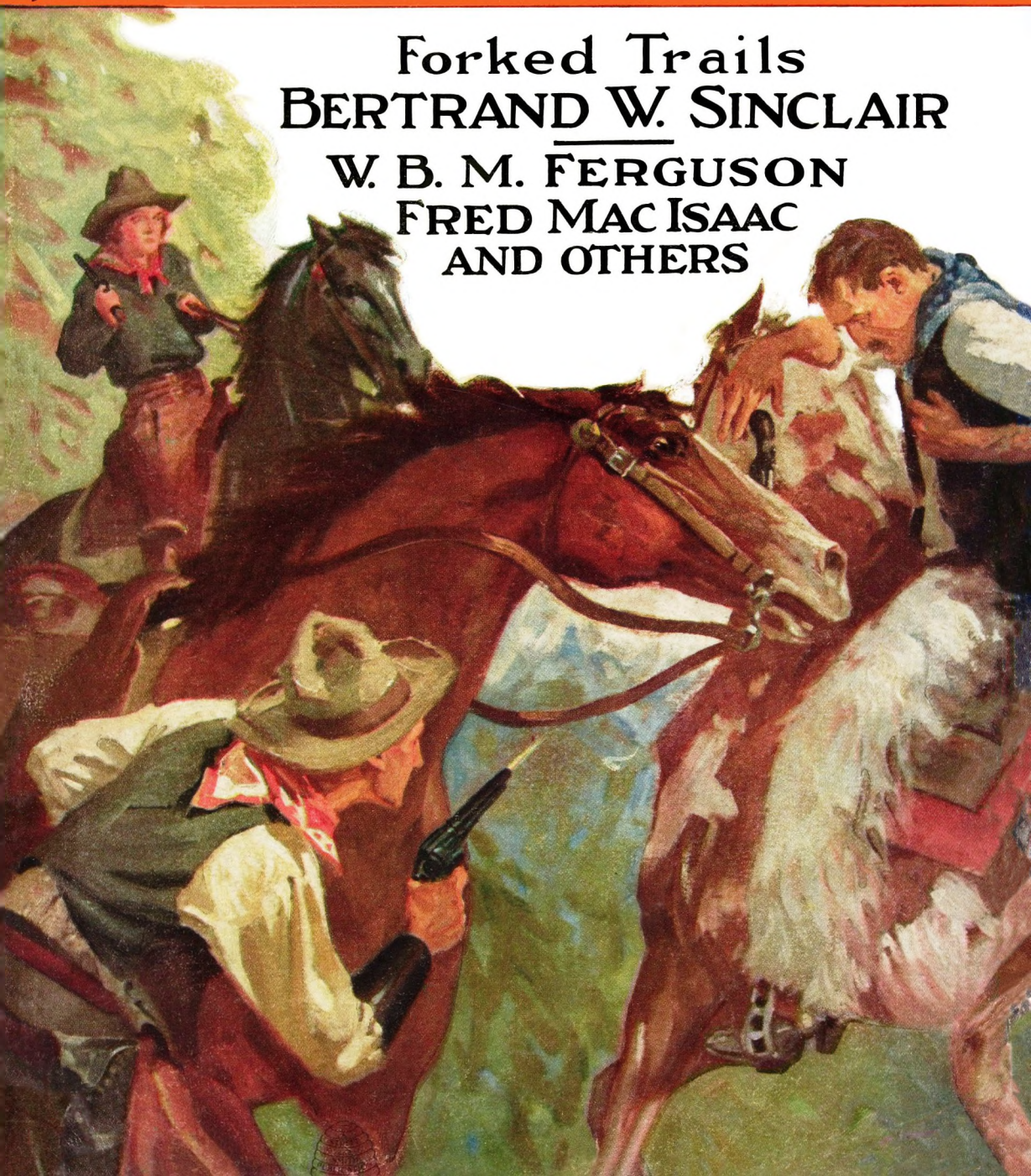
WEEKLY
MAR. 10, 1928

The Popular

15¢
IN CANADA 20¢

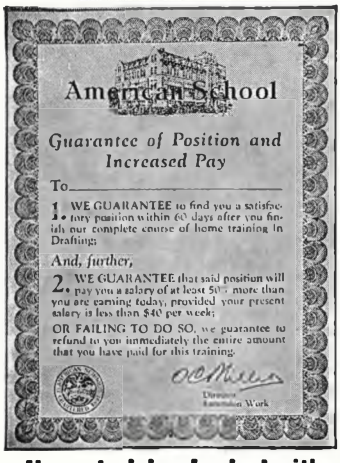


Forked Trails
BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

W. B. M. FERGUSON
FRED MAC ISAAC
AND OTHERS

Drafting Lessons Actually free!

—to prove you can learn at Home, in spare time!

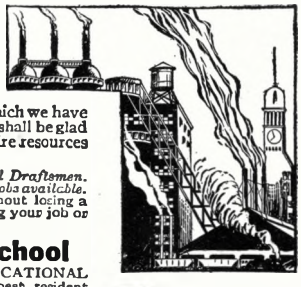


Home-training backed with an agreement to get you a DRAFTING JOB at a 50% RAISE—or money refunded

We have developed a new simplified, rapid way to teach Drafting, and we want to send you three sample lessons *without cost or obligation.* So you can test your own ability to master this fascinating work at home, in your spare time. And see for yourself how quickly and easily *you* can qualify for a fine well-paid Drafting position.

$50 to $125 a week paid to EXPERT DRAFTSMEN!

Pick up the want ads of any big-city newspaper and you'll see why we urge men to go into Drafting. 70,000 fine positions advertised in the past year. Draftsmen are urgently needed in Building Construction, Manufacturing, in the Architectural, Mechanical, Electrical, Structural and Automotive industries. Get in touch with me, and I'll tell you how *you* can get one of these fine jobs.



Come Into Drafting!

The ability to read blueprints and draw plans is the entering wedge to success in all building and manufacturing lines. Learn Drafting and you'll be "sitting pretty." It's INTERESTING work and Draftsmen are a wonderful bunch of fellows. You're bound to enjoy the good natured atmosphere of a Drafting office and the contact it gives you with important activities and BIG MEN.

Here is a word-for-word copy of the Contract which we have made with 30,000 men in the past three years. I shall be glad to make the same agreement, backed by our entire resources of $2,000,000.00—with YOU.

This agreement proves our training does make *real Draftsmen.* It proves that after you finish, *there are well-paid jobs available.* And you can prepare yourself without losing a day's pay or time, without quitting your job or leaving home!

O. C. MILLER
Director Extension Work

The American School

Chartered 30 years ago as an EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION, and, like the best resident schools and colleges, conducted NOT FOR PROFIT. We offer complete, thorough, up-to-date instruction — prepared by 200 leading Engineers, Executives and Educators. A unique instruction, built to meet the specifications of well-paid jobs as laid down by employers themselves—yet simplified for ready understanding by men with only common schooling.

The American School
Dept. D-3192 Drexel Avenue at 58th Street, Chicago

O. C. MILLER, Director, Extension Work ★
The American School, Dept. D-3192
Drexel Ave. & 58th St., Chicago

I am interested to get particulars of your Job and Raise Guarantee. Also send 3 Drafting Lessons without cost or obligation.

Name _____

Address _____

Age _____ Occupation _____

Next week, March 17th, THE POPULAR will open with a novel by Holman Day, called "Square Squair." Odd title, isn't it? Squair is an officer of the law out in a Western wilderness, and he has a twin brother who, contrariwise, is not law-abiding. The story, which is a darned good one, deals with a situation where a man must decide between blood-affection and his duty to his official oath. Next week, remember.

Volume LXXXIX **Number 5**

The Popular

PUBLISHED WEEKLY

Title Registered U. S. Patent Office.

CONTENTS FOR MARCH 10, 1928

Weekly publication issued by Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York. Ormond G. Smith, President; George C. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; George C. Smith, Jr., Vice President; Ormond V. Gould, Secretary. Entered as Second-class Matter, December 22, 1927, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Canadian Subscription, $7.50. Foreign, $8.50.

We do not hold ourselves responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts.

All manuscripts must be addressed to the Editors.

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION, $6.00 **SINGLE COPY, 15 CENTS**

Forked Trails

By

Bertrand W. Sinclair

Author of "Past Twenty-one,"

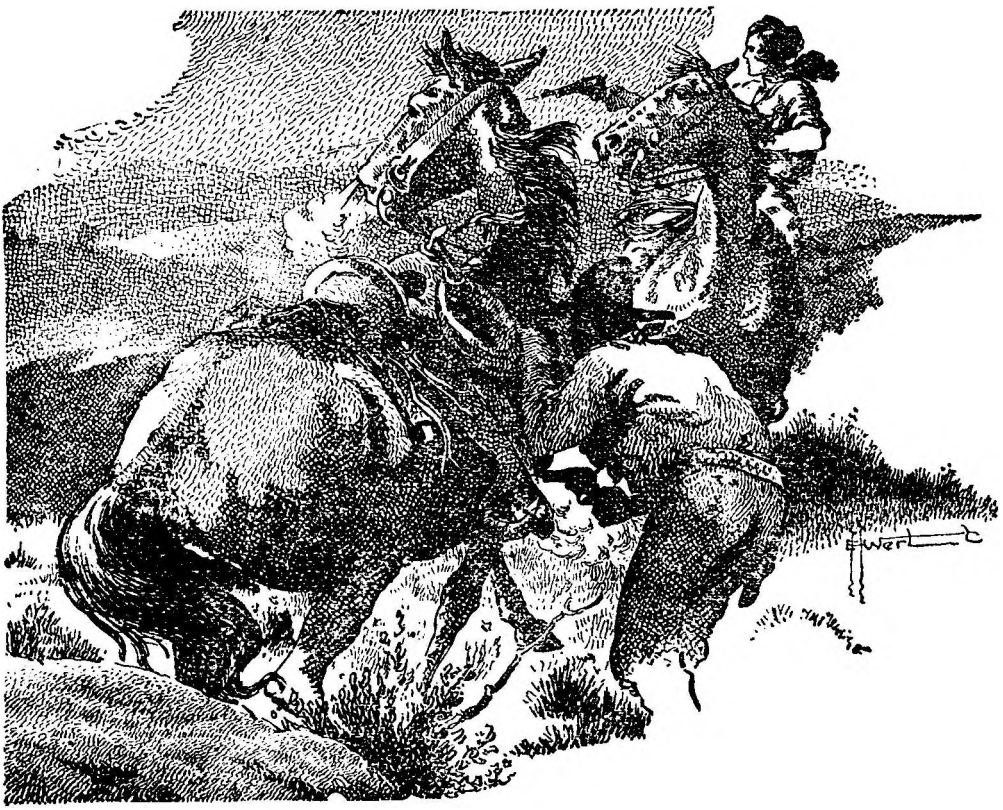
When a man starts on a peaceful trip across a stretch of plains, and is greeted turn back or he may go forward. Don Campbell was a Scotchman by blood and an fore he chose to go forward and find out just why he seemed to be so unpopular in

CHAPTER I.

STOLEN HORSES.

WHY point a moral or adorn a tale, to borrow the phrase of a distinguished person? Echo answers. Frequently in a sequence of incidents of considerable moment there is neither moral nor adornment. On the other hand there may be. You take your choice, or you have no choice, as it happens. If for instance, in the year of our Lord 1887 or '88, when the trail herds were spilling north and west out of Texas as the tide spills itself out of bay and inlet and lagoon when the ebb is strong, if then and there a man riding anywhere west of the Mississippi River had come on a Highlander in kilts doing a sword dance to the pipes for the edification of the antelope and the buffalo wolf, he might have drawn a moral from the spectacle. He would certainly have got primed with a comical tale.

But if he had merely come across a Scotchman in hairy pants and a Stetson hat, with a Colt .45 buckled on his hip, working on the point of a herd of two thousand longhorns bound north, both the moral and the possible tale might have been hard to come at. There would have been no more novelty in that than in the sight of an Irish countenance under a policeman's helmet on the corner of 'steenth and Broadway. Because America was, and is, a land of



"*The Four Winds*," *Etc.*

almost immediately with warning shots, he has a choice of two things to do—he may American by the habit of generations—which is a combination hard to beat. Therethat spot where he was unknown. His choice brought both trouble and happiness.

opportunity, and wherever there is opportunity, there you will find a Scot, and sometimes where there is none—in which case he will be busy creating one to fit his needs.

Which is probably a sufficient reason for Donald Campbell being a top hand with the Square and Compass when it drove its last herd the second season into northern Montana. And if the connection is not yet clear, it may clarify it to say that while there is no sagebrush in Scotland there is plenty of heather in the sagebrush regions of America. Only it is not a material purple bloom to be plucked by hand. It flowers more or less unseen in the heart and blood and brain and sinew of men whose ancestors have pushed the frontier westward until they shoved it clear into the Pacific Ocean, with flintlock guns first and latterly with repeating rifles, not in the sense of it being a holy task and a benefit to humanity, but merely in the ordinary course of events.

Don was a Campbell, which is saying a lot. Both as a clan and as individuals, if the Campbells were not coming they were going somewhere, always. Migrating across the ocean did not essentially change those characteristics. Don drew his first breath in Kansas. His father before him had trafficked in horses between Abilene and Kentucky. Prior to that sundry Campbells on the paternal side had covered most of the

territory between Texas and the New England States.

There was a good deal, in the way of racial and personal wandering, behind this young man with the Square and Compass herd. The Scotch are said to be hard-headed, contentious and acquisitive, with the quality of never letting go what they acquire. But, although Don may have been as hard-headed as any of his primitive ancestors, neither he nor his immediate generation had been strong on acquiring much but experience. And this had given rise to a somewhat animated conversation between him and a man many years older, on a bright September day, with the Missouri River at their back and the end of the long trail at hand.

"Experience," young Don said to his trail boss, Sam Hartley, as they sat sidewise in their saddles watching the last of the herd rise dripping from the shallows of the river, "is the fattest part of my bank roll. It's useful. But you can't cash it in for goods like you can a handful of twenty-dollar gold pieces."

"Takin' it all around, then, you aim to set about gittin' disgustin'ly rich an' leave the collectin' of experience to the other feller," Hartley replied waggishly. "That there's a good idea, Don. I should have done it twenty years ago, m'self. Now, speakin' from experience, I'd say your system is all wrong, the way you indicate her. You gotta have money to make money. You don't pick it up outa the roots of the grass. How better can you set about makin' a start in the cow business than to stay right with this outfit?"

"Get an outfit of my own," Campbell answered.

"If you got a recipe, cook her up," the trail boss grinned, and rode away about his business.

The herd scattered, free of all restraint, on the benchland north of the Missouri. It had been seven months on trail from the Texas Panhandle. The riders were tired, their horses leg weary. On the river bottom, built the year before, a roomy ranch house welcomed them, with a stable and pastures for saddle stock and bunks about a stone fireplace for men.

Indian summer lay like a smoky benediction, a prelude to north winds, snow, frost with bared fangs, and months of splendid idleness for cow-punchers before spring grass brought another round-up. To most of the trail crew it was like sea-battered sailors coming to anchor in port. To Don Campbell that ranch by the Missouri was welcome enough, but for different reasons. He slept through a night that had no turning out on guard over flighty cattle. In the morning the trail boss approached him.

"Some of the boys want to go back to Texas," said he. "Them that wants to stay have steady jobs here. Which do you favor?"

"Neither," said young Don. "Pay me off. I've done my last lick for anybody but myself."

"Seems like I've heard cowboys say that before," Hartley told him with a grin. "The chances are you'll be back here by spring. I'll sort of expect you. We'll start ridin' about May. Meantime, you'll collect more experience. It don't come amiss."

Don, being more frugal with words than he had ever been with money, merely smiled.

He knew where he was going and why. What he could not forecast was what would happen when he got there, nor indeed what might befall him by the way. Still, the unknown had never troubled him greatly. He did not stop to think that he *was* seeking fresh experience, in spite of his disavowal of its value to him, nor that the spirit of restless purpose, with an object, though ever so dim, to be achieved, drove him as it drove his kilted ancestors to descend periodically from their highland

fastnesses to raid sheepfold and cattle pasture in the English lowlands. Don had a considerable acquaintance with Scottish history, but he never thought of drawing any inferences therefrom about his own characteristics.

Between Don's point of departure and his tentative destination lay three hundred miles of rolling plain, bisected by a river into which flowed numerous small creeks from both north and south. It traversed a sizable valley, like a long trough gouged two or three hundred feet below the general level. Little toy ranges of mountains lay off on the sky line. He had a mark on the west which he would not see until he was within a long day's ride of it, and that mark was the Sweetgrass Hills. He had never seen them. But he knew that Milk River, rising in the Rockies, laved the northern foot of the Sweetgrass.

All he had to do was follow that valley till the hills stood blue before him. Very simple. Merely to traverse for a matter of a week that waste of beached grass and gray sage. There were two cow outfits on the lower Milk. Fort Assiniboine manned by a regiment of cavalry stood on a bald plateau two days east of the Sweetgrass. Otherwise it was an empty land, so far as he learned.

