott nodded: "I suppose you're right, but it seems—cold blooded."

"I'd shoot him first, but there's no use wakin' her. We can tell her the horse died." There was a swift twisting of the cowboy's wrist, the horse reared sharply back, and Endicott turned away with a sickening feeling of weakness. The voice of the Texan roused him: "Hand me the bottle and the can quick!" As he sprang to obey, Endicott saw that the hand the cowboy held tightly against the horse's throat was red. The weakness vanished and he cursed himself for a fool. What was a horse—a thousand horses to the lives of humans—her life? The bottle was filled almost instantly and he handed Tex the can.

"Drink it—all you can hold of it. It won't taste good, but it's wet." He was gulping great swallows from the tin, as with the other hand he tried to hold back the flow. Endicott placed the bottle to his lips and was surprised to find that he emptied it almost at a draught. Again and again the Texan filled the bottle and the can as both in a frenzy of desire gulped the thick liquid. When, at length they were satiated, the blood still flowed. The receptacles were filled, set aside, and covered with a strip of cloth. For a moment longer the horse stood with the blood spurting from his throat, then with a heavy sigh he toppled sidewise and crashed heavily to the ground. The Texan fixed the cork in the bottle, plugged the can as best he could, and taking them, together with the remaining can of tomatoes, tied them into the slicker behind the cantle of his saddle. He swung the bag containing the few remaining biscuits to the horn.

"Give her the tomatoes when you have to. *You* can use the other can—tell her that's tomatoes, too. She'll never tumble that it's blood."

Endicott stared at the other: "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you had better wake her up, now, an' get goin'. I'll wait here for Bat. He's probably found the spring by this time, an' he'll be moseyin' along directly with water an' the pack-horse."

Endicott took a step toward him: "It won't work, Tex," he said, with a smile. "You don't expect me to believe that if you really thought Bat would return with water, you would be sending us away from here into this dust-storm. No. I'm the one that waits for Bat. You go ahead and take her through, and then you can come back for me."

The Texan shook his head: "I got you into this deal, an'——"

“You did it to protect me!” flared Endicott. “I’m the cause for all this, and I’ll stand the gaff!”

The Texan smiled, and Endicott noticed that it was the same cynical smile with which the man had regarded him in the dance hall, and again as they had faced each other under the cottonwoods of Buffalo Coulee. “Since when you be’n runnin’ this outfit?”

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"It don't make any difference since when! The fact is, I'm running it, now—that is, to the extent that I'll be damned if you're going to stay behind and rot in this God-forsaken inferno, while I ride to safety on your horse."

The smile died from the cowboy's face: "It ain't that, Win. I guess you don't savvy, but I do. She's yours, man. Take her an' go! There was a while that I thought—but, hell!"

"I'm not so sure of that," Endicott replied. "Only yesterday, or the day before, she told me she could not choose—yet."

"She'll choose," answered Tex, "an' she won't choose—me. She ain't makin' no mistake, neither. By God, I know a man when I see one!"

Endicott stepped forward and shook his fist in the cowboy's face: "It's the only chance. You can do it—I can't. For God's sake, man, be sensible! Either of us would do it—for her. It is only a question of success, and all that it means; and failure—and all that that means. You know the country—I don't. You are experienced in fighting this damned desert—I'm not. Any one of a dozen things might mean the difference between life and death. You would take advantage of them—I couldn't."

"You're a lawyer, Win—an' a damn good one. I wondered what your trade was. If I ever run foul of the law, I'll sure send for you, *pronto*. If I was a jury you'd have me plumb convinced—but, I ain't a jury. The way I look at it, the case stands about like this: We can't stay here, and there can't only two of us go. I can hold out here longer than you could, an' you can go just as far with the horses as I could. Just give them their head an' let them drift—that's all I could do. If the storm lets up you'll see the Split Rock water-hole—you can't miss it if you're in sight of it, there's a long black ridge with a big busted rock on the end of it, an' just off the end is a round, high mound—the soda hill, they call it, and the water-hole is between. If you pass the water-hole, you'll strike the Miszoo. You can tell that from a long ways off, too, by the fringe of green that lines the banks. And, as for the rest of it—I mean, if the storm don't let up, or the horses go down, I couldn't do any more than you could—it's cashin' in time then anyhow, an' the long, long sleep, no matter who's runnin' the outfit. An' if it comes to that, it's better for her to pass her last hours with one of her own kind than with—me."

Endicott thrust out his hand: "I think any one could be proud to spend their last hours with one of your kind," he said huskily. "I believe we will all win through—but, if worse comes to worst—— Good Bye."

"So Long, Win," said the cowboy, grasping the hand. "Wake her up an' pull out quick. I'll onhobble the horses."

CHAPTER XVIII

“WIN”

Alice opened her eyes to see Endicott bending over her. “It is time to pull out,” said the man tersely.

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The girl threw off the blanket and stared into the whirl of opaque dust. “The storm is still raging,” she murmured. “Oh, Winthrop, do you know that I dreamed it was all over—that we were riding between high, cool mountains beside a flashing stream. And trout were leaping in the rapids, and I got off and drank and drank of the clear, cold water, and, why, do you know, I feel actually refreshed! The horrible burning thirst has gone. That proves the control mind has over matter—if we could just concentrate and think hard enough, I don’t believe we would ever need to be thirsty, or hungry, or tired, or cold, do you?”

The man smiled grimly, and shook his head: “No. If we could think hard *enough* to accomplish a thing, why, manifestly that thing would be accomplished. Great word—enough—the trouble is, when you use it, you never say anything.”

Alice laughed: “You’re making fun of me. I don’t care, you know what I mean, anyway. Why, what’s the matter with that horse?”

“He died—got weaker and weaker, and at last he just rolled over dead. And that is why we have to hurry and make a try for the water-hole, before the others play out.”