The buffalo was not long gone from that region. The plains Indian who had lived in his glory on the buffalo herds was by no means gone. But a white man's scalp was safe enough from the red brother's kindly ministrations now, what with treaty money, ample reservations, and issues of government beef—to say nothing of military posts here and there like Fort Assiniboine.

So Don, like most of the men who made the range their habitat, traveled with an easy mind, conjecturing upon the immediate future. He wasn't altogether going it blind on this expedition. Up in the Sweetgrass Hills he knew of a Scotch-blooded family that had taken root some four years earlier—Campbells from Virginia, American as Indian corn, American as Don himself. And they were distant kin to him, although he had never seen them.

Probably, being singularly free from the twin vices of self-consciousness and self-analysis, he would have laughed if any one had told him he was headed for the Sweetgrass largely under the spur of the clan impulse. What he had uppermost in his mind were land and cattle, a roof of his own, a first-comer's share in the potential wealth of a virgin country.

How all this, which he visualized as a rather extensive program, was to be accomplished with a matter of a few hundred dollars in gold strapped about his middle, didn't trouble Don. He had set out on this journey with the conviction that he was through working for other men, helping other men get rich, risking his neck and spending his energy for other men's profit. A free agent personally, he craved economic freedom to boot.

And it was not that he found himself a rebel against curtailed freedom. No, it was simply the natural craving of every high-spirited soul to pursue fortune along lines of his own making. A vagrant whim to see and talk with people of his own blood had set him making inquiries about the Sweetgrass country. He heard of it as a place where bunchgrass grew to a man's stirrups, where pine trees clothed the hills and cold streams came tumbling down. A man could take three hundred and twenty acres of land and hold it by mere possession until a paternal government surveyed it and gave him a deed thereto.

And Don hadn't spent his years in a cow country without learning practical wisdom about the business whereby he earned his living. If land could be had as a gift, living was easy. Cattle would grow and multiply. Land and cattle. Why not reach for them himself with both hands? Why not?

He was reaching mentally as he rode up the valley of the Milk.

Five days out from the Square and Compass the blue spires of the Sweetgrass showed on the sky line when Don made camp at sundown. He had left Fort Assiniboine a day behind. The Milk looped sluggishly in a boggy channel. Outside of the military post he had not bespoken a soul on the journey. He had seen only a few scattered bunches of stock. Plenty of room here. Too much, when a man had to ride for days to bespeak a neighbor.

Don lay on his blankets that night beside a fire of sagebrush roots. The stars winked companionably at him. His two horses grazed on picket, clearing their nostrils as they cropped the short grass. His stomach was comfortably filled with steaks off an antelope shot that afternoon. He felt thoroughly at peace with all the world, in perfect accord with his surroundings. And in that satisfactory state of mind he drowsed off to sleep.

At daybreak he thrust aside his blankets and sat up. As a soldier looks first to his weapons in the face of attack, so a plainsman looks at all times to his horses. Without them, in the empty immensity of the plains, he ceases to be one of the lords of creation.

And a shock of puzzled wonder which speedily became brow-wrinkling exasperation, stirred Don in that dawn light. Two horses stood with drooping heads a little aside from his camp. But they were not his sleek mounts. He had staked two bright sorrels at dusk. Now, in a pearl-gray morning a buckskin and a mottled brown, jaded, tired-looking beasts, had taken their places.

CHAPTER II.

"SHOOT AN' BE DAMNED!"

DON hurriedly drew on his boots. The horses weren't picketed. They were loose as they had been abandoned. Horse thieves, Indians, practical jokers? These horses had been ridden to a whisper and left. His own doubtless made excellent substitutes. Since even tired horses were better than none, he proceeded warily to catch the buckskin and brown. That was easy enough. They were too dispirited to move when he approached. He tied them to the picket ropes, left lying like thin snakes on the grass, and then proceeded to get his breakfast. If an army travels on its stomach, so do other men.

His riding gear, pack outfit and food had not been touched. He would rather have lost blankets and food than his horses. But a man has no choice in such matters and Don wasted no energy bemoaning his luck. Instead, he lay on his oars for an hour or so to give these tired ponies a breathing spell, then packed one and saddled the other. Before he mounted he circled the camp, carefully searching for tracks.

In that thick growth of dew-wet grass these were easy enough to find. The trail of two horses came in, and the trail of two went out. The swap had been made in the dark, and whoever had made the surreptitious exchange had departed westward, up the river.

Whereupon Don mounted and followed that trail, full of the natural indignation of a man who has been robbed. An unwarranted exchange of that sort *was* robbery. But anger did not close his mind to the fact that he had a very slim chance of ever coming up with gentry who traded live stock in the dark o' the moon. The buckskin and brown were dead on their feet. They would carry him a few miles at a sober gait and that was all. His own two were good stout horses, and fresh. They would travel far and fast. But there were the tracks leading in the direction he wanted to go, so he followed them.

A couple of miles upriver, through a sagebrush flat, silver gray in the morning sun, Don drew up to a high earth

bank, jutting from the southern valley wall into the sage as a headland thrusts into the sea. A bullet flicked up a spatter of dust twenty feet before him. A sharp, reëchoing *pow!* disturbed the stillness. He pulled up. He was no stranger to the sound of a gun, nor the significance of a shot across his bows. Neither was he alarmed. He had no enemies likely to ambush him. Nevertheless, in conjunction with horses that disappeared by night, with the fact that he was a stranger in this region, it behooved him to step softly when hidden hands began to throw lead in his path.

So he sat gazing about him. The shot came from across that point, and high up. He could tell that from the sound. In the bottom a few isolated cottonwoods stood by the river. Thin fringes of willow and chokecherry stood here and there along the bank. Otherwise the flat was bare, and so were the sloping banks of the valley pitching down from the plains above. Bleached grass and little else. Little cover for an ambush and none for refuge if he needed refuge—except flight.

Don didn't seriously consider flight. He was annoyed and very curious. He saw no reason for running—yet.

For a minute or two he sat there. Then he stepped up his horses. Before he had gone a dozen steps a second bullet plowed up the dirt, squarely ahead of him.

"This here," Don grumbled, "is too much of a good thing. If you'd show yourself, Mister Man, I might do a little shootin' myself."

But no one showed a head anywhere during the time Don, being prudent, stopped to think. And the more he thought the angrier he grew. He was a free-born citizen about his legitimate business, and the plains were a public domain. Still, in the face of those warning shots——

He turned reluctantly aside, put his buckskin horse at the southern bank. For one hundred yards he rode at right angles to his proper course. Then the stubborn Scotch in him, which is nothing if not persistent, coupled with anger at lawless highhandedness, grew stronger than caution and he swung back to his first direction.

"Shoot an' be damned!" he shouted in a voice that went welling across the valley. "You need to raise your sights, I can tell you that!"

And, as if this gesture of defiance put a stop to intimidation, no more bullets kicked up the dust. He rode in the unbroken stillness of the valley, until as he came abreast of the point he was greeted by the liquid melody of a meadow lark caroling on a sagebrush, the only songbird that haunts the open plains.

A ranch lay before him. Log house, log stable, high, round, pole corrals. Two big stacks of hay behind a tight fence. A hundred acres of pasture also well fenced. The pale green of a cultivated garden patch lay behind the house. Two or three cows and a score of horses grazed in the pasture. The place was occupied. Smoke streamed from a chimney. Clothes, fluttering white, flapped from a line.

Don Campbell had an eye like a hawk. Nothing escaped him, from the neatness, order, and scope of the place, to a rider just turning the fence corner to dismount at the stable and disappear within.

"Maybe that's the hombre that saluted me a ways back," Don reflected. "I wonder why? Well, there's a way to find out. This country must be tougher'n I reckoned if man can't ride peaceful across it without bein' shot at. Have your horses stole in the night, and powder burned under your nose in the mornin' is playin' it strong, seems to me."

The laggard steps of his horses brought him at last to the house, abreast of a wide porch. There he

stopped with a look of inquiry, for three men and a woman stood gazing at him. They stood in a row, silent, staring. And Don stared back.

One man was elderly, a very tall man with red hair and a red face, a bristly red mustache, and a glint like red in his eyes. Two striplings flanked him. They, also, were rufous as to hair and countenance. They lacked the height and weight of what was patently their sire, just as they lacked years, one being hardly seventeen and the other certainly no more than twenty.

The woman was a tall girl. Her hair was red, too, but a richer shade than the others, a brilliant glow of color about her head that caught Don Campbell's eye like a flame in the dark. By contrast her skin was white as milk, above a black-and-white polka-dot dress. And she looked at Don out of eyes peculiarly somber and gray like the sage that floored the valley, steel gray with queer lights.

The three men stood with feet apart, braced, it seemed to Don, thumbs hooked each in the belt that carried a row of shiny brass cartridges and a holstered gun. They didn't speak. If their attitude spelled anything it was watchful hostility.

Don matched that silent stare for a second.

"Well," he said at last, "this seems to be a warlike section of Montana. Do you make a practice of welcoming strangers by shooting 'em up and then glowerin' at 'em like a thundercloud?"

His tone, considering the circumstances, was hardly conciliatory.

"You got your gall to show up here, Salter," the old man said in a snarling voice. "Ride on, you blackguard. Your room's better'n your company."

Salter? Don brightened. They had mistaken him for some one. He didn't feel himself in a precarious position. Indeed, he was already a little amused. He got the impression that this crowd, if they had to, would shoot first and talk afterward. But at present they preferred to talk. And that suited him. He twisted one leg around the horn of his saddle and smiled.

"That isn't Tom Salter, Uncle Malcolm," the girl gave him a second key to the riddle. "Those are his horses all right, but the man isn't Salter."

"I was born a Campbell, and never had reason to change my name," Don informed them. "Salter? Now, nobody ever called me that before. Just who do you reckon I am? And why do you figure I'm poison to you?"

The red-headed man looked at the girl, at his sons, at Don. He seemed uncertain, but there was no uncertainty about his palpable irritation, suspicion.

"If you ain't Tom Salter, what in blazes are you doin' ridin' the country on his pet stock?"

"That," said Don truthfully, "is something I can't help. I'd rather have my own. They're a darn sight better than these. I quit the Square and Compass at the mouth of Milk River a week ago. I'm on my way to the Sweetgrass. Last night I camped a ways below here. I have two crackin' good sorrel ponies, both branded LX on the hip. When I wake up this mornin' they're gone—and these two—which have been rode to a standstill—are there instead. So I naturally use 'em to get somewhere, since walkin' ain't to my taste. Then somebody takes a couple of shots at me just around that point, like a hint to ramble off in some other direction. But I don't see no good reason for takin' that sort of hint, so I'm here. It don't seem like strangers is welcome much, around this place. What's the idea for all the hostile front? Is a man liable to have his horses stole and be taken for an outlaw anywhere in this neck of the woods? What kind of a formation have I run into, anyway?"

The youngest boy grinned. An amused glint showed in the gray eyes

of the red-headed girl. The patriarch of the group fingered his bristly mustache. When he spoke, there was a note of perplexity, a faint regret, in his tone:

"Gosh darn it, young feller, I don't know whether to believe you or not."

"Immaterial to me," Don replied casually. "Only I'd like to know what you're excited about. Maybe you could wise me up so I'd know where to look for my own horses. I got a lot the worst of that swap in the dark."

"Don't be silly, Uncle Malcolm," the girl said quietly. "You're off on the wrong foot. This is certainly not Tom Salter. Don't be so blamed suspicious."

"You'd ought to know," the old man growled. He cast a glance sidewise at his son. "What about it, Murdy?"

"Of course it ain't Salter," he said. "I could 'a' told you that. The horses fooled me for a minute. Salter wouldn't show up here single-handed, nohow. Them's his horses, though, sure as blazes. He was ridin' a buckskin an' leadin' a brown day before yesterday, accordin' to Wundt. I seen him on that buckskin, last summer once. You sure want to get rid of them nags," he grinned at Don. "There's men ridin' around in this country right now that'd shoot you up an' ask questions afterward if they run across you mounted on that buckskin or brown with a TS on their shoulder. You wouldn't have a chance to explain nothin'."

"That's cheerful," Don replied. "What's a man to do—walk, when some thief sets him afoot?"

"Better put up your cayuses," the old man suggested, "an' let's talk this over. You had breakfast, stranger?"

"Thanks, I have," Don accepted the olive branch. "If you're right, I better collect myself a fresh mount. Reckon you could sell me a couple of fresh nags?"

"Maybe. We'll see. You go with him to the stable, Lockie."

The younger of the boys walked with Don across the yard. He eyed the buckskin and brown after Don had stripped off the gear and tied them in stalls to munch hay.

"They wouldn't pack you far, them two," he said shrewdly. "Rode to a whisper."

Don agreed. As they strolled back to the house the boy looked up at him impishly. He was a pert-looking youth with impudent eyes.

"You don't take a hint worth a cent," he grinned. "You got lots of nerve or you're a darned fool. Don't you never turn aside when somebody throws lead in your face? Most men do, in this country."

"If anybody got to shootin' close I expect I'd back up as fast as the next," Don answered. "Was it you givin' them hints with a Winchester?"

The boy shook his head. Somehow that denial didn't convince Don. He had a sort of instinct about boyish bravado. This saucy youth would be quite likely to throw a couple of warning shots in the way of an approaching horse thief. Whoever this Salter was, he wasn't welcome at this place.

"So he set you afoot last night, eh?" Lockie continued, "We reckoned he'd be passin' this way maybe. He must 'a' got off on the wrong foot somewhere, if he had to lift your horses."

"Who is this Salter party?" Don inquired.

"He's a pretty slick rustler from up in the Sweetgrass," Lockie replied, with a carelessness rather too casual. "You'll get his history better from the old man. I don't know much about what he's been doin' lately. I been away on round-up all summer. Just got back yesterday."

Now, so far as Don was concerned, he had at the moment but two interests. One was so tenuous he hardly reckoned with it, but it was a peculiar sort of curiosity about this flaming red-haired

niece of the red-headed man's. He had a much more lively concern with repossessing himself of his two sorrel horses and getting about his business. The Sweetgrass Hill and what tribute he could wring from that virgin country was a great deal more to him than the activities of any reputed hard citizens who might infest that country. But the master of the ranch put a different face on that. And the girl gave it a slant of her own.

Don mentioned his name.

"Oh." The old man looked thoughtful. "You any kin to them Campbells in the Sweetgrass? Didn't you say you was headed for there?"

"I'm a sort of forty-second cousin to all the Campbells up there, I expect," Don admitted. "I don't know 'em but I'm on my way to look 'em up. My folks hail from Kansas. This branch of the Campbell family, I understand, is from Virginia."

"You favor 'em," the old man growled. "You're a Campbell, all right. So's this Tom Salter."

Don didn't miss the emphasis. It registered profound distaste. But he didn't see the connection.

"Salter's what?" he asked.

"He's kin, I'm told, to these Sweetgrass Campbells," the old fellow continued gloomily. "I tell you straight, young feller, I don't like the Campbell tribe. I'm a MacDonald myself."

Don smiled. He knew the tone and the inference, or at least he took it in a certain way, having encountered the ancient animosities of the clans before.

"I ain't responsible for the tribe," he declared. "I play my own hand. You talk like a MacDonald from over in Canada that I met once. You'd think to hear him that the fiery cross was still goin' round. Still broodin' about the massacre of Glencoe! Shucks, we're Americans. Quit pawin' the heather an' wavin' the ancient claymore, an' tell me about this Salter. He stole my horses and I'd take a fall outa him for that if he was my brother. Who is he? What is he? What's he done that you want to take out on me?"

"He's the slickest rustler that ever trailed a rope," old MacDonald snarled. "He's got a holdout in the Sweetgrass, an' them Campbells protect him 'cause he's one of 'em."

"Listen," Don said quietly. "I'm a plumb stranger, but when you lump in everybody in the Sweetgrass like that you're talkin' about my people. Suppose this Salter is a thief. What's Cliff and John Campbell got to do with that? Talk straight."

The old man gulped. His red-rimmed eyes blinked.

"Salter's kin to 'em," he grumbled. "That's all. I ain't accusin' these folk of yours of bein' in on his crooked plays. But nobody can get nothin' on Tom Salter in the Sweetgrass Hills. They favor him."

"Maybe you're a little premature, classifyin' him as a rustler," Don suggested. "You might be wrong."

MacDonald snorted.

"I ain't classifyin' him," he retorted. "He done that for himself. There's others layin' for him. I know he's took a heap of stock off'n me the last two years. Lord only knows how many of my calves is wearin' his brand to-day. He's got away with it so much he's aimin' to become respectable. Havin' stole everythin' else he wants, he announces he's goin' marry this girl. I'll hang him to the corral gate if I ever git hold of him."

They sat in the living room of the MacDonald ranch house. The MacDonalds might be pioneering the wilderness but they believed in comfort and evidently had the means to secure it. They had good furniture, rugs on the floor, a piano. Taste as well as comfort had been a consideration. The girl sat in a leather-upholstered rocker, hands clasped over her knees, a striking figure.

Especially to a young man whose ideas about women tended to be worshipful. A man may know a great deal about certain practical phases of existence. He may be able to cope skillfully with a material environment, hard citizens, big herds, vast distances, to ride, shoot, be cool when much depends on instant decision and action, and still have curiously vague ideas about the reality of women. About this sort of woman that Don was looking at now with unconsciously repressed longing. He may indeed regard any young woman with the ramparts of her sex about her, youth, beauty, all the ancient enchantments, as a combination of the mysterious and the wholly angelic. Eventually he learns that they are human and prone to err—like himself. But Don had never learned that.

He stared at the numerous touches which made that room homelike beyond any room he had been in for a long time, and naturally he ascribed it to this gray-eyed creature with the flaming hair and milk-white skin, who regarded him now with a touch of wistfulness. He liked the sound of her voice. For years he had lived in a world almost exclusively peopled and certainly dominated by men, by masculine interests. There were women in that world, of course, but they were of a type that didn't interest him.

Probably that was why he found himself listening with a divided mind to old MacDonald's bitter saga of Tom Salter, interspersed with an occasional shaft at the Sweetgrass Campbells.

Salter, it seemed was a thorn in the MacDonald flesh—incidentally, according to Malcolm, a thorn in the flesh of other outfits ranging stock along Milk River. His devious ways were beyond all reckoning, except that wherever he was active stock disappeared. Nobody could catch him at it. It appeared that lately he had journeyed to White Sulphur Springs, a point far south of Fort Benton on the Missouri River. Coincidental with that a considerable number of horses disappeared from the Dot and Dash range. The Dot and Dash was owned by an energetic and hot-headed person named Wundt who believed in hanging his own thieves without benefit of clergy, and so he had set out in pursuit. This bunch of Dots and Dashes was believed to be headed north, where the C. P. Railway traversing western Canada offered a ready market for horses. But the trail had been lost on the Marias River and now Wundt was looking for Salter, horses or no horses, with blood in his eye. And Salter had been traveling toward Canada, at last account, pursued by the furious Wundt.

But in Malcolm MacDonald's eye the crowning infamy was that Tom Salter was after Ruby MacDonald. There were other people in the Sweetgrass besides Campbells. Ruby had gone visiting there the previous winter. She had been seen by Salter. That godless thief had been audacious enough to send word to old Malcolm that he was coming to the MacDonald ranch and get himself a wife by and by.

MacDonald became almost garrulous in his temper. Ruby rocked in her chair, looking a trifle embarrassed at these personal disclosures. But she said nothing. When she looked at her uncle, it was, Campbell marked, with something that might be either anger or contempt. Certainly it wasn't friendly.

The feeling that he was on dangerous ground, that he would be better on his way, came over Don. All this bother meant little to him. If there was any reflection on him because this notorious Salter was allied with the Sweetgrass Campbells who were his own kinsfolk, Don didn't consider it a casus belli, at the moment. Yet this was distasteful. The absurdity of danger there amused him, on second thought. A querulous patriarch of the frontier maundering on about a thief whose exploits were so

fantastic as to be mythical. How could a lone man—in a region where other men were able and enterprising and quick to take action where any transgression of their rights or property occurred—how could any individual flourish single-handed as a public nuisance and not be speedily abated?

Yet Don was shy two sorrel horses to show that some one on Milk River had a way of taking what he required. And there was nothing unsubstantial about Malcolm MacDonald, who nursed ancient clan grudges and grumbled about horse thieves, nor the two able-looking youths who sat silent with cigarettes in their mouths, nor Ruby MacDonald with the flaming hair who rocked and kept looking at him in a way that strangely disturbed his blood.

And he couldn't mount and ride away offhand. His horses, such as had been left him, were too tired. Until they rested, or unless he could get fresh mounts from this querulous MacDonald, he could only sit there. And he was as well there as anywhere.

Because if those two were Tom Salter's horses, and Salter was what these people claimed, he had better not be seen with them in his possession. Don was wise enough in the ways of his country to understand that. It was equivalent to being overhauled by a policeman on a city street with the evidence of a robbery on his person. To meet this raging Wundt from White Sulphur while he was mounted on either the brown or buckskin was asking for immediate trouble. Thinking of that gave him a sudden resolution.

CHAPTER III.

A WARNING.

"DO you suppose," he asked MacDonald, "that this Salter party will go traipsin' around this country with my two horses?"

"Salter," the old man replied, "is apt to do whatever he blame well feels like doin'. Still, bein' foxy, he's most likely layin' low till this Wundt quits fussin' around. When he comes back to his layout in the Sweetgrass he'll have saddle stock of a different kind."

"Isn't there law and officers to enforce it, in this country?" Don inquired. "Montana ain't supposed to be plumb wide open, is it?"

"Sure, there's law. Lots of it," MacDonald replied. "But you can't have a deputy sheriff posted on every ridge. They ain't enough to go around. People is mostly on the square. What everybody knows ain't exactly evidence in court either. If a man is cute like a fox he can get away with a lot. An' this Salter uses his head, as well as a long rope."

"Then somebody ought to kill him on general principles," Don stated with conviction. "A slick thief is all same rattlesnake. There's only one thing to do with him."

"Most likely somebody will," old MacDonald agreed. "Some of these days he'll git smoked up to a fare you well."

"If I had a couple of fresh horses," Don said thoughtfully, "I'd be on his trail right now. It sort of ruffles me to have a man take things from me while I'm asleep."

"Slim chance," the youngest MacDonald put in. "You don't know the country. Might as well chase a shadow. You'll never see your sorrel horses again. Unless you had a stroke of luck."

"You don't get lucky sittin' on your boot heels waitin' for things to come your way," Don said. He didn't mention the fact that he had been following a perfectly plain trail when those two shots deflected him. Nor did he stop to wonder why, with Salter taboo in that vicinity, his tracks should point for the MacDonald ranch. A man could go anywhere with safety in the darkness. "Takin' it all around, I'd as soon make

a try. Suppose," he addressed MacDonald, "you sell me a couple of fresh horses? I feel like bein' on my way."

The old man seemed to regard Don with a frowning look of appraisal. The girl stopped rocking. Don got the impression, out of one corner of his eye, that she was looking at him with surprise, not unmixed with apprehension.

"I guess I could let you have a mount," old MacDonald said finally. "Though we ain't got none to spare. Murdy, you go bunch them ponies."

The youngster heaved himself to his feet. A minute later he was loping around the pasture. When the loose horses came streaking into the corrals, old MacDonald beckoned Don to come with him. As they walked toward the stable he had a feeling that Ruby was at their heels. He glanced over his shoulder. She was only an arm's length behind him. She made a sign Don couldn't interpret, except that she was trying to tell him something, implying caution, secrecy. But against what, or whom, he hadn't the remotest idea. He went on to the corrals, mystified, disturbed, eager to speak to her but restrained by that cryptic shake of her head, the quick pursing of her red lips. And along with that he couldn't help thinking what a picture she was. A girl had no business to be so good looking, to upset a man so. He wondered idly what it would be like to see her smile, to hear her laugh.

"Now them two grays. I might let you have them," old MacDonald said, "for fifty apiece."

Don took in the two horses indicated with one shrewd glance. They were saddle-broken horses in good flesh, not quite as high quality as the sorrels he had lost, but good enough for any man's riding. But fifty dollars apiece! Certainly Malcolm MacDonald was no philanthropist. The dim suspicion floated in Don's mind that the old man was taking advantage of the situation to make a typical Scotch bargain. Don knew what horses were worth in Montana. Thirty dollars apiece for such stock was a fair average.

"You must think well of 'em at that figure," he said. "Are they racing stock or something? Ordinary saddle horses don't generally bring that price."

"I don't aim to give good broke horses away, young feller," old Malcolm said frostily. "We need 'em ourselves. Fifty dollars is the price."

He didn't say, "Take it or leave it," but his manner implied that statement. Even if Don had been inclined to haggle, which was not his nature or his policy about anything, MacDonald's manner closed the question. Don looked at the two grays and without any apparent reason the desire to be on his way revived strongly.

"I'll take 'em," he said briefly. "Here's your money. Gimme a bill of sale."

"Make that out when we get to the house," MacDonald nodded. "Rope 'em out for Campbell, Murdy."

He seemed a trifle more genial with five twenty-dollar gold pieces clinking in his red, hairy-backed hand. He was a thundering big man, Malcolm MacDonald, and he had hands in proportion. Money, Don reflected, was quite a lot to this elderly Scot.

"Say, you ain't in no rush, are you?" he observed. "Soon be noon. Better wait till we have somethin' to eat before you pull out."

Don was saddling one horse. He shook his head. He wanted to be on his way. Contrariwise, he wanted to know what Ruby MacDonald was trying to convey to him. Something she didn't want the rest of her family to know. Something she either wouldn't or didn't dare mention. Don was annoyed with himself for being swayed by obscure impulses. To hell with the whole damn business! That was his inner reflection. He had been deprived

of two good horses. He had been shot at. He had, he privately considered, been as good as held up in the purchase of these two gray RMs. The whole combination irritated him exceedingly. There was even a profound irritation in being unaccountably attracted by this silent, red-haired girl who talked with her eyes in a language he could not understand. And when a man faces irritations and complications he naturally seeks to escape.

"If I leave these Salter plugs with you," he said to MacDonald, "will you hold 'em till I come back after 'em, or send you word what to do with 'em? I got a bone to pick with this party over this sight-unseen horse swapping."

"You bet we'll hold 'em," old MacDonald growled. I'd like for to see him ride in here to claim 'em."

"All right. Make me out that bill of sale and I'll be on my way," Don said.

He had his horses packed and saddled. When he took the first hitch in the latigo Ruby walked back to the house. He led his outfit now to the porch and the old man walked with him. The two youths remained at the stable. In the big room the old man sat down to scrawl a bill of sale on a sheet of paper, Don at his elbow. While old Malcolm wrote the girl moved uneasily about the room. And in her flitting, once she passed directly behind Don Campbell.

He felt a gentle pressure at his back. He glanced over his shoulder. Ruby put one finger on her lips. Her gray eyes flashed a distinct warning. And as Don's head turned back to the bent shoulders of her uncle he felt her thrust something into his hip pocket. After which she walked away to the other side of the room.

Don took his bill of sale, bade MacDonald a curt good-by, doffed his hat to Ruby and stepped out.

Three hundred yards clear of the ranch he reached for that hip pocket. His fingers closed upon and drew forth a folded bit of paper. A few words were penciled on ruled lines and one edge was ragged where it had been torn hastily off a pad.

Don't go looking for Tom Salter. Waste of time. Go straight to Cliff Campbell. Ask him about Tom Salter—and about me. Then do what you like about it. Tell Tom Salter to watch out for Uncle Malcolm and Murdy. No time to write more. R. M.

CHAPTER IV.

ONE OF THE SAME BLOOD.

DON stared at those hurriedly scrawled words. For a second he was tempted to turn back and get at the root of this. He didn't like mysteries. No man does. It was damned funny. In one sentence she told him not to waste time looking for this supposed horse thief, Salter. In another she gave him a message to be delivered by him personally to Salter. And—and—— Too many queries buzzed in Don's brain.

In the end he decided to do just what she advised—go straight to Cliff Campbell. That was his destination anyhow. While inclination urged him to scout about for tracks that might be the trail of his stolen horses, reason told him he would have to leave that to chance, for the time being at least. The thief had a long start. It was too much of a needle-in-a-haystack proposition.

The bottom where he rode now was tracked over by cattle, presumably MacDonald stock. He could see them scattered in grazing bunches. He was no magician to distinguish one sort of track in the grass from another. Better follow that penciled advice to the letter.

"Do what you like about it." About what? R. M. Ruby MacDonald. And the brand on the two horses he had just bought was an RM. That head of flaming hair and gray eyes with a curious message in them rode with him. He could see the very texture of her milk-

white skin. "Damn fool!" he abjured himself.

Like any normal, straightforward man Don hated obscurity. Where there was so much smoke there must be fire. What the nature of the conflagration might be that raised the smoke of suspicion around the MacDonald ranch might be, he hadn't the least idea. And it was none of his business. Nevertheless, a very human curiosity impelled him to make it his business. He was involved to the extent of two excellent sorrel horses, at any rate.

And if the Sweetgrass Hills held the answer to the riddle, he would kill two birds with one stone. He gave over looking for horse tracks in the bottom. He passed close by a bunch of bald-face cattle branded RM on the ribs. The valley walls shut off any far look. And since he had ridden for days in that gray-green trough that winds across two thirds of northern Montana, he suddenly grew desirous of a far look and so pointed his horse at the south bank and bore up to the level of the plains.

To a man who had trailed for seven months across the flattest section of North America that look was a treat. The triple buttes of the Sweetgrass stood bold now, three giant purple cones. Far beyond them in the west loomed a pale outline that Don knew was the tip of the Rockies, faint like a mirage. The Canada line lay only an hour's ride on his right. The flat top of the Cypress Range broke that horizon with a blue smudge.

He could see the Highwoods, the Belts, the Snowies, the Moccasins, the Bear Paws, each a miniature mountain cosmos, rising like monstrous ant hills out of the vast, bleached plain. Texas, Kansas, western Nebraska, Wyoming—Don had crossed them all in that summer pilgrimage from the south; flat wastes, bald and monotonous, covered with short grass, threaded by bitter water.

"Even if I haven't made no good start, havin' a couple of horses stole from me that a way," Don reflected, "I'm sure glad I came. This looks like a sure-enough country to me. I bet there's pretty places in them hills. And she sure ain't overpopulated. There ain't enough people in a hundred square miles to wad a shotgun."

Forty miles or so, he reckoned, separated the MacDonald ranch from the eastern butte of the Sweetgrass trio. An hour before sundown Don was skirting the foot of that butte, admiring the tall bunch grass, crossing tiny streams of cold water that came trickling down from pine forests on the upper slopes.

He rode with a curiously divided mind, an odd mixture of considerations and motives. Single-track minds are rare. Don cogitated upon horse thieves and red-headed girls, of a log house built by his own hands on one of these spring creeks, of a bunch of cattle grazing under his brand. Also, mixed in with these reflections like raisins in a rice pudding, were more immediate inquiries.

Where was the Campbell ranch, or ranches? There were two Campbells that he knew of, Cliff and John. There might be more. The Sweetgrass covered a lot of territory. The skirts of the three buttes, East Butte, West Butte, and Gold Butte thrusting up a lesser cone in the middle, covered a forty-mile circle. Ride and look was his only recourse.

"If I camp to-night," he said to himself whimsically, "I sleep with my hand on the picket ropes."

But he didn't camp that night. He topped a spur running out from East Butte and passed grazing cattle by a creek. A mile up that, where it widened to a small valley with poplar groves turning to autumn gold, he came on a ranch.

In the yard of that ranch he pulled

up to speak to a man who came walking from the house to meet him. And Don was familiar enough with his own countenance to stare at the man with lively interest. A stare that was returned in much the same degree, for a second before they broke mutually into speech.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS TOM SALTER.

THE man looking up at Don was probably thirty-one or two. He stood bareheaded. The last of the sun slipping through a notch in the bank struck glints from hair that was wavy brown with a touch of gold in it, like Don's own. He had very blue eyes. He was a little taller than Don—who was no runt—and thicker through his square shoulders.

"I shouldn't be surprised if your name happened to be Campbell," Don said.

The man nodded, smiling.

"So's mine," Don continued. "Last summer, trailin' across Nebraska, I come across a feller that knew you. I wrote you a letter from Ogallalla—that is, if you're Cliff Campbell."

"That's me. Yeah, I got that letter. So you're one of Alec Campbell's boys from Kansas."

"One? I'm the only one there is," Don laughed. "The rest of his boys were girls."

"Well, it ain't every day in the year a cousin comes ridin' in," Cliff said. "So put up your horses. You landed here just in time to smack your chops over fried chicken."

"Fried chicken?" said Don. "Say, if I was a prodigal son that'd suit me far better'n any fatted calf."

Cliff's stable was big, and in the dim stalls Don could see a work team and two or three saddle horses. Behind the stable, stacks of hay loomed within a tight fence. Machinery and a wagon bulked in a shed. Cliff's house was roomy. It had sprawling wings and wide porches. All about for miles, as Don's roving eyes had apprised him, lay good grazing, free as the air. Here was accomplishment and prosperity. If one Campbell could do that much for himself, so could another.

The stream which watered that tiny hollow flowed between house and ranch buildings. They crossed on a stout bridge of pine logs.

"I notice you're mounted on 'Windy' MacDonald's stock," Cliff commented. "Been circulatin' around the RM?"

"No longer than I had to," Don grinned. "I camped below there a ways last night. Somebody set me afoot. I had to buy these two grays from MacDonald to get up here."

"Bet he made you pay for 'em if he knew you were a Campbell," Cliff chuckled. "Old Malcolm don't fancy the Campbells."

"Why?" Don asked, with his foot on Cliff's threshold.

"Because they don't fancy him," Cliff replied.

Then Don was being introduced to a tiny woman with brown eyes, a mass of straight black hair, and cheeks tinted like a ripe apple. She reminded him of a robin, she was so small and cheerful and energetic. A couple of young men, booted and spurred, unjointed themselves from chairs to shake hands with him. Cliff haled a small figure from behind a bulky sofa and asked proudly:

"How's this for a young stock hand? We're raisin' our own riders up here in the Sweetgrass."