Endicott noticed that the Texan was nowhere in sight. He pressed his lips firmly: “It’s better that way, I guess,” he thought.

“But, that’s your horse! And where are the others—Tex, and Bat, and the pack-horse?”

“They pulled out to hunt for the water-hole—each in a different direction. You and I are to keep together and drift with the wind as we have been doing.”

“And they gave us the best of it,” she breathed. Endicott winced, and the girl noticed. She laid her hand gently upon his arm. “No, Winthrop, I didn’t mean that. There was a time, perhaps, when I might have thought—but, that was before I knew you. I have learned a lot in the past few days, Winthrop—enough to know that no matter what happens, you have played a man’s part—with the rest of them. Come, I’m ready.”

Endicott tied the scarf about her face and assisted her to mount, then, throwing her bridle reins over the horn of his saddle as the Texan had done, he headed down the coulee. For three hours the horses drifted with the storm, following along coulees, crossing low ridges, and long level stretches where the sweep of the wind seemed at times as though it would tear them from the saddles. Endicott’s horse stumbled frequently, and each time the recovery seemed more and more of an effort. Then suddenly the wind died—ceased to blow as abruptly as it had started. The man could scarcely believe his senses as he listened in vain for the roar of it—the steady, sullen roar, that had rung in his ears, it seemed, since the beginning of time. Thick dust filled the air but when he turned his face toward the west no sand particles stung his skin.

Through a rift he caught sight of a low butte—a butte that was not nearby. Alice tore the scarf from her face. “It has stopped!” she cried, excitedly. “The storm is over!”

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"Thank God!" breathed Endicott, "the dust is beginning to settle." He dismounted and swung the girl to the ground. "We may as well wait here as anywhere until the air clears sufficiently for us to get our bearings. We certainly must have passed the water-hole, and we would only be going farther and farther away if we pushed on."

The dust settled rapidly. Splashes of sunshine showed here and there upon the basin and ridge, and it grew lighter. The atmosphere took on the appearance of a thin grey fog that momentarily grew thinner. Endicott walked to the top of a low mound and gazed eagerly about him. Distant objects were beginning to appear—bare rock-ridges, and low-lying hills, and deep coulees. In vain the man's eyes followed the ridges for one that terminated in a huge broken rock, with its nearby soda hill. No such ridge appeared, and no high, round hill. Suddenly his gaze became rivetted upon the southern horizon. What was that stretching away, long, and dark, and winding? Surely—surely it was—trees! Again and again he tried to focus his gaze upon that long dark line, but always his lids drew over his stinging eyeballs, and with a half-sobbed curse, he dashed the water from his eyes. At last he saw it—the green of distant timber. "The Missouri—five miles—maybe more. Oh God, if the horses hold out!" Running, stumbling, he made his way to the girl's side. "It's the river!" he cried. "The Missouri!"

"Look at the horses!" she exclaimed. "They see it, too!" The animals stood with ears cocked forward, and dirt-caked nostrils distended, gazing into the south. Endicott sprang to his slicker, and producing the flask, saturated his handkerchief with the thick red liquid. He tried to sponge out the mouths and noses of the horses but they drew back, trembling and snorting in terror.

"Why, it's blood!" cried the girl, her eyes dilated with horror. "From the horse that died," explained Endicott, as he tossed the rag to the ground.

"But, the water—surely there was water in the flask last night!" Then, of a sudden, she understood. "You—you fed it to me in my sleep," she faltered. "You were afraid I would refuse, and that was my dream!"

"Mind over matter," reminded Endicott, with a distortion of his bleeding lips that passed for a grin. Again he fumbled in his slicker and withdrew the untouched can of tomatoes. He cut its cover as he had seen Tex do and extended it to the girl. "Drink some of this, and if the horses hold out we will reach the river in a couple of hours."

"I believe it's growing a little cooler since that awful wind went down," she said, as she passed the can back to Endicott. "Let's push on, the horses seem to know there is water ahead. Oh, I hope they can make it!"

"We can go on a-foot if they can't," reassured the man. "It is not far."

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The horses pushed on with renewed life. They stumbled weakly, but the hopeless, lack-lustre look was gone from their eyes and at frequent intervals they stretched their quivering nostrils toward the long green line in the distance. So slow was their laboured pace that at the end of a half-hour Endicott dismounted and walked, hobbling clumsily over the hot rocks and through ankle-deep drifts of dust in his high-heeled boots. A buzzard rose from the coulee ahead with silent flapping of wings, to be joined a moment later by two more of his evil ilk, and the three wheeled in wide circles above the spot from which they had been frightened. A bend in the coulee revealed a stagnant poison spring. A dead horse lay beside it with his head buried to the ears in the slimy water. Alice glanced at the broken chain of the hobbles that still encircled the horse's feet.

"It's the pack-horse!" she cried. "They have only one horse between them!"

"Yes, he got away in the night." Endicott nodded. "Bat is hunting water, and Tex is waiting." He carried water in his hat and dashed it over the heads of the horses, and sponged out their mouths and noses as Tex and Bat had done. The drooping animals revived wonderfully under the treatment and, with the long green line of scrub timber now plainly in sight, evinced an eagerness for the trail that, since the departure from Antelope Butte, had been entirely wanting. As the man assisted the girl to mount, he saw that she was crying.

"They'll come out, all right," he assured her. "As soon as we hit the river and I can get a fresh horse, I'm going back."

"Going back!"

"Going back, of course—with water. You do not expect me to leave them?"

"No, I don't expect you to leave them! Oh, Winthrop, I—" her voice choked up and the sentence was never finished.

"Buck up, little girl, an hour will put us at the river," he swung into the saddle and headed southward, glad of a respite from the galling, scalding torture of walking in high-heeled boots.