"Don't be silly," Jenny Campbell reproved her husband—but Don could see that was a mere gesture.

The RM, stolen horses, wistful girls with flaming red hair, were thrust out of that picture. These people had neither mysteries nor moods. They were functioning cheerfully in their

chosen world. They sat down to supper by the light of oil lamps. At eight o'clock the two riders withdrew to a bunk-house wing, since they had to be abroad early. Cliff, his wife, and Don revived family history, traced the movements and location of every collateral branch of the family they could think of.

"Phu! I can almost smell heather and peat smoke," Jenny Campbell said at last. "You two are as bad as Windy MacDonald. Think you'd just come over from Argyle."

"I'm as American as you are, you little bunch of Iowa sunshine," Cliff retorted. "Three generations in these United States, old girl. But a hundred generations in Scotland maybe. The Campbells rustled cows off the English before Columbus crossed the duck pond. Don't you like the Scotch? What for did you marry one?"

"To try and civilize you, you lummox," Jenny bantered. "They say it takes three generations to make a gentleman. Lord knows how many it would take to make a Highlander anything but what he is."

"It can't be done a-tall," Cliff grinned. "It's born in us to think well of our own an' to light hard on our enemies. God bless the Duke of Argyll! You never met him, Jenny, and neither have I, but he was a Campbell, too."

And so to bed at last on a comfortable mattress in an airy room. Don closed his eyes almost as soon as his head settled gratefully on one of Jenny Campbell's goosefeather pillows, but in that brief interval his mind went questing back to another ranch where the thistle had blown its seed. What the devil did Ruby MacDonald mean? He would find out in the morning.

He did. Breakfast was over at sunrise. Cliff and Don stood by the stable door watching Cliff's two riders lope away. Morning gave a noble view from Cliff's ranch, through a notch in the west bank, and down the creek which opened like a wide gate to the south. The pointed spire of East Butte lifted to the sun. Rolling land swept away to the flat plains. Cattle sprinkled the ridges. Fertile, beautiful in its vastness, it looked alluring to Don. A man could take his pick of it because as yet only a few had come to pick. The human tide would roll in by and by. The land-hungry, the opportunity seekers, were pushing west of the Mississippi, out of the crowded corn States. Don knew that. He was thinking of what he could do in ten years if he got in on the ground floor, when Cliff spoke of a more immediate matter.

"Were you joshin' last night about havin' your horses stolen?"

"I should say I wasn't," Don answered emphatically. "It was like this."

He began at the point where he wakened to find two played-out horses instead of his sorrels. He continued on to the moment of leaving the RM. Only he did not show Cliff Ruby MacDonald's note. He had meant to do that, but some peculiar reluctance stopped him. Perhaps it was that phrase, "ask him about *me*." He meant to ask about her. But he kept the note in his pocket, letting it be understood that Ruby had told him these things.

Cliff's face took on a scowl.

"Why, the darned old hound!" he said indignantly. "That's all hot air. Tom ought to go after him for shootin' off his mouth that way. Gosh darn his black heart. He ain't got the brains of a prairie dog."

He stopped to reflect a second.

"Somethin' kinda funny about this," said he.

"Well, tell me, then," Don put in. "What about Tom Salter? Were those his horses? If so, how'd they come there in place of mine? I don't care two whoops in hell about old Windy

MacDonald nor his quarrels. But I have got some interest in this horse-stealin' business, when it comes close home like this."

"Well, you can take it from me," Cliff said positively, "that Tom Salter don't steal stock any more'n I do. He don't have to, for one thing, because he's got plenty of his own. That TS buckskin an' brown is his. No question about that. It's his brand. An' besides I know them two horses. How they got there I can't say. But I know this. Day before yesterday Tom rode with me an' them two boys that just left, an' he slept here that night—the night your horses were taken. What the dickens is Windy MacDonald tryin' to start, talkin' like that? That's what I want to know."

"He seemed agitated particularly about this Tom Salter," Don said, "an' peeved about sufferin' from rustlers."

"Yeah, I've heard this rustlin' talk before," Cliff said contemptuously. "But Tom was never included in it. Old Windy comes honest by his name. If he could he'd count his calves every mornin' before breakfast. If one was missin' he'd swear it was stole, when it might be grazin' just over the hill. If anybody's rustlin' off the RM they got stock enough an' money enough to start right out an' round up every suspicious character within a hundred an' fifty miles."

"They've got quite a lay-out, have they?" Don asked.

"Sure. Makin's of a darned fine ranch if they want to turn the Milk out on the flat an' irrigate. An' the RM cattle must run around three thousand head. Gosh darn it, that don't give Windy MacDonald no license to make the kind of talk he did to you about Tom Salter. Gosh, does he think he could head off either Tom or that red-headed girl by makin' cracks like that? I should say not. What do you think of Ruby? Ain't she a corker for looks? Ever see such a head or hair?"

"She's quite a girl, all right," Don agreed.

Cliff laughed.

"I guess that's the root of the grouch Windy's got against Tom Salter," he went on. "All the loose men in the country would be hangin' around the RM if Windy an' them cutthroat kids of his didn't kinda horn everybody off. Ruby ain't exactly shy, but she don't encourage the young fellers, an' Windy goes outa his way to discourage 'em. Though what in blazes his idea is I don't know. Somebody's goin' to get his loop on her some time. That kind of girl don't go beggin' in this country. She ain't been off that ranch in two years till last winter.

"Tom Salter knew her when she was a kid in pigtails. Tom worked for the RM when they first come to this country. There's another feller, married man, used to work for MacDonald. He's located him a ranch here in the hills. Ruby broke away an' come up to visit 'em for a spell last winter. I don't know if Tom got sweet on her, but he was around there some. MacDonald don't like us nohow, me nor John. Never did. Old Windy himself come outa one of them Scotch settlements in eastern Canada where they still talk Gaelic an' keep up all the old clan wars. An' Tom Salter is just like one of us. He ain't no blood kin, but he's a half brother of John's wife.

"I don't know whether Ruby cares two whoops about Tom or not. That's their business. But I'm a kinda crude josher sometimes, I guess. I met old Windy on round-up this spring, an' just to take a rise outa him I told him Tom was comin' down to the RM an' collect himself a wife. Maybe the old fool took that to heart. That may be why he's so down on Salter. I don't know that Tom's ever been there. A man don't go where he ain't welcome. But this talk he's makin' about Tom rustlin'—well, he better not talk too loud or too

often like that. The MacDonalds may be tough, but Tom Salter ain't no easy pickin's for anybody."

"*Are* they tough?" Don asked.

"Old Windy is hard to figure," Cliff said frankly. "He looks mean an' he can talk mean, an' he don't ever hesitate to do so. I only know about old Windy what I've heard. But that oldest boy of his *is* bad. You know that young hound ain't only turned twenty but he's got two notches on his gun. He killed a feller in Wyoming when he wasn't but sixteen. An' just about a year ago he put a feller's light out in Fort Benton. Murdy is all cocked an' primed for trouble any time. He's cold-blooded. He ain't afraid of nobody. He *wants* to be bad. Them two kids'll do anything, Don."

"But you don't reckon two boys belongin' to a pretty good-sized cow outfit would steal two horses from a man travelin' across country? Nor leave Tom Salter's ponies in their place? Two horses is nothin' to them with all that stock. An' why shoot me up, tryin' to head me off in some other direction? They acted decent enough when they found I wasn't Tom Salter. Why for?"

"I don't know," Cliff replied, "unless maybe to get you—a stranger in the country—to start after Tom under a wrong impression."

"Yes, but *why?*" Don persisted.

Cliff shrugged his burly shoulders.

"Search me," he admitted. "I tell you, Don, while I don't believe in startin' things, if I was you I'd talk it over with Tom himself. When it comes to blamin' a man for stealin' horses, an' shootin' from cover, an' backin' it up with the sort of talk old Windy made to you, a man can't hardly let it pass. I know Tom Salter's a white man. He put me an' John onto the Sweetgrass for a location, an' he's located here himself. John an' me has got probably a thousand cattle between us. Tom's got three-four hundred. I ain't ever heard of rustlin' bein' laid up against any of us. You know what some big outfits are. They're likely to figure a small man will rustle off 'em if he gets a chance. But they generally keep their mouths shut until they catch him at it. There have been rustlers on this range. Show me any range where some feller hasn't figured out a scheme to get rich quick. Wherever there's anything worth stealing you'll find a thief with his eye on it. I think we better ride over an' see Tom. His ranch isn't more'n five miles. He'll be interested to hear about that buckskin an' brown anyway. Unless you want to let it go as it lays, drop it altogether?"

"There's been nothing started for me to drop, so far," Don grinned. "If I had any idea who got away with my two sorrels I'd be on his trail right now. I'm not declarin' war on the RM because old Windy sticks me for more money than them two grays were worth. Naturally I take your word about Salter. Seein' Ruby MacDonald asked me to, I'll deliver her warnin'."

He didn't say anything more about the embattled Wundt from White Sulphur who was supposed to be raging about on the trail of Tom Salter. Cliff dismissed Wundt with contempt. He knew him. Wundt, he said, was a big-mouthed false alarm. If somebody had lifted a bunch of his horses Wundt would naturally ride and roar. But if Mr. Wundt wanted Tom Salter he knew where to find him. The Salter ranch was easy to locate.

"Meantime, I aim to go ahead with what brought me here," Don continued. "I may get track of those horses later. I want to see if I can get hold of something that looks like the makin's of a ranch. These hills look good to me. And I'd as soon meet Salter an' talk this over now as any time."

"Let's ride, then," Cliff said. "We can kill two birds with one stone. The more Campbells in the Sweetgrass the

better. If there was enough of us to hold down the good locations an' grab the first water rights, we could head off some big outfit from comin' in an' tryin' to hog it all. We could keep out sheep. That's the next big nuisance. There's money in sheep. We're goin' to have sheepmen to contend with after a while, gosh darn 'em."

Once on the ridge above Cliff's ranch he pointed out landmarks here and there to give Don the lay of the land. The valley of Milk River looped around the northern foot of the Sweetgrass, dipping into Canada in a great curve. The hills bordered right on the line. Don did not know it, but he was to live—and not so many years distant—in a time when the gray-sage bottoms of the Milk from the Sweetgrass Hills to its far-off junction with the Missouri were one continuous meadow and garden, dotted with little towns.

Off south a shadowy depression marked the Marias River, where big cow outfits had taken root to thrive mightily on government grass. The Rockies loomed blue on the west, high and distant with unseen passes notched by the hand of the Creator for transcontinental railways and ten thousand square miles of foothills awaiting settlement, now that the war smoke no longer endangered the whites.

"Wonder this country never opened up before," Don said to Cliff. "It's got the south skinned a Mormon block for cattle. There's no desert. Grass and water everywhere."

"She covers a lot of territory, these western United States," Cliff drawled. "Ten years ago the cowmen down south figured Montana was all same north pole. They know better now. But they didn't trouble to find out till they began to get crowded for range at home."

Like the Israelites of old Don looked at the land and found it good. The more he saw of it the more he felt that here was the soil in which to take root and grow. Kansas had filled up in its time, until free land was no more. Texas had a million people and was spilling millions of cattle over its borders. The old West was growing up, unconscious of its growth. A man could still throw ten thousand head of stock into an empty stretch twenty miles square and hold it against all comers by the mere fact of being there first. But he couldn't hold it forever, even by the divine right of cattle kings. Don was aware of that. Other men, men who had grown gray and rich in the cow business, still thought that all the plains had been ordained by Heaven to grow grass for cows to eat, and would never be aught but free pasture. Don looked farther and saw more.

"Salter's is over there," Cliff pointed. "I'm goin' to swing around the edge of the butte a ways. I got a bunch of horses rangin' here. I like to cast my eye on 'em once in a while."

They jumped the bunch presently, a bay stallion with a band of mares and their families, had a look at them, bunched and snorting on a hillside. Then, as they rode over the crest of the next spur, one of dozens radiating from East Butte, sloping ridges of grassy land dividing small clear creeks that flowed out into the lap of the plains, Don pulled up to stare into a hollow at their feet.

They were fairly under the sharp uplift of the butte. A pine forest began scarcely six hundred feet above. A cluster of springs flowed out of this hillside, converged in a small creek, that wound in a natural meadow where clumps of poplar made gold-leaved patches above the pale-green trunks. There was an area of nearly two hundred acres in that saucerlike depression. The creek that debouched therefrom was lined with broad, grassy flats.

"What a peach of a ranch that little basin would make," Don said.

"Would, all right," Cliff agreed. "I brought you around on purpose to have a look at it. Had half a notion to locate it myself only I'd started building where I am before I run across this. There's lots of good spots in the hills, though."

"This suits me clear down to the ground," Don muttered. "It sure does."

"Grab it then, before somebody else does," Cliff advised. "Every now an' then some feller comes scoutin' a location in the Sweetgrass. Some of the boys that ride for the big outfits are beginnin' to think they'd ought to take up land. You can't go wrong on this."

"Can a man file any sort of legal claim to land here," Don asked.

"Sort of. Good enough to hold it. 'Tain't surveyed yet. You just squat. That establishes your right," Cliff explained, "till the government gets around to survey it. Then if you've put in your legal residence an' made your improvements, you get a deed. You can locate it by what they call metes an' bounds and file that description in the land office at Fort Benton. You're entitled to a hundred-an'-sixty-acre homestead, a hundred an' sixty preëmption, a hundred an' sixty desert claim. Your wife is entitled to the same, an' your children over eighteen."

"I can sure lay off some good land on this flat and along that creek," Don commented. "Why, you can cut a hundred ton of wild hay on that meadow right now."

"Sure. Take it up. She's yours," Cliff laughed. "By the time you're gray-headed she'll be worth money. Antelope Springs they call this place."

They loped on toward Tom Salter's, Don thinking more about Antelope Springs than the matter that took them riding. In half an hour they dropped into a brush-lined creek bottom. Like Cliff's, like the RM, Salter's ranch was built of pine logs. It was neat. These new-made ranches spelled competence, resource, permanence. Cattle lay on the flanks of the creek above and below the place. A man appeared in the door of the house when they rode up.

"Hello, Tom."

"'Lo, Cliff."

Salter was of medium height, dark-skinned, compactly built. He had a small black mustache and very white, even teeth. He was genial, hospitable. He had a ready laugh. Yet Don didn't like him—not as he liked Cliff, as he felt about Cliff from the hour of meeting. And Don had never been prone to snap judgments. This wasn't judgment, he told himself. It was nonsense. He ought to take Cliff's word about Salter, and take Salter at his face value. But he couldn't. He had purely instinctive reservations about Tom Salter, for no logical reason. He didn't like him.

The queer reflection that he might be jealous came to Don after he had shaken hands with Salter and exchanged the usual courteous banalities. Then Cliff, who was direct to the point of bluntness, opened the ball.

"I wouldn't give anybody's yapping a second thought," Cliff said, "if it wasn't that this particular yap was handed to Don here. He happens to be another Campbell come to stake himself a ranch in the hills an' grow up with the rest of us. On his way he camped below the RM. In the night somebody stole two horses off him. When he rode into the ranch in the mornin' Windy MacDonald makes a pretty strong talk about you. This is the kind of spiel the old fool is makin'."

And Cliff proceeded to repeat concisely what Don had told him. He supplied the correct details with only a word or two of correction from Don.

Tom Salter listened with an expression of mild amusement.

"He certainly loaded you for bear as far as I was concerned," Salter remarked.

"This girl there——" Don delivered her message. If he had thought of showing that note to Cliff nothing would have persuaded him to put it in Salter's hands. Yet he felt obliged to do as she asked. "She told me to tell you to watch out for Uncle Malcolm and Murdy."

"She would," Salter nodded. "Much obliged. And you can bet I will.

"About these horses of mine," Salter continued, after a brief pause. "I left them in the Wineglass pasture three or four days back. The Wineglass lays about forty miles southeast of here, on Plentywater. Either they got loose—or somebody needed a mount an' lifted 'em. You left 'em at MacDonald's, eh? Did you tell him to hold 'em?"

"Till I called for 'em or sent him word what to do with them," Don replied.

"Windy MacDonald is a mouthy old fool," Salter said quite casually. "I don't take any stock in this Wundt. I saw Wundt at White Sulphur after those horses were run off his range. He didn't say anything to me. If I was as slick and industrious a rustler as MacDonald tried to make out to you, I'd 'a' been a rich man long ago. Oh, well, so long as he don't do anything but talk, shucks, he isn't worth botherin' about. Murdy's the bad one of that lot, so they say. One of these days I'll ride down there an' get those ponies. That buckskin is one of my top mounts."

Salter seemed very little concerned about Windy MacDonald's threats, assertions or opinions. He seemed a great deal more concerned with Don's loss, and the peculiar reception he got at the RM.

"Old Windy must reckon I aim to ride in there like young Lochinvar," he chuckled. "Maybe I will some day. Ruby's worth a man takin' a chance for. I don't know as she'll stand for her family ridin' herd on her always. I bet it was Lockie smoked you up. That young cuss would like to be bad like Murdy. And," he added, as if it were an afterthought, "if it was Murdy MacDonald made that kind of talk instead of that red-faced old blatherskite, I expect I'd have to take it up. As it is I——" He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

So that was that. Cliff and Don refused an invitation to stay for a noon snack. They headed straight for home. Passing a bunch of cattle with a TS sprawled across their ribs, Cliff said:

"Tom's sensible. I can't figure what Windy MacDonald is gettin' at. The idea of Tom Salter rustlin' cattle an' stealin' horses is plumb ridiculous. Them's some of his cattle. I know he's bought or raised every hoof he owns. Surely old Windy can't be all up in the air because maybe Tom might step in an' marry Ruby? What in Sam Hill can he be drivin' at, makin' that crazy play?"

That, of course, was just as much a mystery to Don. He had collided mildly with the MacDonalds. He had pondered a bit about that red-headed girl with the wistful eyes. He suspected *she* could tell him what it was all about.

Several times during that afternoon he put aside a half-formed desire to ride down to the RM and ask her. Curiosity, he told himself, was what killed the cat. Let Salter unscramble the eggs. Only that penciled, "Do what you like about it," nagged at him like an unaccepted challenge to do something.

Instead he discussed with Cliff the best method of doing something with Antelope Springs. A man had to do some good for himself in spite of stolen horses and red-headed damsels—who might or might not be in distress.

But he didn't like Tom Salter. That was definite. There was a sort of proprietary smirk about his black-mustached lips when he said, "She would."

"If I," quoth Don to himself, when he settled down in bed that night, "had my loop on a girl like that, it would take more than a windy uncle an' a would-be bad man to keep me off'n that ranch."

Just what an invidious declaration like that really meant Don didn't trouble to ask himself.

CHAPTER VI.

FRESH BRANDS!

THE plains were not swept clean of buffalo and marauding Indians, the mountain streams looted of virgin gold, by men who lay on their oars. No. The jazz age at which moralists carp is perhaps a rightful inheritance from a stock that pursued fortune and adventure with hasty steps and eager eyes. The occasional "bad" man was really bad. The general run of citizenry accomplished amazing results in their legitimate undertakings. Both fought or worked with something akin to ferocity. Philosophers didn't thrive materially in the cattle country, or in the mining camps. While they pondered the men of action passed them by, seizing opportunity while it was within reach.

So Don Campbell let no grass grow under his feet. He had come to the Sweetgrass for a purpose. He saw in Antelope Springs an opening wedge. Unhesitatingly he set about driving it home.

A week from the day he and Cliff rode to Tom Salter's Don sat on a block of pine in his own yard, gazing with considerable satisfaction on a roof of his own. It covered no mansion. Sixteen feet square. Walls seven feet high. A pole roof with six inches of sod on top of the poles to shed rain and keep out frost. The raw material came off the hillside above—all but the door and three windows and a handful of nails which he had brought from Fort Benton with a wagon and four horses lent him by his cousin. He had hauled a great deal more than doors and windows and a few feet of sawed lumber on that hurried trip. A winter's supply of flour, coffee, sugar, the staple necessities. He could live till spring on his own resources—and he still had money enough to buy a hundred head of yearling heifers. In ten years—the vista warmed him with the glow of accomplishment.

"Gosh, I can do a lot here in six months," he reflected, viewing the result of only six days. To be sure, Cliff had helped him, laboring with ax and saw so that Don would speedily have cover for his grub and blankets. He could borrow Cliff's mower and rake now and put up a few tons of hay for his saddle horses. Then a small pasture so they wouldn't have to be confined to a picket rope while the weather was good. After that a tight log stable to keep them warm when Jack Frost nipped at everything outdoors and blizzards howled down the wolves. Wolves! He could hunt wolves all winter. There was a plague of them in the Northwest. The hunters had exterminated the buffalo, and the buffalo wolf had turned in packs on the cattle. Savage, cunning killers, hunting in packs. The cattlemen paid liberal bounty on a wolf scalp. Why, a man had all the chances in the world to do a lot of good for himself here.

Thus Don, sitting on his pine block, staring at the sunset, not wholly unconscious of beauty while he considered practical things. East Butte flung a long shadow. He watched it creep down toward the gray hollow of Milk River. He was reminded of the RM and Ruby MacDonald. He hadn't thought much about that episode lately.

It wasn't his funeral—except for those two sorrel horses. And it wasn't worth while mourning over them. They were good horses, those sorrels, above

the average. He had picked and broken them himself. And a man hates to be robbed. Still—he couldn't declare a vendetta on unknown thieves and waste time chasing phantoms. While in Fort Benton he had sought out the sheriff of that county and told his tale.

"We'll keep an eye out, of course," that official said genially. "But it's a powerful big country. You know how it is."

Don knew. Two horses weren't a flea bite in a county a hundred and fifty miles wide, three hundred miles long.

So he had put that matter aside. And, since he couldn't help linking Tom Salter and Ruby MacDonald together in his mind, he put that aside also. She was probably quite competent to look out for herself. Windy MacDonald was probably what his name implied. If he tried to keep enterprising young men away from his niece he had his own reasons.

It was nothing to him, Don thought as he rolled a cigarette and blew smoke into the still evening air while the long pointed shadow of the lofty Butte waltzed down across the eastern plains.

Out of one corner of his eye he saw a picketed horse lift his head and stare, ears pricked up. Don followed that equine's fixed gaze. He saw two horses ambling slowly along the crest of the bank that pitched down to his meadow. One walked behind the other. They took a few steps at a time, looking at their brothers on picket below. On top of that bank they stood very clear against the evening sky. Don had keen eyes. He stared with more than casual interest.

Loose horses wandering across the open range were not cause to excite anybody. Only—one of this pair carried a saddle on his back.

He took a second look to make sure. A riderless horse like that meant misfortune to some one. One of his picketed horses nickered. The pair on the bank looked, turned, came trotting down.

Don remained on his block. He had been about to saddle up and gather them in. Apparently he didn't need to. The strays dropped to the flat, drank at the first spring. Then they came curiously, ears erect, necks arched, up to his horses on picket. One horse had twenty feet of rope trailing from his neck.

They stood smelling noses. Don rose softly from his seat. He took his *reata* in hand and softly approached the strays. The saddled horse and his mate stood side by side, eying him. They didn't move. They merely pricked up their ears at the sound of his voice, wheedling, coaxing, soothing. He got his fingers on the neck of one. The other shoved a wide-nostriled muzzle into the palm of his hand. A pink tongue licked up the few grains of sugar there.

Don patted them first one then the other. He was grinning as if at some rare joke.

"You old red sons of guns," he said affectionately. "Talk about the cat comin' back. Did you smell me out, or was it just a accident? Eh, you red devils? Gosh!"

They were his own two stolen sorrels.

And then Don's eyes began to burn bright with anger for he saw now on the hip of each an ugly blotch where the old brand had been blotted. Above it stood a clean, fresh brand on the glossy hide—a GG.

"Where there's a brand there must be an owner," Don muttered. "I'll get somebody for this. Ponies, I sure wish you could talk."

CHAPTER VII.

A STRONG CLEW.

IT seemed to be an evening for callers. Don stripped off the saddle, tied up the sorrels. While he debated what he should do with them, Tom Salter loped

in from the south. He nodded to Don with his genial smile and a fine showing of teeth. His eye rested appraisingly on the sorrels.

"Well," he said, "she's a fine, large fall evenin'. You're gettin' a good start on the ranch, ain't you? Accumulatin' some more live stock? That your brand, Campbell?"

Don explained.

"Well, I'll be darned," Salter grinned. "Now that's luck. Your stolen nags come home to you and you're a saddle to the good besides. Nice rig, too."

It was. Salter dismounted. They bent over the saddle. Full flower-stamped, Nelson tree, a coiled grass rope on the fork, it was fairly new—and it bore the stamp of a noted Wyoming saddle maker. But that told them nothing. Hundreds of range riders all over the West used that make and style.

"I sure don't like a thief," Don frowned. "They made an ugly blotch of the old brand. No use askin' if you ever heard of that Double G?"

Salter shook his head.

"Cliff might," he said. "Never heard of it myself. If it's registered you can locate it, all right. Anyway, you're ahead on the deal. That's something."

It was something—but not enough, Don felt. Sometimes a man takes things like that as a personal affront. Don did now. He stood staring at that saddle and he craved to get his hands on the man who was so free with a hot iron on his horses. But he didn't say anything to Salter about how he felt.

"I'm ridin' over to Cliff's to see if I can borrow a handsaw and some augers," Salter said. "How about comin' along?"

"Why, I guess I will," Don agreed, after a second's thought.

But it was not for the sake of Tom Salter's company he rode. It occurred to him that Cliff's pasture was a good place for these wandering sorrels until —well, he had a burning desire to pry into this matter now. He wanted to talk to cliff about it.

So presently he was mounted on one of the MacDonald grays with the two sorrels trailing at the end of a rope. It was only three miles straight across the hills to Cliff's ranch. Dusk was just beginning to thicken when they rode into the yard. Cliff came out. He grinned when Don told him what had happened.

"Huh," he said. "This must be everybody's day for gettin' what belongs to 'em. Your buckskin an' brown got here this afternoon, Tom. Did you smell 'em?"

"Lord, no!" Salter exclaimed. "I come over to borrow a handsaw. Who brought 'em up from the RM?"

"Ruby," Cliff replied. "She's stayin' over a day or two with Jenny. Handsaw, my eye! Where there's honey the bees buzz around."

He laughed uproariously. Salter swung off his horse. He looked nowise displeased.

"Well, let's turn the long-lost *caballos* into the field," Cliff suggested, as Salter clanked across the porch. "Better put your mount in the stable. Might as well sleep here. Jenny's hot cakes are better'n the ones you cook for yourself, I'll bet."

Don needed no urging. He didn't say anything more until they were back in the house. There Cliff, Jr., who had taken a great fancy to Don, monopolized him with an uninterrupted flow of questions until his mother put him to bed. Don shook hands with Ruby MacDonald, but he didn't exchange ten words with her. Salter gave him no chance. He told her the tale of Don's returned sorrels as if it were a joke of some kind on somebody unknown. Don wondered dryly if Salter would be so brilliant, so much at his ease with Ruby, if Windy MacDonald and his two sons were by. He would have

liked to talk to Ruby himself. But he wasn't competing for her attention.

Ruby herself was rather quiet. She lay back in a chair with her slippered feet to the fireplace, and they were small, well-formed feet, Don took notice. Her hair was like burnished copper in the lamplight. And once or twice Don saw her, with one ear turned to Salter's flow of talk, look steadily at him as if she were curious about something. He himself sat back by a table with Cliff.

"You don't know anything about that Double G brand, do you, Cliff?" he finally asked his cousin.

"No. But I just got a brand book, latest issue, from the association," Cliff replied. "By gosh, we'll look it up."

He hunted up this black-bound gospel according to the range and began pawing pages covered with strange and manifold designs, which men had registered as marks on their stock. What the pilot book is to coastwise navigators, the Association brand book is to the men on the range.

Don watched. Now, in his wanderings Don had once shipped to Chicago with a trainload of cattle. There he decided to winter. Being young and footloose and improvident he stepped rather high. Consequently in time he found himself low in funds. The simplest way out of that difficulty was to hunt a job and earn enough money for his transportation to a cattle country where being broke mattered nothing to an able rider. Pure chance set him to work in a ropewalk. He did not tarry long in that industry, only a matter of two months. But in that time he learned a great deal about rope. It came easy, since a cow-puncher is vitally concerned with the quality, strength and usefulness of rope in his daily business.

And Don had examined closely the forty-foot manila lass rope coiled on the work of the strange saddle. He didn't have to look twice, with his chance-acquired knowledge of cordage, to note that it was a trifle different from the usual grass rope, neither the tight and slender maguey rope of Mexico, nor the common hard twist in general use over the Northern ranges by all riders who had forsaken the rawhide reata. In short, Don had an idea it wasn't American-made rope.

If it was not, then Don had a shrewd notion where it came from. He waited patiently while Cliff pored over the brand book.

"'Tain't registered in Montana," he said finally.

"Any Canadian brands listed there?"

"Yeah. A few. At the tail end here," Cliff replied.

"Lemme see."

There weren't many brands in the Northwest territory. It was an even newer country than Montana. The Canadians were only beginning to range cattle in all that wilderness of grass. Probably not more than a hundred were listed. But there was a list. Every Montana cattleman had a direct interest in all contiguous grazing country. His cattle wandered at will. On those unfenced plains stock could, and did, sometimes drift three hundred miles between fall and spring.

Don ran his finger down a row of black-faced marks.

"Here it is," he said quietly. "Grimes & Gilson. Double G, left hip on horses, left rib on cattle. Range Sage Creek, south side Cypress Hills. Post office Medicine Hat, West Assiniboia."

"Huh," Cliff grunted. "Took 'em across the line. Sold 'em to this outfit most likely. Outfit listed in the brand book wouldn't be likely to steal horses outa Montana. You'll have to write Grimes & Gilson they're stung, Don."

Don said nothing, but he looked thoughtful.

"Sage Creek," Ruby volunteered. "is straight north of our ranch. Sometimes

cattle from the Cypress come down to Milk River."

"Well, you can easy find out from Grimes & Gilson how they come by your horses if you hanker to find out," Tom Salter put in. "Chances are some stock hand will come trailin' along in this direction lookin' for his saddle in a day or two."

Salter took the brand book and stared at the brand and description where Don's finger marked the entry.

"How far do you reckon it would be to the Double G outfit?" Don asked Cliff. And Ruby answered for him.

"It's about fifty miles from our place to the south face of the Cypress Hills," she said. "The boundary line is only a few miles north of us. The mouth of the Sage is right above our ranch."

"Figure you'll ramble over there an' interview these people, Don?" Salter asked.

"I might. Don't know if it's worth while."

"If I wasn't so gosh darn busy," I wouldn't mind goin' along," Salter said. "I found out from the Wineglass the other day that them ponies of mine didn't just drift off. Somebody took 'em outa their pasture. I expect it was some lone horse thief slidin' across the line in a hurry."

"Oh, well, I don't know," Don muttered. "I might. I don't know."

But he did know. He knew very well that he was going after the man who set him afoot on Milk River and defaced his horses with a hot iron. And he was going to look over this Double G outfit. He didn't mention it, and it didn't seem to occur to either Salter or Cliff Campbell that while a small outfit in need of saddle stock *might* buy them from a casual traveler, if they were good horses and cheap, no cattleman lays himself open to suspicion by blotting out an old brand when he puts on his own. That alone would have raised a question in Don's mind. He wanted to know and since he could find out by a few days' riding—why, he'd ride.

Looking up at Salter, and at the girl in the yellow glow of the lamp, he felt a profound distaste for Salter's company on that—or any other expedition. And he was ashamed of feeling that way. He had no basis for that excessive dislike of the man—unless Ruby MacDonald was the basis. And she was nothing to him, whatever she might be to Tom Salter.

"I'm a gosh-darn fool," he thought to himself. "She don't hardly know I exist, an' here I am hatin' a man just simply because she might have some interest in him."

So for the rest of that evening Don put aside that groundless distaste. He tried to be genial. They played whist, he and cliff against Ruby and Salter, while Jenny Campbell sat by knitting socks for her man. They had coffee and toast made on the coals in the fireplace at midnight. And then Salter left. He had to go home, he said.

Cliff went out with him. Jenny Campbell betook herself into a bedroom. Don stood by the fireplace. Ruby MacDonald looked up at him.

"You *are* going up across the line to see how your horses come to have a Double G on them, and why the old brand was blotted out—aren't you?" she asked suddenly.

Don stared at her. She was alert, keen-witted. For a minute his surprise kept him silent. Women aren't supposed to be versed in the technique of branding irons. Then he reflected that Ruby was a cattleman's daughter. She might know a great deal about range work. She seemed to. It occurred to Don that she must be uncannily aware of what was passing in his mind, for she was smiling at him as if she were amused.

"What makes you think so?" he asked.

"Hunch," she replied briefly.

"I'd rather bank on a cinch, myself," he retorted.

"Would you, now?" She leaned a little toward him. "You don't look like that kind of a man to me. You didn't act like a man who only played cinches the morning you came to our place. You acted as if you'd take a chance quite cheerfully."

"Oh, I might if that seemed the proper play," he admitted. "When a man has had his two pet horses stolen, when he's had a couple of slugs of lead throwed in his face for no reason at all, he's apt to get his back up a little and be ready for most any kind of argument."

She leaned back in her chair, looking at him steadily.

"I hope you have luck," she said. "I'll be here for two or three days, I guess. Stop in at the RM on your way back and tell me about it. We're always glad to see anybody drop in."

"I didn't quite get that idea from your Uncle Malcolm," Don said dryly. "He didn't act like he'd be over hospitable to any Campbell. You know, somebody might take me for Salter again."

"You don't like Tom much, do you?" she went off on another tack.

Don protested. This young woman disturbed him. She was much too acute in her perceptions. But she only smiled, and while Don was busy explaining that so far as he knew Tom Salter was a good friend of Cliff's and a very estimable young man, Cliff came in, and Don grew silent.