Had Endicott combed Montana throughout its length and breadth he could have found no more evil, disreputable character than Long Bill Kearney. Despised by honest citizens and the renegades of the bad lands, alike, he nevertheless served these latter by furnishing them whiskey and supplies at exorbitant prices. Also, he bootlegged systematically to the Port Belknap Indians, which fact, while a matter of common knowledge, the Government had never been able to prove. So Long Bill, making a living ostensibly by maintaining a flat-boat ferry and a few head of mangy cattle, continued to ply his despicable trade. Even passing cowboys avoided him and Long Bill was left pretty much to his own evil devices.



It was the cabin of this scum of the outland that Endicott and Alice approached after pushing up the river for a mile or more from the point where they had reached it by means of a deep coulee that wound tortuously through the breaks. Long Bill stood in his doorway and eyed the pair sullenly as they drew rein and climbed stiffly from the saddles. Alice glanced with disgust into the sallow face with its unkempt, straggling beard, and involuntarily recoiled as her eyes met the leer with which he regarded her as Endicott addressed him:

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"We've been fighting the dust storm for two days, and we've got to have grub and some real water, quick."

The man regarded him with slow insolence: "The hell ye hev," he drawled; "Timber City's only seven mile, ef ye was acrost the river. I hain't runnin' no hotel, an' grub-liners hain't welcome."

"God, man! You don't mean——"

"I mean, ef ye got five dollars on ye I'll ferry ye acrost to where ye c'n ride to Timber City ef them old skates'll carry ye there, an' ef ye hain't got the five, ye c'n swim acrost, or shove on up the river, or go back where ye come from."

Endicott took one swift step forward, his right fist shot into the man's stomach, and as he doubled forward with a grunt of pain, Endicott's left crashed against the point of his jaw with a force that sent him spinning like a top as he crumpled to the hard-trodden earth of the door-yard.

"Good!" cried Alice. "It was beautifully done. He didn't even have a chance to shoot," she pointed to the two 45's that hung, one at either hip.

"I guess we'll just relieve him of those," said Endicott, and, jerking the revolvers from their holsters, walked to his saddle and uncoiled the rope. Alice lent eager assistance, and a few moments later the inhospitable one lay trussed hand and foot. "Now, we'll go in and find something to eat," said Endicott, as he made fast the final hitch.

The cabin was well stocked with provisions and, to the surprise of the two, was reasonably clean. While Alice busied herself in the cabin, Endicott unsaddled the horses and turned them into a small field where the vegetation grew rank and high and green beside a series of irrigation ditches. Passing the horse corral he saw that three or four saddle-horses dozed in the shade of its pole fence, and continued on to the river bank where he inspected minutely the ferry.

"I guess we can manage to cross the river," he told Alice, when he returned to the cabin; "I will breathe easier when I see you safe in Timber City, wherever that is. I am coming back after Tex. But first I must see you safe."

The girl crossed to his side and as the man glanced into her face he saw that her eyes were shining with a new light—a light he had dreamed could shine from those eyes, but never dared hope to see. "No, Win," she answered softly, and despite the mighty pounding of his heart the man realized it was the first time she had used that name. "You are not going back alone. I am going too." Endicott made a gesture of protest but she gave no heed. "From now on my place is with you. Oh, Win, can't you see! I—I



guess I have always loved you—only I didn't know it. I wanted romance—wanted a red-blood man—a man who could do things, and——”

“Oh, if I could come to you clean-handed!” he interrupted, passionately; “if I could offer you a hand unstained by the blood of a fellow creature!”

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She laid a hand gently upon his shoulder and looked straight into his eyes: "Don't, Win," she said; "don't always hark back to *that*. Let us forget."

"I wish to God I could forget!" he answered, bitterly. "I know the act was justified. I believe it was unavoidable. But—it is my New England conscience, I suppose."

Alice smiled: "Don't let your conscience bother you, because it is a New England conscience. They call you 'the pilgrim' out here. It is the name they called your early Massachusetts forebears—and if history is to be credited, they never allowed their consciences to stand in the way of taking human life."

"But, they thought they were right."

"And you *know* you were right!"

"I know—I know! It isn't the ethics—only the fact."

"Don't brood over it. Don't think of it, dear. Or, if you must, think of it only as a grim duty performed—a duty that proved, as nothing else could have proved, that you are every inch a man."

Endicott drew her close against his pounding heart. "It proved that the waters of the Erie Canal, if given the chance, can dash as madly unrestrained as can the waters of the Grand Canyon."

She pressed her fingers to his lips: "Don't make fun of me. I was a fool."

"I'm not making fun—I didn't know it myself, until—" the sentence was drowned in a series of yells and curses and vile epithets that brought both to the door to stare down at the trussed-up one who writhed on the ground in a very paroxysm of rage.

"Conscience hurting you, or is it your jaw?" asked Endicott, as he grinned into the rage-distorted features.

"Git them hosses outa that alfalfy! You ———! I'll hev th' law on ye! I'll shoot ye! I'll drag yer guts out!" So great was the man's fury that a thin white foam flecked his hate-distorted lips, and his voice rose to a high-pitched whine. Endicott glanced toward the two horses that stood, belly-deep, in the lush vegetation.

"They like it," he said, calmly. "It's the first feed they have had in two days." The man's little pig eyes glared red, and his voice choked in an inarticulate snarl.

Alice turned away in disgust. "Let him alone," she said, "and we will have dinner. I'm simply famished. Nothing ever looked so good to me in the world as that ham and potatoes and corn and peas." During the course of the meal, Endicott tried to dissuade

the girl from her purpose of accompanying him on his search for Tex and the half-breed. But she would have it no other way, and finally, perforce, he consented.