He didn't tarry by the fire much longer. He knew that he was going to ride far and early in the morning, so he took himself off to bed.

And now he was frankly disturbed by Ruby MacDonald. She liked him? Or did she? Maybe she was just collecting another scalp. Don dropped off to sleep with his brain still revolving futile questions.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHY DID HE LIE?

DON looked out to the northwest as he rode away from Cliff's after breakfast and he could plot his trail to the Double G as straight as an arrow shot from its bowstring. The sun was coming up in a clear, crisp autumn morning. In that thin, bright air he could see the faint blue of the Cypress range, a ghostlike wraith on the horizon.

But his way proved not so direct, in the end. He had told Cliff he was going, and when he turned away from his own place at the springs he did not stop in at his cousin's. Thus he crossed the creek a mile above Cliff Campbell's ranch, bearing straight for the Cypress on a line that would bring him across the valley of the Milk twenty miles from the foot of East Butte.

Twenty minutes' ride beyond Cliff's he saw a rider sitting a motionless horse on a ridge ahead of him, a pinnacle that topped everything within a four-mile radius, a very proper place for any one to keep lookout. Don had no reason to turn aside. He held his course. And presently he found that his solitary horseman was Ruby MacDonald.

"You ride early," he greeted her.

"I'm going home," she replied.

"Oh," said he. "Last night you said you were goin' to stay at Cliff's for a day or two."

"I changed my mind after breakfast," she smiled. "And after I started I kept an eye out for you."

"That was nice of you," he told her. "We can ride a ways together if you like."

"You might as well go on to the RM with me," she said. "And stay there to-night. From there you can follow Sage Creek right up to the Cypress."

Don hadn't intended taking that route. Yet there was only a few miles' difference. And it was something to

have company all day and sleep that night in a comfortable room instead of making camp in some lonely creek bed. So he turned toward the RM, jogging beside Ruby MacDonald. His mind, if the truth be told, ran upon her a great deal more than upon the object of his journey.

For a long time their talk was rather impersonal. They were mounted on horses that bounced under them like balls of live rubber. They rode in bright sunshine across a land that like themselves stood on the threshold of an unknown future. Neither Don nor the girl were chatterers. They talked, true, but they could ride without embarrassment in silence. Once, after a long interval something Ruby said started Don on what a man could do in the Sweetgrass. She listened gravely. Then she remarked:

"When dad located the RM he told me it was his last stand. He said that in twenty years the open range would be gone, the big cow outfits swamped by settlers and sheep."

"Twenty years is a long time," Don said. "I've known men run five hundred cattle into five thousand in half that time. You lost your dad, eh?"

"A horse fell on him," she said, and Don asked no more.

They rode without haste, at a running walk, that easy tireless gait a good saddle horse can keep up for days and put forty or fifty miles behind him between suns. When noon drew near they stopped by a spring bubbling out of a side hill a mile or so south of the valley of the Milk. Here as they boiled a pot of coffee on a fire made from dry roots and twigs of sagebrush, Don marked a black speck moving along the rim of the valley. He thought it was a rider, but he couldn't be sure.

Ruby took a pair of field glasses out of the *anqueros* on her saddle, and looked a long time. Then she handed the glasses to Don without a word.

He focused them. They were the most powerful binoculars he had ever looked through. The rider seemed to leap up at him, a rider on a slashing bay loping steadily east.

"Why, that's Tom Salter," he said. "And he rides like he was in a hurry."

Ruby nodded. They sat beside the spring. In a grassy hollow their hobbled horses fed, below the line of vision. Salter couldn't see them. Unless he had an eye like an eagle he would hardly mark two figures on the grass, nor the faint smoke of their fire. Don peered hard. He could almost see the lather on the bay's flanks.

"He's sure ridin'. Maybe he set out to overtake you," Don suggested. "Shall I fire a shot to attract his attention to us?" Ruby shook her head. Her eyes had a speculative cast. Little wrinkles furrowed out between her eyebrows.

"I think he's headed for the ranch," she said. "Let him go. Three's a crowd."

"He's apt to get a hot reception at the RM, isn't he?" Don said casually. "I thought you liked this Salter party?"

"I do, in a way," Ruby admitted. "But he keeps me guessing sometimes. I don't quite know what to make of him. No, I don't think they'll shoot him up. I don't believe he'd head in there if he thought they would."

"You aren't the only one that's puzzled," Don answered thoughtfully. "It strikes me kinda funny that this well-known character, Tom Salter, isn't known by sight to this uncle an' these brothers of yours. They took me for him, till you said I wasn't. Don't these fellers circulate around in this country? They've been here, all four of 'em, some time. Cliff told me Salter worked one time for the RM. Don't they ever meet on round-up? How come?"

"In a way, it's simple," Ruby explained. "Tom did work for us once, but that was before Uncle Malcolm's

time. Uncle Malcolm and Murdy and Lockie—well, they're funny. Uncle Malcolm never goes on round-up. Lock and Murdy do, but they always ride with outfits to the east, or over around the Bear Paws. We have men repping with the Maltese Cross and the Seventy-seven. They probably have met Salter often enough. You see? Tom Salter range-herds his own stock, close around home. He doesn't ride round-up—not now."

"Queer Salter's got such a bad name with your uncle," Don ruminated. "Cliff says he's a white man. I don't love Tom Salter myself—but I don't hardly know why. I'd take Cliff's word about him sooner than your uncle's."

"Uncle Malcolm's play," Ruby said with a touch of color rising in her face, "is all for my benefit. He's scared I'll take a notion to marry Tom."

"Suppose you did," Don hazarded. "What difference does that make to Windy MacDonald?"

"I've been sort of wondering myself, lately," she murmured. "I don't know why my family should want to keep me in a glass case."

Don stared after that loping rider. He was abreast of them in the distance, and while Don watched he went out of sight down over the rim into the valley.

"Glass cases," said Don, "are easy broken."

She smiled broadly at that, lifted the cup of coffee to her lips without comment. It seemed to Don that idea amused her. He didn't understand why it should.

There was a good deal he couldn't understand about this young woman. The feminine riddle carries its own key. That, of course, Don had yet to discern. He would have been quite happy to ride with Ruby across the plains through an autumn day—who wouldn't, he asked himself candidly?—without having the unseemly shadows of Windy MacDonald and Tom Salter laid across their path. But Ruby had them on her mind. She went on talking about them after they had repacked and got under way.

When he was in the saddle again Don looked at his watch. Two o'clock. Time had wings beside that spring, it seemed. They had been there two hours.

"It'll be dark before we get in," she said, when he told her. "If Tom kept up that gait he'll be there hours before we are."

"Maybe wild work at the RM when he does," Don remarked.

"I didn't ask him to come there," Ruby said. "In fact, as you remember, I sent him word to watch out for those two. If he goes looking for trouble ——" She shrugged her shoulders.

"You got something on your mind, young lady," Don said boldly. "You had that day I come to your place. You still have. Why don't you get it outo your system?"

It was a random shaft, shot as much by intuition as by a logical certainty of the mark. Ruby looked at him sidelong out of those gray eyes. She twisted a lock of hair back behind one ear, and kept looking at him. Don felt that she was probing, weighing.

"If I was sure I could trust you, I would," she said slowly. "I've got so I don't know who I can trust."

Don sat up a little straighter.

"People here an' there," he said stiffly, *"have* trusted me. You don't have to if you don't feel like it. I didn't mean for to pry into your troubles—if you got any. Though I don't see why anybody like you should have any."

"Why shouldn't I have, same as anybody else?" she demanded, with a touch of petulance.

But Don could not put into words what he felt—that no good-looking, indeed alluring, young woman in a comparatively womanless land should ever have any cares that some one wouldn't cheerfully take off her hands.

"Uncle Malcolm may undertake to give me fits," she said, after a time, "for riding off up to Cliff Campbell's and taking Salter's horses with me. However, I had my own reasons for doing that. Don't pay any attention to him if he happens to be grouchy. That's his natural condition lately. I asked you to stop in, so it's all right."

"What seems to be eatin on him?" Don asked carelessly. "Has he got some secret sorrow?"

"If I knew I'd be a lot wiser than I am," she declared. "I have only a suspicion. And I'm not like him. I don't go about shouting my suspicions."

"It's healthier not to, in this man's country," Don averred. "If he talks about anybody that displeases him the way he talked about Salter, somebody is liable to take him up."

"Well, he has to talk," Ruby said. "He isn't named Windy for nothing. I suppose a man is apt to get red-eyed and rave when stock comes up missing all the time."

"That isn't hot air then? There is stuff bein' rustled from the RM?"

"It seems so," she nodded. "A heap, if the tally is correct. It's crazy, of course, to lay it on Tom. They only do that to keep him away from me."

Don uttered a very natural sentiment. He wasn't boasting, merely expressing a conviction.

"If I was Tom Salter I'd sure reason with them people of yours."

"I dare say perhaps you would," she said, with another of those peculiar, appraising, sidelong glances.

"Well, then, why don't he?" Don grumbled.

For just a moment the queer quality of clannishness that is bred in the Highlander was uppermost in Don. He wasn't thinking of Salter as this desirable woman's potential lover, but as one of the Campbells, who wasn't showing himself in a good light, who wasn't stubbornly holding his own in a feud. Don was, in a way, taking up an ancient clan grudge against the MacDonalds. And he smiled as he became aware of his attitude, even as he uttered the words.

Ruby only answered carelessly: "Oh, I never asked him why. I don't care."

He wondered if that were strictly true. Wondering, he fell silent. They rode for a mile without speaking. When they did talk again it was of other things. Don had rambled a lot. Ruby, before she came to Milk River, had seen something of the Southwest. The RM had originated in New Mexico. She knew Albuquerque and the Santa Fe Trail. She had been in Kansas City and Chicago and Omaha with her father.

Roderick MacDonald had been a good deal of a chum with his daughter, Don inferred. Ruby's life seemed to have narrowed into a rut since a badger hole and a thousand-pound horse put a full stop to her father's career. Ruby wasn't quite an artless prairie flower waiting for some enterprising young man to woo her. She had ideas about the world at large, about people. So had Don. They found plenty to talk about without twanging too personal a string.

Which made the way as short as the time seemed by their noon fire. Sundown flung a diffused glow along the valley where they rode now. Far ahead the RM buildings loomed faintly by the river bank. The sagebrush grew pearl tinted, then dull gray, and presently darkness brought out the stars. Lighted windows made a mark for them in that obscurity. Toward that yellow pin point they rode steadily, unhurried.

"That was the shortest fifty miles I've rode for a long time," Ruby said abruptly, when the house took form out of the night. "Stop in when you come back out of Canada. Maybe I'll ask you to do something for me, then."

"All you got to do is mention it." Don promised largely.

"You better not be too previous till you hear what it is," she warned. "It might be a man-size job."

"Anything any man of my age an' inches can do, I can do," Don affirmed, "if it's in my line at all. At least I can tackle it—if it's up to me. You wouldn't ask a man to jump through a hoop just for your own amusement, I don't think."

"No," she declared. "I'm not like that. And I don't think you'd jump through a hoop just to amuse a woman, anyway."

"You never can tell," Don laughed. "It would depend on the woman."

"Oh? Well, here we are. I'll get one of the boys with a lantern so you can see to put up your horses. Oh, yes, and I'll lend you these. They might come in handy."

She thrust her binoculars at him. By the time Don thanked her and stowed them in a saddle pocket they were at the porch.

Only a knife edge of light showed past drawn blinds. The lamp that guided them shone from a kitchen window. They stepped up on the porch. Ruby opened the door, Don at her heels. They blinked in the flare of the lamp. The only occupant of the room was Lockie, with his stocking feet to the fire and a book in his hand. He regarded them over his shoulder owlishly.

"Hello," said he.

"Hello, Lockie," Ruby greeted. "Where's everybody?"

"Old man an' Murdy made up a pack outfit an' pulled down the river this afternoon. I'm holdin' down the ranch all by my lonesome," he drawled.

"Pull on your boots and light a lantern, like a good boy," Ruby requested, "so Mr. Campbell can put away the horses. You unsaddle mine. I've got to cook some supper."

Lockie heaved himself out of the chair.

"Anybody ride along here this evening, Lock?" Ruby asked. They were in the kitchen lighting a lantern, but Don could hear.

"Nary soul. Why?" Lockie wanted to know.

"We saw a rider fogging it down the river this way," Ruby said. "I wondered if he got this far."

"I was wishin' somebody would drop in for company," Lockie grunted. "This here is the lonesomest place on earth. Did you think it might be Tom Salter comin' to call on you? Did you see him while you was up in the Sweetgrass? Is this feller on his trail?"

"Don't be silly," Ruby told him. Don could hear Lockie chuckle.

He came out with the lantern. Apart from necessary directions he said nothing to Don. And when they came back to the house he kicked off his boots, took his book in hand, and planted himself by the fireplace.

Once or twice Don saw him glance over the top of his book with the peculiar bright-eyed look children and animals have for anything strange. But he made no attempt to conversation. Don could hear Ruby in the kitchen. He could smell things frying. Presently she called him.

"Come on, Mr. Campbell, and have a bite. Lockie, do you want anything to eat?"

"Guess I'll have a cup of coffee," he called back.

The three of them gathered at a long kitchen table. Lockie drained his cup and stalked back into the living room.

"Now I wonder why that young devil lied to me?" Ruby murmured fretfully.

Don stared. She dipped into a pocket of her apron and brought out two cigarette stubs.

"How long since those were smoked?" she whispered.

Don looked.

"Not more than two or three hours at the outside," he replied. "Why?"

"Uncle Malcolm smokes a pipe. Lockie doesn't smoke at all. Murdy rolls his with brown papers always," she muttered. "I know a man who smokes fine cut in white papers like these. He has a funny habit. Most of the time he doesn't throw cigarette butts away. He lays them on something, and forgets them. Just like I found these—on a corner of the mantel. Tom Salter *was* here. Now why did that boy lie to me about it?"

CHAPTER IX.

A REMARKABLE ANNOUNCEMENT.

DON packed and saddled in the rose-and-gray dawn. So, a trifle to his surprise, did Ruby. She had a bulky roll in a yellow slicker tied across the back of her saddle. Her gear was on a fresh horse, a powerful, deep-chested black. When Don swung into his saddle she mounted also.

"I'm going back to the Sweetgrass," she said to Lockie. "If the rest of the family can go gallivanting around, so can I."

To Don she said:

"I'll show you a good place to cross the river a little ways along."

A few hundred yards above the ranch she pointed out a hard-bottomed ford in the boggy stream. Pointed also where Sage Creek opened a cleft in the north wall of the valley.

"So long," Don put out his hand. "See you again soon."

"Sooner than you want maybe," she smiled.

Don splashed through the shallows. On the farther side he looked back. Ruby was loping up the flat. Why the deuce did she want to turn right around and go back to the hills, he wondered? Maybe the MacDonalds were all erratic. Then he headed toward the mouth of Sage Creek, beginning to speculate on whether he would find the Double G that night if he rode steadily. He could cover forty or fifty miles without pushing his horses too hard. No matter if he didn't. He had time to burn and a camp outfit.

Where the Sage came down Don took a backward look at the RM. He was forty or fifty feet above the level of their pasture. He could see the first rays of the sun making dew pearls on the grass all over the bottom. With a sudden impulse of curiosity he unlimbered the glasses Ruby had lent him. Don had never before encountered a pair of prism binoculars. It was miraculous how they magnified distant objects. Their use now, looking much for the sake of looking, as a man climbs a hill just to see what lies on the other side, gave him food for thought. Likewise it confirmed Ruby's assertion at the supper table.

At a distance of a quarter mile the horses in the RM pasture stood so clear in those lenses that he could read the brands. On one he didn't need to read the brand. He recognized him as the beast Tom Salter had ridden beside him to Cliff's ranch that evening.

So Salter *had* been at the RM. And he must have ridden away on a fresh horse. Whether the Salter-MacDonald feud had been ironed out, or for what reason, didn't greatly concern Don. Salter had been at the ranch. He had left his cigarette trade-mark in the house. Lockie MacDonald had lied about that to Ruby. Salter's horse was in the RM pasture. Logically he would be abroad somewhere mounted on a MacDonald horse. He—— Don shrugged his shoulders. It was too complicated. If he had not lost two horses in that vicinity, if the Salter buckskin and brown hadn't been left in their stead, if the clan MacDonald hadn't declared Salter a cunning thief and their enemy, Don wouldn't have thought any more about it. He tried to shove it aside now. He was on his way to solve that part of the riddle that personally concerned him.

The rest—— "Oh, rats!" he exclaimed impatiently, and turned up Sage Creek.

Five miles from the mouth of the Sage Ruby MacDonald on her black horse trotted down the western bank fairly abreast of him. Don pulled up and stared at her in amazement. Between leaving him by the river and meeting him here, she had abandoned skirts for cloth trousers, riding boots, and a black shirt instead of a silk blouse. She looked like a fine-featured, fresh-colored boy with red hair tucked under a gray-felt hat. And she rode like one, Don thought.

"I told you you might see me sooner than you wanted," she greeted him.

"I thought you were going back to Sweetgrass," he said.

"I am," she laughed. "But not today."

"Then where the dickens are you goin'?" he asked bluntly.

"Up Sage Creek with you, probably as far as the Double G, if you don't mind," she said casually.

"What for?" Don blurted.

"Because I like your company, Mister Donald Campbell," she told him archly. "Because I want to see if the grass is any better in Canada than it is in Montana. Because—oh, just because."

And then she laughed outright, a clear, ringing peal of amusement, because Don grew pink under his tan from neck to temples nad sat staring at her as if he doubted his hearing.

"Oh, my Lord!" she cried. I don't aim to hog tie you and drag you off to a preacher. Don't look so flabbergasted."

"Look a here," Don found his voice. "You can't. I won't let you. I'd be tickled to death to have you ride with me for the rest of my life, but you can't go traipsin' up across the line with me alone. You wouldn't have no more reputation than a jack rabbit has horns when you come back."

"I don't have to worry about my reputation," she declared calmly. "That can take care of itself. And there are other things that won't. I'm not riding up here for fun. I'm looking for something. I want to go along with you because two heads are better than one, if one happens to belong to a fairly level-headed and determined man. If you won't let me go with you, I'm going myself. I've got a blanket and grub and a gun tucked inside my shirt. I'm going anyway."

"What's it all about?" Don asked fretfully. "What do you want to go out on a limb like this for? Spread your hand."

"Ride along and I will," Ruby promised. "Don't be sore because a woman is tagging along. Treat me as if I were a rider looking for stray stock."

Her words and attitude left Don no choice. He could act like an ill-mannered hound—which he was not—and tell her to chase herself—which he didn't want her to do. Or he could accept the situation she created and let the future take care of itself. So he gave his horse rein. They headed on up the creek, side by side.

"You know," Ruby said presently, "ever since this funny thing about your horses—and there have been other funny things—I've been thinking a lot. When you and Cliff located that brand in the book I kept thinking, 'Gilson, Gilson.' 'Gilson' sounds familiar. Last night I remembered. Jack Gilson. He came north the year before we left New Mexico. He was in Montana. Then he went into the Northwest. I remember dad talking about him. He was reckoned a hard citizen. Nobody ever laid anything definite against him. But they said he was crooked as a dog's hind legs. And clever.

"Now if this Gilson of Grimes & Gilson knows all the tricks of the cow business, he isn't overlooking any bets in his own business. He mightn't have overlooked the RM. We've lost more

cattle than Windy Malcolm MacDonald lets on to me. I know that. One of the reasons I took after you was to tell you that if this is the Jack Gilson my dad knew, you'd better be cautious how you run up against him asking him to explain a blotted brand and his own Double G on the same horse. The other reason is that I think my esteemed uncle and his rowdy son are darned poor cattlemen. They seem to think no RM cow ever goes across the Canadian line. I figure they do and that they don't always come back. Another thing—I have an idea that wherever they went yesterday evening, they went in a hurry, and Tom Salter went with them."

"How do you know?" Don inquired.

"I have eyes and I use them," she retorted. "All our saddle stock is shod for fall riding. They crossed the river on the ford you used this morning—four shod horses. I could see the tracks plain as day, fresh from last night."

"You might be right. I noticed those tracks myself. That would be why his horse is in your pasture."

Don had to explain his look with the glasses.

"Why did Lockie lie to me about him being there?" she demanded savagely. "I'm getting sick of this infernal combination. I'm going to bust it wide open."

Don looked at her. She was angry. Her gray eyes burned.

"Well, Salter's a pretty good friend of yours," he said. "Maybe——"

"Oh, is he?" she snapped.

"Isn't he?" Don made it direct.

"Oh, he talks nice and he wants to marry me," she replied. "But I'm not so sure as I might be that he's a real good friend of mine."

"You got more reason to be sure of him than you have of me," Don pointed out. "You know him, and you don't know much about me."

"I may be crazy but I'm not a fool," she told him. "I use my head for something besides a place to hang my hat. Maybe that's why I'm not Mrs. Salter already. And remember, if you're fishing you won't get any bites from me, Mister Campbell."

"Anyway," Don ignored that last thrust, "suppose Salter did ride in and talk Dutch to your uncle—maybe they made peace. Men do bury the hatchet sometimes. Maybe these horse thieves have stirred them up to action, same as it has me. Maybe they've gone looking for RM cattle together. What difference does it make?"

"None, maybe, maybe a lot," Ruby said slowly. "I've suggested before now that it might be a good scheme for the RM to send some riders to look around across the line. Uncle Malcolm and Murdy have always hooted at the idea of any one on the Canadian side rustling from an American outfit. No chance, they claim, for a rustler to hold out in the Cypress Hills with the Northwest Mounted Police on the job. They always said the rustling was done from the Sweetgrass or the Marias River, or away down the Milk."

"Well, they might be right," Don admitted. They say the Mounted Police are on patrol all the time, and that they follow a thief to hell an' back again when they start. Anyway, it's not your funeral. You got no call to go travelin' around an' layin' yourself open to talk. Let Windy MacDonald worry about his own stolen cattle."

"*His* cattle?" she echoed. "What put that into your head? Malcolm MacDonald never owned a hundred cows in his whole misspent career. The only thing he ever raised was a couple of bad boys. What do I care for gossip? I'd rather people blatted their heads off about me, then sit still and be robbed till I'm broke. You don't think I'm all agitated about Windy MacDonald's cattle, do you? The RM belongs to *me*."

CHAPTER X.

OMINOUS RIDERS.

WHILE the next five miles slid behind them Don learned a number of salient facts. Prior to her father's accident Ruby knew little of her Uncle Malcolm except that he existed as a stage driver in southern Wyoming. Roderick and Malcolm MacDonald had originally come to Texas from eastern Canada, two wanderers out of a Highland Scotch colony. Malcolm had drifted north. Roderick prospered in Texas. He acquired cattle, located finally in New Mexico, where Ruby was born. Later, he trailed up to Montana with two thousand cattle, lured by a new country with unlimited range.

Death overtook him long before his time. He hadn't, it seemed, reckoned on that final contingency. Nor had he much time. A man with a broken back lives only a few hours.

"I suppose in his last hour a man naturally turns to his own people," Ruby said, "whether they're good, bad, or indifferent. So he made a will, wrote it out himself with a pencil. A—a what-do-you-call-it sort of a will?"

"Holograph."

"That's the word. He left the RM to me, lock, stock and barrel. Only he said in it that his brother Malcolm was to have charge of it till I was of age; that Uncle Malcolm was to draw two hundred and fifty a month from the estate as a salary; that I was to have enough money for my expenses. It was a simple will and the court held it good. That's how Uncle Malcolm came here. That's why he's running the show. But it's *my* show."

"I see," Don nodded.

"And a fine mess he's making of it," she continued scornfully. "It makes me sore. Him and that wall-eyed Murdy. I could wring their necks sometimes. I doubt if I have as many cattle now as when my father was killed. They ought to have increased a half or two thirds. They ride and ride and look wise and growl about wolves and rustling and bad winters killing weak stock. And I don't have anything to say about anything. Uncle Malcolm's my legal guardian. He has control of the funds in a way. When he pops his whip he thinks I ought to jump. Why I almost have to use a gun to pry a hundred dollars out of him when I need clothes. There's plenty of money lying idle in the bank—I don't suppose he's embezzled it. Twenty thousand dollars' worth of beef went East last fall, and it doesn't cost six thousand a year to run this ranch. He won't hardly hire men to cover this range as it should be covered. He won't hire labor to put up hay. The two or three riders he keeps to ride with round-ups are mossbacks that couldn't hold down a range job anywhere. Talks about keeping down expenses and his cheapness is making a joke of the RM. And it's my outfit, not his, that he's making a hash of."

They rode another mile or so.

"Why don't you kick him out," Don asked, "and put in a cowman that knows his business?"

"I'll throw him out with a bump that'll jar the bones of his ancestors," Ruby stormed, "as soon as I can. That'll be in a year. I'll be twenty-one next October. You watch me then."

"If you have proof that he's incompetent you don't have to wait at all," Don said. "If he is not properly protecting your interests, if he refuses you any reasonable sums for your own maintenance, you can appeal to the district court and have a new administrator appointed. Property laws are made to protect orphans. A trustee or an executor has to walk a chalk line, I can tell you—if you get a real lawyer to act on your behalf."

"Are you sure about that?" she asked. "I don't know much about law or lawyers."

"I don't, either," Don said; "but I happen to know about that. Had some experience myself. My father and mother were both killed in a wreck on the Santa Fe. The old man had a little property. He had a will made, too, appointed a friend of his executor, and guardian over me an' two sisters, younger'n me. And we were soon up against it worse'n you are by a long shot. Especially me. This feller raised Cain with me. I couldn't hardly get enough to eat. And I fought with him until there was such a fuss raised it got into court. And the court kicked him off the job in spite of the fact that he was my father's choice. So I'm pretty sure that if you have any way of proving that Uncle Malcolm is making a hash of your affairs, you can get him fired."

"I hope you're right," said Ruby brightly. "When I get back off this trip I'll look into that. Yes, sir. You can bet a dollar to a doughnut I will."

"You shouldn't be on this trip at all." Don began his remonstrance anew.

"You don't have to worry about *your* reputation, do you?" Ruby inquired sweetly.

"No, of course not. But——"

"Then forget mine," she counseled. "I've got something at stake. I want to know something about my own business. I'm not a featherbrain looking for thrilling adventures. Don't worry about what any old woman in the Sweetgrass might say about me riding around with you. Have you noticed that there are fresh horse tracks leading up this creek?"

"I have."

"I thought you did. I saw you slanting your eye down at them."

"Horse tracks in a stock country is common as grass," Don pointed out.

"Still the fresh track of four shod horses heading north from the RM is not common. You know that instead of going down the river I have a hunch these imitation stock hands from the RM came up Sage Creek. Four tracks. That would sort of argue Tom Salter is with them—since his horse is left in our pasture. Now why should Tom suddenly go off on a pack trip with them after the way they've talked about taking his scalp? I'm awful curious about all this. Maybe it doesn't mean anything. Maybe the boys have taken a shoot up here to see if any RM stuff has strayed north. Maybe—well, for instance, I want to know some more about his Grimes & Gilson outfit. I can't very well wander off up there by myself. I could but I don't want to. So I fasten myself on you. I should 'a' been a man."

"I'm darned glad you're not," trembled on the tip of Don's tongue. But he didn't utter the words. He was well aware that he had to do with a fascinating young woman who was also headstrong and impulsive. Ruby was quite capable of disregarding his advice, of proceeding about her own pursuits in her own way, if he offended her.

While the range didn't exactly cloister its women, it did have a pretty rigorous set of conventions for them. There were taboos, just as in a politer society there were chaperons. A woman or a girl defied the taboos at her peril. Probably, Don reflected, a girl with three thousand cattle in her own right could ride where and when and with whom she willed and perhaps escape slander. But she couldn't escape criticism, and most of it would come from those of her own sex.

Don admired Ruby MacDonald's courage if not her judgment. He could scarcely carp at her judgment either, for she had picked him as a companion for this expedition. Why?—on two looks and a guess. Don didn't flatter himself that her interest in him was personal, affectionate, the little flame that mysteriously begins to burn be-

tween a man and a woman and ends in the conflagration known as love. He didn't know that he carried his credentials of resource and integrity in his look and bearing, for discerning eyes to note. No. Ruby needed a man in her business, and he happened to be handy.

He was eager enough to help her. Helpfulness was instinctive in him, as it is strangely enough in most men who would disdain help for themselves. He could see her difficulty plainly enough. It was the sort of thing he could easily credit to a footless windbag like Malcolm MacDonald. But it was wiser and safer, he felt sure, for him to go scouting for her, than for Ruby herself to roam the plains with him on the trail of a mystery. He told her that, trying to persuade her to go back. He was still tuned in that key when they halted for a noon camp.

"You're as persistent as sin," she said to him frankly. "Why do you keep harping on that?"

"Because it worries me," he said. "Persistence at anything is natural. I'm Scotch."

"So am I," she retorted. "Just as Scotch as you are. Otherwise I'd be sitting around home, complaining to myself. As it is, I'm up in Canada, and I'm going farther. I'd rather go with you, because you look like a white man. But I'm not going back till I've seen the head of Sage Creek and looked around the Cypress a little."

"Then you'll have to ride with me, I guess," Don capitulated. "I can't let you go wandering around in this blamed wilderness alone."

It was a wilderness. They had covered twenty miles by noon. The Sage was a small stream, sluggish, winding like a snake in a shallow depression that traversed a region of flat emptiness. The Sweetgrass Hills loomed far in the southwest. The Cypress began to stand high and dark in the north, a pine-clothed barrier across their path. But all between was flat grass and wide vistas of sagebrush. There was no timber, scarcely a willow on the creeks, little shelter in all that bleak plain for either man or beast. It was forsaken by all life save an occasional sage hen, a few squawking plovers, badgers that burrowed underground and wolves that slunk unseen.

Yet stock did occasionally traverse that desolation. They saw sign of cattle, if not the cattle themselves. There were signs of shod hoofs along the Sage which they noted more particularly. Here and there. Fresh. Passing north, like themselves.

"The MacDonald's aren't the only men in the country who ride shod horses," Don remarked once to Ruby.

But she only smiled. Womanlike, she abided by her intuition. Don had no intuition in the matter. He did have uneasy intuitions about this girl. Life was going to be different for him after this ride. Every hour they jogged together convinced him of that. His newly started ranch in the Sweetgrass seemed remote, an unimportant incident. This was reality, riding up the Sage beside Ruby MacDonald, going a two-day ride into a foreign country to ask a man he had never seen how his brand came upon Don's sorrel horses, going up into that dark range of hills to see if RM cattle had strayed there to their undoing.

There might be dynamite for some one over that. There might be explosions of various kinds over this ride, if they bumped into Windy MacDonald and his cold-eyed son with the itchy trigger finger—or Tom Salter. Don didn't really believe any of that trio—or the three together—had ridden up Sage Creek. Why should they? And, contrariwise, if they so desired, why shouldn't they? It was a free country. A man needed no passport to cross the line. Range men covered a hundred

miles for a whim, a fancy. He had done it himself. But Windy MacDonald would hardly approve of his niece riding around for a whim, with a stranger.

Ruby's account of the RM cattle business troubled Don in a fashion which he didn't mention to her. Under all that smoke there might be a spark or two. That was why he would have preferred to play a lone hand. Where men owned cattle by thousands there were other men who had nothing but ambitions to own. There were a variety of illegitimate ways of acquiring ownership. The cattleman always had that to contend with. There are burglars in towns. Trusted bank officials abscond with funds. There are weak brothers, even though mankind by and large does not covet its neighbor's ox to the extent of purloining the ox.

Afternoon drew to a close. The Cypress range seemed to draw nearer, to rise higher and darker. It ran away east and west like a gigantic, flat-topped wall covered with trees. A lowering sun made a purple haze over those distant pines. Notches where creeks debouched to the plain lay in black shadow.

And they saw no ranch or habitation in that empty land, though they had forty-odd miles between them and Milk River and the Cypress was only a two-hour ride away.

"It don't look like we'll sight the Double G to-night," Don said.

"We might not be welcome, if we did," Ruby replied. "Asking questions about stolen horses."

"This isn't a country run by thieves," Don told her. "The Mounted Police, they say, put the fear of the Lord into any bad actors who stage a performance over here. It ain't a gunman's country either. Well, we better peel our eye for a good place to camp."

"Yes, because it isn't likely any one would build a ranch away out in these sagebrush flats when there's shelter and timber in those hills," Ruby agreed. "We'll hit ranches in the foothills in the morning, likely."

That seemed probable. The great plain between Milk River and the Cypress was hot and dry in summer. Winter blizzards would howl unchecked across its monotonous face. A headquarters ranch on that bleak area was unlikely. Don began conning the creek bottom for a likely spot to camp.

In the early dusk he found one. A little aside from the slinking stream a cold spring bubbled out at the foot of a bank steep as a mountain cliff. A few willows surrounded the spring, the first they had seen that day. Lush grass grew there. They could have a fire and spread their blankets within reach of picketed horses. Don didn't mean to be set afoot in this waste land.

He couldn't sleep. The fire died to coals and went black and he lay staring at the sky, thinking about the girl wrapped in her blanket, a formless huddle less than ten feet from his own bed. It seemed madness for her to be there. Don thought of the ripple that would run through the Sweetgrass, of what her own men would think. Curiously he didn't trouble himself about what Salter would think. He didn't care. But he cared greatly about the likelihood of other men—and women—mentioning Ruby MacDonald after this with sly, meaning smiles. Only some vital discovery, some dramatic upturn in connection with missing RM cattle would take the curse off.

She knew that. She didn't care. Armored with purity and pride, she didn't care. She could sleep. Don could hear her slow, regular breathing. She was a marvel, he thought. Nerve like a man. And passionately convinced that somehow, with his assistance, she was going to uncover some rare skulduddery now that she rode abroad herself to look out for her own interests.

Don hoped she would. Otherwise she was where she should never have been, merely bent on a fool's errand—only nobody would ever believe that. Ruby wouldn't care whether they did or not. But he, Don, would.