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Leaving her to pack up some food, Endicott filled the water-bag that hung on the wall and, proceeding to the corral, saddled three of the horses. Through the open window of the cabin he could see the girl busily engaged in transferring provisions to a sack. He watched her as she passed and repassed the window intent upon her task. Never had she seemed so lovable, so unutterably desirable—and she loved him! With her own lips she had told him of her love, and with her own lips had placed the seal of love upon his own. Happiness, like no happiness he had ever known should be his. And yet—hovering over him like a pall—black, ominous, depressing—was the thing that momentarily threatened to descend and engulf him, to destroy this new-found happiness, haunt him with its diabolical presence, and crush his life—and hers.

With an effort he roused himself—squared himself there in the corral for the final battle with himself. “It is now or never,” he gritted through clenched teeth. “Now, and alone. She won’t face the situation squarely. It is woman’s way, calmy to ignore the issue, to push it aside as the ill of a future day.”

She had said that he was right, and ethically, he knew that he was right—but the fact of the deed remained. His hand had sped a soul to its God.

Why?

To save the woman he loved. No jury on earth would hold him guilty. He would surrender himself and stand trial. Then came the memory of what Tex had told him of the machinations of local politics. He had no wish to contribute his life as campaign material for a county election. The other course was to run—to remain, as he now was, a fugitive, if not from justice, at least from the hand of the law. This course would mean that both must live always within the menace of the shadow—unless, to save her from this life of haunting fear, he renounced her.

His eyes sought the forbidding sweep of the bad lands, strayed to the sluggish waters of the Missouri, and beyond, where the black buttes of the Judith Range reared their massive shapes in the distance. Suddenly a mighty urge welled up within him. He would not renounce her! She was his! This was life—the life that, to him, had been as a sealed book—the fighting life of the boundless open places. It was the coward’s part to run. He had played a man’s part, and he would continue to play a man’s part to the end. He would fight. Would identify himself with this West—become part of it. Never would he return to the life of the city, which would be to a life of fear. The world should know that he was right. If local politics sought to crush him—to use him as a puppet for their puny machinations, he would smash their crude machine and rebuild the politics of this new land upon principles as clean and rugged as the land itself. It should be his work!

With the light of a new determination in his eyes, he caught up the bridle-reins of the horses and pushed open the gate of the corral. As he led the animals out he was once

more greeted with a volley of oaths and curses: "Put them back! Ye hoss-thief! I'll have ye hung! Them's mine, I tell ye!"

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"You'll get them back," assured Endicott. "I am only borrowing them to go and hunt for a couple of friends of mine back there in the bad lands."

"Back in the bad lands! What do ye know about the bad lands? Ye'll git lost, an' then what'll happen to me? I'll die like a coyote in a trap! I'll starve here where no one comes along fer it's sometimes a week—mebbe two!"

"It will be a long time between meals if anything should happen to us, but it will do you good to lie here and think it over. We'll be back sometime." Endicott made the sack of provisions fast to the saddle of the lead-horse, and assisted Alice to mount.

"I'll kill ye fer this!" wailed the man; "I'll—I'll—" but the two rode away with the futile threats ringing in their ears.

CHAPTER XIX

THE END OF THE TRAIL

"How are we going to find them?" asked the girl, as the two drew their mounts to a stand on the top of a low ridge and gazed out over the sea of similar ridges that rolled and spread before them as far as the eye could reach in three directions—bare coulees, and barer ridges, with here and there a low bare hill, all black and red and grey, with studdings of mica flashing in the rays of the afternoon sun.

"We'll find them. We've got to. I have just been thinking: Living on the edge of the bad lands the way this man does he must occasionally cross them. Tex said that the Split Rock water-hole was the only one between the river and the mountains. We'll start the horses out and give them their heads, and the chances are they will take us to the water-hole. In all probability Tex and Bat will be there. If they are not we will have to find them."

"Of course!" assented the girl. "Oh, Win, I'm so proud of you! I couldn't be any prouder if you were a—a real cowboy!" Endicott laughed heartily, and urged his horse forward. The animals crossed several low ridges and struck into a coulee which they followed unhesitatingly. When it petered out in a wide basin, they struck into another coulee, and continued their course, covering the miles at a long, swinging trot. At sundown Endicott reined in sharply and pointed to the northward. "It's the ridge of the Split Rock!" he cried; "and look, there is the soda hill!" There it was only a mile or two away—the long black ridge with the huge rock fragment at its end, and almost touching it, the high round hill that the Texan had described.

The horses pressed eagerly forward, seeming to know that rest and water were soon to be theirs. "I wonder if they are there," breathed the girl, "and I wonder if they are—all right."

A few minutes later the horses swung around the base of the hill and, with an exclamation of relief, Endicott saw two figures seated beside the detached fragment of rock that lay near the end of the ridge.

The Texan arose slowly and advanced toward them, smiling: "Good evenin'," he greeted, casually, as he eyed the pair with evident approval. "You sure come a-runnin'. We didn't expect you 'til along about noon tomorrow. And we didn't expect you at all," he said to the girl. "We figured you'd shove on to Timber City, an' then Win would get a guide an' come back in the mornin'."

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Endicott laughed: "When I learned there was such a place as Timber City, I intended to leave her there and return alone—only I was not going to wait 'til morning to do it. But she wouldn't hear of it, so we compromised—and she came with me."

Tex smiled: "It's a great thing to learn how to compromise." He stared for a few moments toward the west, where the setting sun left the sky ablaze with fiery light. Then, still smiling, he advanced toward them with both hands extended: "I wish you luck," he said, softly. "I cared for you a mighty lot, Miss Alice, but I'm a good loser. I reckon, maybe it's better things worked out the way they did." Endicott pressed the outstretched hand with a mighty grip and turned swiftly away to fumble at his latigo strap. And there were tears in the girl's eyes as her fingers lingered for a moment in the Texan's grasp: "Oh, I—I'm sorry. I——"

"You don't need to be," the man whispered. "You chose the best of the two." He indicated Endicott with a slight jerk of the head. "You've got a real man there—an' they're uncommon hard to find. An' now, if you've got some grub along suppose we tie into it. I'm hungry enough to gnaw horn!"

As Alice proceeded to set out the food, the Texan's eyes for the first time strayed to the horses. "How much did Long Bill Kearney soak you for the loan of his saddle-horses?"

"Nothing," answered Endicott, "and he supplied us with the grub, too."

"He, what?"

"Fact," smiled the other, "he demurred a little, but——"

"Long Bill's the hardest character in Choteau County."

Endicott glanced at his swollen knuckles: "He is hard, all right."

Tex eyed him in amazement, "Win, you didn't—punch his head for him!"

"I did—and his stomach, too. We were nearly starved, and he refused us food. Told us to go back where we came from. So I reached for him and he dozed off."

"But where was his guns?"

"I took them away from him before I tied him up."

"Where is he now?"

"Tied up. He called me a lot of names because I turned the horses into his alfalfa. They were hungry and they enjoyed it, but Bill nearly blew up. Then we got dinner and took the horses and came away."

“You’re the luckiest man out of hell! You doggoned pilgrim, you!” Tex roared with laughter: “Why accordin’ to dope, he’d ought to just et you up.”

“He whined like a puppy, when we left him, for fear we would get lost and he would starve to death. He is yellow.”

“His kind always is—way down in their guts. Only no one ever made him show it before.”

“How far did we miss the water-hole last night?” asked Endicott, as he and Tex sat talking after the others had sought their blankets.

“About two miles. The wind drifted us to the east. Bat didn’t get far ’til his horse went down, so he bled him like we did, and holed up ’til the storm quit. Then, after things cleared up, we got here about the same time. The water ain’t much—but it sure did taste good.” For a long time the two lay close together looking up at the million winking stars. Tex tossed the butt of a cigarette into the grey dust. “She’s a great girl, Win. Game plumb to her boot heels.”

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"She is, that. I've loved her for a long time—since way back in my college days—but she wouldn't have me."

"You hadn't earnt her. Life's like that—it's ups an' downs. But, in the long run, a man gets about what's comin' to him. It's like poker—in the long run the best player is bound to win. There's times when luck is against him, maybe for months at a stretch. He'll lose every time he plays, but if he stays with it, an' keeps on playin' the best he knows how, an' don't go tryin' to force his luck by drawin' four cards, an' fillin' three-card flushes, why, some day luck will change an' he wins back all he's lost an' a lot more with it, because there's always someone in the game that's throwin' their money away drawin' to a Judson."

"What is a Judson?"

"Bill Judson was a major, an' next to playin' poker, he liked other things. Every time he'd get three cards of a suit in a row, he'd draw to 'em, hopin' for a straight flush. That hope cost him, I reckon, hundreds of dollars, an' at last he filled one—but, hell! Everyone laid down, an' he gathered the ante." The Texan rolled another cigarette. "An' that's the way it is with me—I tried to force my luck. I might as well own up to it right here an' get it over with. You've be'n square, straight through, an' I haven't. I was stringin' you with all that bunk about politics, an' you bein' sure to get hung for shootin' Purdy. Fact is, the grand jury would have turned you loose as soon as your case come up. But, from the first minute I laid eyes on that girl, I wanted her. I'm bad enough, but not like Purdy. I figured if she'd go half-way, I'd go the other half. So I planned the raid on the wool-warehouse, an' the fake lynchin', purpose to get her out of town. I didn't care a damn about you—you was just an excuse to get her away. I figured on losing you after we hit the mountains. The first jolt I got was in the warehouse, when we didn't have to drag you out. Then I got another hell of a one in the coulee under the cottonwoods. Then they got to comin' so thick I lost track of 'em. An' the first thing I knew I would have killed any man that would look crossways at *her*. It come over me all of a sudden that I loved her. I tried to get out of it, but I was hooked. I watched close, an' I saw that she liked me—maybe not altogether for what she thought I'd done for you. But you was in the road. I knew she liked you, too, though she wouldn't show it. 'Everything's fair in love or war,' I kept sayin' over an' over to myself when I'd lay thinkin' it over of nights. But, I knew it was a damned lie when I was sayin' it. If you'd be'n milk-gutted, an' louse-hearted, like pilgrims are supposed to be, there'd be'n a different story to tell, because you wouldn't have be'n fit for her. But I liked you most as hard as I loved her. 'From now on it's a square game,' I says, so I made Old Man Johnson cough up that outfit of raiment, an'

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made you shave, so she wouldn't have to take you lookin' like a sheep-herdin' greaser, if she was a-goin' to take you instead of me. After that I come right out an' told her just where I stood, an' from then on I've played the game square. The women ain't divided up right in this world. There ought to have be'n two of her, but they ain't another in the whole world, I reckon, like her; so one of us had to lose. An', now, seein' how I've lied you into all this misery, you ought to just naturally up an' knock hell out of me. We'll still keep the game fair an' square. I'll throw away my gun an' you can sail in as quick as you get your sleeves rolled up. But, I doubt if you can get away with it, at that."

Endicott laughed happily, and in the darkness his hand stole across and gripped the hand of the Texan in a mighty grip: "I wish to God there was some way I could thank you," he said. "Had it not been for you, I never could have won her. Why, man, I never got acquainted with myself until the past three days!"

"There ain't any posses out," grinned Tex. "The fellow I met in the coulee there by Antelope Butte told me. They think you were lynched. He told me somethin' else, too—but that'll keep."

As they were saddling up, the following morning, the Texan grinned: "I'll bet old Long Bill Kearney's in a pleasin' frame of mind."

"He's had time to meditate a little on his sins," answered Alice.

"No—not Long Bill ain't. If he started in mediatin' on them, he'd starve to death before he'd got meditated much past sixteen—an' he's fifty, if he's a day."

"There are four of us and only three horses," exclaimed Endicott, as he tightened his cinch.

"That's all right. The horses are fresh. I'm light built, an' we'll change off makin' 'em carry double. It ain't so far."

The morning sun was high when the horses turned into the coulee that led to Long Bill's ranch. Bat, who had scouted ahead to make sure that he had not succeeded in slipping his bonds and had plotted mischief, sat grinning beside the corral fence as he listened, unobserved, to the whimpering and wailing of the man who lay bound beside the cabin door.

"What's the matter, Willie?" smiled Tex, as he slipped from his seat behind Endicott's saddle. "Didn't your breakfast set right?"

The man rolled to face them at the sound of the voice, and such a stream of obscene blasphemy poured from his lips as to cause even the Texan to wince. Without a word

the cowboy reached for a bar of soap that lay awash in the filthy water of a basin upon a bench beside the door, and jammed it down the man's throat. The sounds changed to a sputtering, choking gurgle. "Maybe that'll learn you not to talk vile when there's ladies around."

"Water!" the man managed to gasp.

"Will you quit your damn swearin'?"

Long Bill nodded, and Tex held a dipper to his lips.

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"Go catch up the horses, Bat, an' we'll be gettin' out of here. They's some reptiles so mean that even their breath is poison."

As Bat started for the alfalfa field the man fairly writhed with fury: "I'll hev the law on ye, ye—" he stopped abruptly as Tex reached for the soap.

"You won't have the law on no one, you lizard! You don't dare to get within hollerin' distance of the law."

"I will pay you a reasonable amount for any damage to your field, and for the food, and the use of your horses," offered Endicott, reaching for his pocket.

"Keep your money, Win," grinned the Texan. "Let me pay for this. This coyote owes me twenty dollars he borrowed from me when I first hit the country an' didn't know him. He's always be'n anxious to pay it, ain't you, Bill? Well, it's paid now, an' you don't need to go worryin' your heart out about that debt no longer."

Again the man opened his lips, but closed them hurriedly as Tex reached for the soap.

"I'll have to borrow your horse an' saddle for my friend, here," said the Texan, "an' Bat, he'll have to borrow one, too. We'll leave 'em in Timber City."

"*Non!*" cried the half-breed, who had paused in the process of changing Alice's saddle to her own horse. "Me—I ain' gon' for bor' no hoss. Am tak' dis hoss an' giv' heem back to Judge Carson. Him b'long over on Sage Creek."

"Whad'ye mean, ye red scum!" screamed the man, his face growing purple. "That Circle 12 brand is——"

"Ha! Circle 12! De mos' dat Circle 12 she hair-bran'." He stepped into the cabin and reappeared a moment later with some coal-oil in a cup. This he poured into his hand and rubbed over the brand on the horse's shoulder. And when he had pressed the hair flat, the Circle 12 resolved itself into a V 2.

The Texan laughed: "I suppose I ought to take you into Timber City, but I won't. I imagine, though, when the Judge hears about this, you'd better be hittin' the high spots. He's right ugly with horse thieves."

"Hey, hain't ye goin' to ontie me?" squealed the man, as the four started down the bank with the horses.

"You don't suppose I'd go off an' leave a good rope where you could get your claws on it, do you? Wait 'til we get these horses onto the flat-boat, and all the guns around here collected so you can't peck at us from the brush, an' I'll be back."



"You gon' on to Timbaire City," said Bat, "an' I'm com' long bye-m-bye. A'm tak' dis hoss an' ride back an' git ma saddle an' bridle." He advanced and removed his hat; "*Adieu, ma'mselle*, mebbe-so I ain' git dere 'til you gon'. Ol' Bat, he lak' you fine. You need de help, som'tam', you mak' de write to ol' Bat an', ba Goss, A'm com' lak' hell—you bet you dam' life!" Tears blinded the girl's eyes as she held out her hand, and as a cavalier of old France, the half-breed bent and brushed it with his lips. He shook the hand of Endicott: "Som'tam' mebbe-so you com' back, we tak' de hont. Me—A'm know where de elk an' de bear liv' plenty." Endicott detected a twinkle in his eye as he turned to ascend the bank: "You mak' Tex ke'p de strong lookout for de posse. A'm no lak' I seen you git hang."

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"Beat it! You old reprobate!" called the Texan as he followed him up the slope.

"How'm I goin' to git my boat back?" whined Long Bill, as the Texan coiled his rope.

"Swim acrost. Or, maybe you'd better go 'round—it's some little further that way, but it's safer if you can't swim. I'll leave your guns in the boat. So long, an' be sure to remember not to furget sometime an' pay me back that twenty."

The ride to Timber City was made almost in silence. Only once did the Texan speak. It was when they passed a band of sheep grazing beside the road: "They're minin' the country," he said, thoughtfully. "The time ain't far off when we'll have to turn nester—or move on."

"Where?" asked Alice.

The cowboy shrugged, and the girl detected a note of unconscious sadness in his tone: "I don't know. I reckon there ain't any place for me. The whole country's about wired in."

Timber City, since abandoned to the bats and the coyotes, but then in her glory, consisted of two stores, five saloons, a half-dozen less reputable places of entertainment, a steepleless board church, a schoolhouse, also of boards, a hotel, a post office, a feed stable, fifty or more board shacks of miners, and a few flimsy buildings at the mouths of shafts. It was nearly noon when the three drew up before the hotel.

"Will you dine with us in an hour?" asked Endicott.

The Texan nodded. "Thanks," he said, formally, "I'll be here." And as the two disappeared through the door, he gathered up the reins, crossed to the feed barn where he turned the animals over to the proprietor, and passing on to the rear, proceeded to take a bath in the watering trough.

Punctually on the minute he entered the hotel. The meal was a solemn affair, almost as silent as the ride from the river. Several attempts at conversation fell flat, and the effort was abandoned. At no time, however, did the Texan appear embarrassed, and Alice noted that he handled his knife and fork with the ease of early training.

At the conclusion he arose, abruptly: "I thank you. Will you excuse me, now?"

Alice nodded, and both watched as he crossed the room, his spurs trailing noisily upon the wooden floor.

"Poor devil," said Endicott, "this has hit him pretty hard."

The girl swallowed the rising lump in her throat: “Oh, why can’t he meet some nice girl, and——”

“Women—his kind—are mighty scarce out here, I imagine.”

The girl placed her elbows upon the table, rested her chin upon her knuckles, and glanced eagerly into Endicott’s face:

“Win, you’ve just got to buy a ranch,” she announced, the words fairly tumbling over each other in her excitement. “Then we can come out here part of the time and live, and we can invite a lot of girls out for the summer—I just know oodles of nice girls—and Tex can manage the ranch, and——”

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"Match-making already!" laughed Endicott. "Why buy a ranch? Why not move into Wolf River, or Timber City, and start a regular matrimonial agency—satisfaction guaranteed, or your money back. It would be more prac——"

"Winthrop Adams Endicott!"

"Oh, I forgot! I'm not practical. I'm romantic, and red-blooded, and——" they had the little dining-room to themselves; he rose swiftly from his chair and, crossing to her side, stooped and kissed her, not once, but twice, and thrice,—"I'm glad of it! And that reminds me, I have a couple of errands to attend to, so you will have to manage to worry along without me for fifteen minutes or so."

She laughed up into his face: "How can I ever stand it? I've worried along without you all my life. I guess I'll survive."

"You won't have to much longer," he smiled, and hastened from the room. A half-hour later he returned to find her waiting in the hotel "parlour." She saw that his eyes were shining as he crossed eagerly, seated himself upon the haircloth sofa beside her, and whispered in her ear.

"Winthrop! Indeed we won't do anything of the kind! Why it's—it's——"

"It's impractical, and it's romantic," he finished for her. "Also, it's unconventional. Now, refuse if you dare! The stage leaves for Lewiston and the railroad at five. He seems to be a regular chap—the parson. Both he and his wife insisted that the event take place in their house. Said it would be much pleasanter than the hotel—and I heartily agreed with them. We figured that half-past four would give us just about time."

"Well, of all things!" blushed the girl. "You two arranged the whole affair, and of course, as I'm only the bride, it wasn't necessary to consult me at all!"

"Exactly," smiled Endicott; "I'm red-blooded, you know, and romantic—and when I go in for little things like unconventionality, and romance, I go the limit. And you don't dare refuse!"

She looked up into his eyes, shining with boyish enthusiasm: "I don't dare," she whispered. "I don't want to dare. Oh, Win, I—I'm just crazy about it!"

A few moments later she drew away from him and smoothed her hair.

"You must go right this minute and find Tex. And, oh, I hope Bat will be here in time! I just love old Bat!" She ceased speaking and looked questioningly into his eyes which had suddenly become grave.

“I have been looking for Tex, and I couldn’t find him anywhere. Then I went to the stable across the street. His horse is gone.”

For some moments both were silent. “He never even said good-bye,” faltered the girl, and in her voice was a note of real hurt.

“No,” answered Endicott, softly, “he should have said good-bye.”

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Alice rose and put on her hat: "Come on, let's get out of this hateful stuffy little room. Let's walk and enjoy this wonderful air while we can. And besides, we must find some flowers—wild flowers they must be for our wedding, mustn't they, dear? Wild flowers, right from God's own gardens—wild, and free, and uncultivated—untouched by human hands. I saw some lovely ones, blue and white, and some wild-cherry blossoms, too, down beside that little creek that crosses the trail almost at the edge of the town." Together they walked to the creek that burred over its rocky bed in the shadow of the bull-pine forest from which Timber City derived its name. Deeper and deeper into the pines they went, stopping here and there to gather the tiny white and blue blossoms, or to break the bloom-laden twigs from the low cherry bushes. As they rounded a huge upstanding rock, both paused and involuntarily drew back. There, in the centre of a tiny glade that gave a wide view of the vast sweep of the plains, with their background of distant mountains, stood the Texan, one arm thrown across the neck of his horse, and his cheek resting close against the animal's glossy neck. For a moment they watched as he stood with his eyes fixed on the far horizon.

"Go back a little way," whispered Endicott. "I want to speak with him." The girl obeyed, and he stepped boldly into the open.

"Tex!"

The man whirled. "What you doin' here?" his face flushed red, then, with an effort, he smiled, as his eyes rested upon the blossoms. "Pickin' posies?"

"Yes," answered Endicott, striving to speak lightly, "for a very special occasion. We are to be married at half-past four, and we want you to be there—just you, and Bat, and the parson. I hunted the town for you and when I found your horse gone I—we thought you had ridden away without even saying good-bye."

"No," answered the cowboy slowly, "I didn't do that. I was goin' back—just for a minute—at stage time. But, it's better this way. In rooms—like at dinner, I ain't at home, any more. It's better out here in the open. I won't go to your weddin'. Damn it, man, I *can't*! I'm more than half-savage, I reckon. By the savage half of me, I ought to kill you. I ought to hate you—but I can't. About a lot of things you're green as hell. You can't shoot, nor ride, nor rope, nor do hardly any other damn thing a man ought to do. But, at that, you whirl a bigger loop than I do. You've got the nerve, an' the head, an' the heart. You're a man. The girl loves you. An' I love her. My God, man! More than all the world, I love the woman who is to be your wife—an' I have no right to! I tell you I'm half-savage! Take her, an' go! Go fast, an' go a long time! I never want to hear of you again. But—I can still say—good luck!" he extended his hand and Endicott seized it.

"I shall be sorry to think that we are never to meet again," he said simply.

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The shadow of a smile flickered on the Texan's lips: "After a while, maybe—but not soon. I've got to lick a savage, first—and they die hard."

Endicott turned to go, when the other called to him: "Oh, Win!" He turned. "Is she here—anywhere around? I must tell her good-bye."

"Yes, she is down the creek a way. I'll send her to you."

The Texan advanced to meet her, Stetson in hand: "Good-bye," he said, "an' good luck. I can't give you no regular weddin' present—there's nothin' in the town that's fit. But, I'll give you this—I'll give you your man clean-handed. He ain't wanted. There's no one wants him—but you. He didn't kill Purdy that night. It's too bad he didn't—but he didn't. We all thought he did, but he only creased him. He came to, after we'd pulled out. I heard it from the puncher I had the fight with in the coulee—an' it's straight goods." He paused abruptly, and the girl stared wide-eyed into his face. The wild flowers dropped from her hands, and she laid trembling fingers upon his arm.

"What are you saying?" she cried, fiercely. "That Purdy is not dead? That Win didn't kill him? That——"

"No. Win didn't kill him," interrupted the Texan, with a smile.

"Have you told Win?"

"No. Weddin' presents are for the bride. I saved it for you."

Tears were streaming from the girl's eyes: "It's the most wonderful wedding present anybody ever had," she sobbed. "I know Win did it for me, and if he had killed him it would have been justifiable—right. But, always, we would have had that thing to think of. It would have been like some hideous nightmare. We could have put it away, but it would have come again—always. I pretended I didn't care. I wouldn't let him see that it was worrying me, even more than it worried him."

The cowboy stooped and recovered the flowers from the ground. As Alice took them from him, her hand met his: "Good-bye," she faltered, "and—may God bless you!"

At the rock she turned and saw him still standing, hat in hand, as she had left him. Then she passed around the rock, and down the creek, where her lover waited with his arms laden with blossoms.

AN EPILOGUE

At exactly half-past four the Texan galloped to the door of the Red Front Saloon, and swinging from his horse, entered. Some men were playing cards at a table in the rear,



but he paid them no heed. Very deliberately he squared himself to the bar and placed his foot upon the brass rail: "Give me some red liquor," he ordered. And when the bartender set out the bottle and the glass the cowboy poured it full and drank it at a gulp. He poured out another, and then a third, and a fourth. The bartender eyed him narrowly: "Ain't you goin' it a little strong, pardner?" he asked. The Texan stared at him as if he had not heard, and answered nothing. A smile bent the white aproned one's lips as he glanced into his customer's eyes still black from the blow Curt had dealt him in the coulee.

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"Them lamps of yourn was turned up too high, wasn't they?" he asked.

The cowboy nodded, thoughtfully: "Yes, that's it. They was turned up too high—a damn sight too high for me, I reckon."

"Git bucked off?"

The blackened eyes narrowed ever so slightly: "No. A guard done that."

"A guard?"

"Yes, a guard." The Texan poured out his fifth drink. "In the pen, it was."

"In the pen!" The bartender was itching with curiosity. "You don't look like a jail-bird. They musta got the wrong guy?" he suggested.

"No. I killed him, all right. I shot his ears off first, an' then plugged him between the eyes before he could draw. It was fun. I can shoot straight as hell—an' quick! See that mouse over by the wall?" Before the words were out of his mouth his Colt roared. The bartender stared wide-eyed at the ragged bit of fur and blood that was plastered against the base-board where a moment before a small mouse had been nibbling a bit of cheese. The men at the card table paused, looked up, and resumed their game.

"Man, that's shootin'!" he exclaimed. "Have one on me! This geezer that you bumped off—self defence, I s'pose?"

"No. He was a bar-keep over on the Marias. He made the mistake of takin' on due notice of a pair of black eyes I'd got—somehow they looked mirthful to him, an'—" The Texan paused and gazed reproachfully toward a flick of a white apron as the loquacious one disappeared through the back door.

A loud shouting and a rattling of wheels sounded from without. The card game broke up, and the players slouched out the door. Through the window the Texan watched the stage pull up at the hotel, watched the express box swung off, and the barn-dogs change the horses; saw the exchange of pouches at the post office; saw the stage pull out slowly and stop before a little white cottage next door to the steepleless church. Then he reached for the bottle, poured another drink, and drank it very slowly. Through the open door came the far-away rattle of wheels. He tossed some money onto the bar, walked to the door, and stood gazing down the trail toward the cloud of grey dust that grew dimmer and dimmer in the distance. At last, it disappeared altogether, and only the trail remained, winding like a great grey serpent toward the distant black buttes of the Judith Range. He started to re-enter the saloon, paused with his foot on the threshold and stared down the empty trail, then facing abruptly about he swung into the saddle, turned his horse's head northward, and rode slowly out of town. At the little creek he paused and stared into the piney woods. A tiny white flower lay, where it had

been dropped in the trail, at the feet of his horse, and he swung low and recovered it. For a long time he sat holding the little blossom in his hand. Gently he drew it across his cheek. He remembered—and the memory hurt—that the last time he had reached from the saddle had been to snatch *her* handkerchief from the ground, and he had been just the fraction of a second too late.

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“My luck’s runnin’ mighty low,” he muttered softly, and threw back his shoulders, as his teeth gritted hard, “but I’m still in the game, an’ maybe this will change it.” Very carefully, very tenderly, he placed the blossom beneath the band inside his hat. “I must go an’ hunt for Bat, the old renegade! If anything’s happened to him—if that damned Long Bill has laid for him—I will kill a man, sure enough.” He gathered up his reins and rode on up the trail, and as he rode the shadows lengthened. Only once he paused and looked backward at the little ugly white town. Before him the trail dipped into a wide valley and he rode on. And, as the feet of his horse thudded softly in the grey dust of the trail, the sound blended with the low, wailing chant of the mournful dirge of the plains:

“O bury me not on the lone prairie
Where the wild coyotes will howl o’er me,
Where the rattlesnakes hiss and the crow flies free,
O bury me not on the lone prairie.”