And he couldn't go about like a knight-errant, cutting off wagging tongues. A man with little more than his hands could hardly champion a young woman who owned three thousand cattle and a ranch, and was proudly conscious of her possessions—she wouldn't let him.

Don wished now that he had taken her by her white neck and dragged her back to the RM that morning. But it was too late. He turned over and tried to sleep. Instead his eyes roved the dark sky, marking a cloud bank that drifted up from the east. He wondered if it would rain. It was very dark. Very still.

In that hush his ear, close to the ground, caught a reverberation to which he had listened many times. He knew what it was. Faint, far, rumbling, making imperceptible tremors in the earth—hoofs trampling, hundreds of them in a compact mass.

He sat up. Nothing. When he laid his head on the folded coat that served for a pillow he could hear it again. Stock in motion. He lay and listened. It grew. When he sat up a second time he could hear those hoofs. He could hear more distinctly a dull uproar that was the bawling of cattle. They were moving steadily as driven stock move. Don had no evidence but his reason, his experience, to inform him that riders pressed that mass of cattle in the night. But he was very sure.

"Hey, Ruby," he whispered.

"Yes?" She sat up instantly.

"There's a bunch of stock comin' down the creek. Seems to me they're bein' hazed along. We better get hold of our horses, an' be organized."

Ruby, as he did himself, slept fully dressed. She cast her blankets aside. It took no more than a minute to lead up the picketed horses, to cinch saddles on them, to draw all three up against the cutbank.

"Listen to 'em," Don said.

"Funny. Why should anybody drive cattle down this creek at night?" she whispered. "Round-ups don't move at night."

"I don't know," Don muttered. "Keep still. Here they come. I can hear riders. They won't see us unless they run right into us."

A vague, formless blur came abreast, filling that shallow creek trough and passed. Cattle. Here and there a cow bawled, a low complaining sound. Abnormal. Range cattle, except in early summer, when young calves persist in getting lost from their mothers in the press of a herd, do not bawl on a drive. These did. The drag of the herd went by. They could hear the creak of leather, the jingle of bit and spur, a trailing rope end snapped at laggard cattle. Once a man swore crisply. Then the trample and jingle of gear, the plaintive lowing, drew away, were swallowed up and silenced in the impenetrable night.

"To-morrow," Ruby said in Don's ear, "we'll look into this."

They stood by their horses a long time. The stillness that lies on the plains, so profound it can be felt, like fog at sea, remained unbroken. They put their horses on picket again, and crept into their blankets.

But not to sleep. Don lay listening for the sound of Ruby's slumber-breathing to begin its soft rhythm. He heard her shift now and then. After an interminable time he whispered:

"Can't you sleep?"

"Uh-uh," she replied. "I'm waiting for daylight."

After that Don himself found sleep impossible. He turned and twisted. Once he had half a notion to rise and

build a fire, but forbore. In the end he lay passive, waiting also for daylight to break.

It came at last, a pale gleam, a mounting fan of pink and rose and orange spreading in the sky until gray light wiped out the color and the sun cocked a segment of a round, yellow eye lazily above the horizon.

By then breakfast was eaten, they were packed and on the move.

The floor of Sage Creek was cut with hoofs. They stared with increasing curiosity, unspoken questions. Then they rode up on the benchland and gazed away south. Nothing moved within range of the eye. The creek bed lay empty as far as they could see. Save for those sounds in the night and the tracks, that passing herd might have been a dream. Ruby reached for the glasses in Don's saddle pocket and looked through them a long time, toward Milk River. When she handed them to Don she said briefly:

"There they are."

Don picked out cattle—he supposed them cattle—with those powerful lenses. Far south, ten, perhaps twelve miles. On the rim of the creek he saw dark objects in little clusters. In a day's ride they had not seen a hoof north of the Milk River bottoms.

"That's bound to be the herd that passed us," he observed.

"I wonder if the riders are still with them?" Ruby murmured.

"They're scattered out grazing," Don replied. "They're not on the drive."

"Riders or no riders, I want to have a look at those cattle," Ruby declared. "Will you go back with me?"

"I aim to see the whole show through," Don answered.

She gave him a grateful smile. They loped south, a mile, five miles, ten. In an hour and a half they were drawing close. The herd lay on the bank, in the creek bed, on the bench. Some grazed. Most were lying down, and they were too weary to rise when Don and Ruby rode among them. No riders appeared. No camp loomed anywhere along the Sage.

They were all RMs. Every hoof. Not a steer, not a yearling, not one immature beast among them. Don saw Ruby's lips moving as she twisted in her saddle. He made a rough count himself, more of an estimate, briefly.

"Three hundred or over," Ruby said at last. "All cows. All RMs. Three hundred cows and not a calf at foot. That's a little too much of a good thing."

She frowned, pondering over those cows and their lack of offspring.

"No," she went on, "it's not reasonable. You don't find three hundred dry cows all in one bunch on any range I ever heard of. Where are their calves?"

Don could no more answer that than she.

"I was right and that fool of a Windy MacDonald was wrong—as usual," she continued angrily. "I told him we ought to send two or three sharp-eyed riders up across the line. Well, I had to find it out for myself. Let's head north again."

Don rode for a mile deep in thought.

"Listen, lady," he began then. "You know something about this Gilson and your hunch may be right about him. The fact that this Double G outfit has its brand on two horses that don't rightly belong to 'em, doesn't look any too good. Now the matter of that Double G on my sorrels don't amount to much, although that started me up here. That bunch of your cows bein' hazed south in a hurry through the night, that's different. All that herd of cows with nary a calf among 'em. That looks to me like an organized steal. Because a lot, probably most, of those cows has had calves with 'em quite recent. You could tell that, I suppose."

"Of course."

"Every one knows that advice is cheap," Don continued. "Have a little patience while I unload some on you, about this."

"Go ahead," she replied. "You're a cow-puncher, and I think you know your business or I wouldn't be here with you. I told you before I'm not a fool."

"Thanks," Don said dryly. "First, I wish you'd turn right around and go home and leave this stock-detective business to me. It might come to something a woman shouldn't be mixed up in."

"No!" she flashed. "It's my affair, my cattle. If my own people can't or won't do it, I'll see after my own cattle myself. This is supposed to be a civilized country. I have a right to ride where I please looking for my own stock. I will."

Her tone precluded argument along that line.

"All right. I'll hand out some more advice. I aimed to ride into the Double G an' make polite inquiries of Grimes & Gilson about this horse-brandin' business. This makes it different. We are both mounted on RM horses. That would identify us. You can gamble every rancher in the Cypress Hills knows that brand and its range. If I were alone, this is how I'd work, and two of us don't make it any different: I'd be an RM rider scouting around to see if any of our stuff had drifted this far north. I wouldn't say anything about stolen horses when I rode into the Double G. I'd be a cheerful stock hand not worryin' over anything, only I'd see all there was to be seen without pryin'. I'd find that Mounted Police post at Medicine Lodge an' talk it over with them. If I could spot a bunch of new-weaned calves, branded or unbranded, I'd contrive to find out if they belonged to that particular rancher's cows, or to those RM cows back there."

"Now you're talkin' sense," Ruby declared. "I'll see that you don't lose anything by that, Mister Donald Campbell. Just now I'm worrying over lost cattle. Do you suppose Uncle Malcolm and Murdy *did* go down Milk River? I wonder?"

So did Don. He wondered about Tom Salter, too. He was a blunt-speaking as well as a direct-thinking young man. But he didn't voice what was in his mind.

A couple of miles past their camp Don pointed.

"Yonder's a rider."

They pulled up. As Don reached for the glasses this horseman dropped out of sight. A mile farther they saw him bob up like a jack-in-the-box, showing briefly on the crest of a little pinnacle. He had increased his distance. Within ten minutes they marked another off to the left, east of Sage Creek. The glass told them nothing, save that it was indeed a rider. Neither man remained long in sight.

"One over here an' one over there," Don commented. "An' both of 'em wary. That's hardly accordin' to Hoyle. Wonder if there's any behind."

They twisted in their saddles. An exclamation of surprise escaped Don. As if his wonder—which had been mostly a jest—had materialized to confound him, they saw a rider sitting motionless on a low rise a mile or more in the rear. Don lifted the glasses. Before he had them focused this rearward horseman moved down off his perch. In a moment the low ground had swallowed him up.

"It looks to me," Don said deliberately, "as if they were sort of ridin' herd on us. One on each side. Another behind. Yes, sir, I sure wish you'd gone back home this mornin'. I got a flash of that hombre behind before he disappeared. He was watchin' *us* through a pair of glasses. I'd say things was apt to tighten."

CHAPTER XI.

BLAZING GUNS!

STRAIGHT up the Sage they rode, keeping on high ground back from the bank of the creek. Parallel with them rode those distant horsemen, like Indian scouts hanging on the flank of an emigrant train. For a time they would vanish. Then momentarily one or another would appear.

"Keepin' us spotted," Don said. "If we weren't suspicious we'd never notice anything strange about that."

"So long as they keep their distance," Ruby murmured. "I hope I haven't got you into a jack pot."

"Never was in one yet I didn't get out of," Don reassured her.

So long as they kept their distance! Well, he had an active brain and it was busy with possible contingencies. Until something cracked—if something did—he meant to keep on his way.

Now scattered grazing cattle began to show on slopes that lifted in gentle tiers toward the Cypress, wearing its dark mask of timber all along the southern face. In five miles, if they held straight, they would be among those pines. But there would be a ranch before that, unless the brand book lied.

They passed the first of the grazing cattle. The bed of the Sage narrowed, deepened. Willows fringed the stream. Clumps of poplar studded the bottoms. The short grass of the plains was changing to bunch grass that waved like ripe wheat in the sun.

The line of a fence lifted far ahead, a dark thread across the golden grass. From one upstanding knoll, like a low island, they got a glimpse of clustered buildings. For half an hour they had seen nothing of those flanking riders.

"Ruby," Don said, "if that is the Double G we had better pass it up. Medicine Lodge—I asked Cliff about that post—lays right at the west end of the hills. We can make it in three hours from here. I'd just as soon the Mounted Police knew we were in this country—and why. It would be wiser, considerin'——"

Out of a hollow, squarely before them, rose first the heads, then the shoulders, the bodies of four mounted men, confronting them at a distance of fifty yards.

"Aha!" Ruby exclaimed triumphantly. "We'll see what *they* have to say for themselves."

For the riders, so close now, that Don could see the whites of their eyeballs under gray hat brims, were Windy MacDonald, Murdy, Tom Salter. The fourth was a round-shouldered, middle-aged individual with a long nose, a long, drooping, straw-colored mustache. But he was well mounted and the high-headed bay he bestrode carried a Double G on the left hip.

They met, face to face. It seemed to Don as if these four barred their way. But that, he reflected, was probably just fancy. He wasn't apprehensive. The range was a public highway open to all men. But he was very curious about the MacDonalds and Tom Salter, why they were together, how they would explain their presence to Ruby, under the circumstances.

And then he was fixed by the look in Murdy MacDonald's eye. The boy's gaze was steadfastly upon him. He had greenish eyes. There was something in them that made Don Campbell tighten, made him suddenly wary. Murdy's face was expressionless—but his eyes were not. And Murdy had two notches on his gun. Don remembered that.

He scarcely heard what Ruby said to her uncle. He watched Murdy. Salter, too. There was a look about this honest man, this friend of Cliff Campbell's in the far-off Sweetgrass Hills, that was as much of a menace as the queer glow in Murdy's green eyes.

Young MacDonald's horse fidgeted. He jabbed the beast suddenly with his

spurs. The bound the brute gave brought him alongside Don. He saw Murdy's right hand shift. It was as if he saw double—as if his perception had become lightning fast—for Salter was also reaching for his gun.

Now Don was a remarkably agile young man, both mentally and physically. Also he desired not only to live, but to live victorious over his enemies. He had seen a good deal of gun play in his time, without ever having been involved in any himself. He knew what a gun was for. He knew also the advantage of quick motion and a solid basis under his feet for straight shooting.

Wherefore he cast himself nimbly out of his saddle as Murdy reached for his gun, thus putting the thick body of a horse between himself and both young MacDonald and Tom Salter.

And as his feet hit the ground he bent and fired under the neck of his horse —not at Murdy, but at Salter, almost in Salter's face. He didn't reason about that. Murdy was the deadly one. The same sort of look had flashed over his face as he reached for his gun that Don had once seen on the face of a wolf slashing at a hound with bared teeth. But Don's gun roared at Salter first, because a particular sort of hate and contempt for the man swept over him, as Salter bored in with his lips parted, eager to kill.

Murdy missed with his first shot—by inches. Don felt the wind of the bullet on his face. But *he* didn't miss. He saw Salter's extended arm, with the black muzzle of a .45 sweeping in an arc, stiffen in the air. Salter's mouth opened wide like a fish snatched from its pool. He folded up like an empty sack and rolled sidewise off his plunging horse.

Don could never visualize in detail precisely what happened after that. Guns cracked over his head, behind him. His own answered as fast as he could throw the fore sight on a man and pull trigger. He wasn't hit. He didn't think of being hit.

It was like being caught in a whirlwind full of thunder and lightning. And like the whirlwind it passed quickly. He found himself standing by a dead horse—his horse—a dead man a few feet away. A hundred yards distant Murdy MacDonald was galloping, weaving in his saddle as if he were drunk. The man with the pale eyes and drooping mustache flogged his horse with a quirt, vanishing into the hollow out of which the quartet had come. Windy MacDonald was nowhere in sight. Ruby sat on her motionless black horse, resting both hands on the horn of her saddle. One hand held a white-handled Colt that dribbled a pale wisp of smoke from its muzzle.

She looked down at Don with agony in her eyes.

"Are you hit?" she croaked.

"No."

"I am." She put one hand to her side. "I'm getting dizzy. Oh, Don! Those dirty, thieving, murdering hounds!"

He caught her as she slid, gathered her close in his arms, cried out at the sight of blood seeping through the bosom of her black shirt. He held her so for a second, begging her to speak to him, careless of those fleeing, would-be killers, careless of Tom Salter in the grass at his feet staring vacantly at the sky.

CHAPTER XII.

ROMANCE IN A HOSPITAL.

SOMETHING like two weeks later Don Campbell came jogging down a steep hill into the town of Medicine Hat, which sits by the Saskatchewan River, forty miles northwest of Cypress Hills. He rode beside a man in a flat-brimmed Stetson, bright scarlet tunic and blue breeches with a two-inch yellow stripe down each outer seam—

thus heralding to all and sundry at a great distance that he was a constable of the Mounted Police.

They crossed a sage-grown flat to enter the town, an orderly collection of stores, hotels, dwellings spreading on both sides of a railway track. They crossed this track to a miniature barracks. The policeman pointed out a large brick building two blocks north.

"There's the hospital, sir," said he, "where you'll find the young lady."

Don dismounted before this edifice. He removed his spurs, entered a hall and approached a desk to address a uniformed nurse. Presently he was stepping softly down a corridor behind another uniformed person, was ushered through a door into a room.

Ruby sat propped up in bed surrounded by pillows. She dropped a hank of colored silk and a piece of embroidery and held out both hands to him.

"My Lord! I'm glad to see you," she said. "This is lonesomer than the middle of Lonesome Prairie. Sit down and give an account of yourself. Why didn't you come to see me sooner?"

Don pulled a chair up beside the bed.

"How are you anyway?" he asked.

"Oh, fine. I can go home any time now, they say, if I'm careful how I move around," she said. "I would have gone—the good Lord knows it's no fun staying here in bed—but I was waiting for you, or to hear from you anyway."

"We got everything dead to rights," he told her. "Did they keep you posted? I sent word to you by Sergeant Palmer last time he was in."

"Oh, they didn't tell me much, except —well, *you* tell me now," she urged. "A sergeant came in and hemmed and hawed and said Mr. Campbell sent his compliments, miss, and he'll be in to see you presently, miss, thank you."

Don laughed at her imitation of an embarrassed Englishman.

"Say, I hated to see you hauled off to town in that wagon from the post," he said. "I wanted to come along myself. But, of course, I knew you were all right, and I had to get busy with those policemen. You were lucky, weren't you. Two inches farther in might have killed you."

"Have you seen that woman any more that came in with me?" Ruby asked.

"Mrs. Gore? No. Met her husband once or twice."

"I must send her something nice when I get home," Ruby murmured. "She was awful good to me. My, I'm a soft thing—and I thought I was as good as a man. It was only in the flesh, and it made me sick. I never had anything hurt so."

"A .45 slug is not very nice," Don agreed. "Even if it isn't very deep. "And you're not soft. You sat up there and blazed away. I've seen men quit for less. Old Windy did. He tore off as soon as the first gun cracked."

"Has he—they—turned up anywhere? How about Murdy?"

"No, your respected uncle ain't been seen since." Don frowned. "We sent word to Fort Benton to look out for all of 'em, an' the Mounted Police patrols looked out, too. Soon as we got you started for town this Medicine Lodge sergeant an' three buck troopers started with me for the Double G. That long-nosed feller that rode with 'em was there. He had a hole in his leg so he couldn't travel an' he was ready to crawfish. He was Grimes. Gilson had pulled his freight. He was Jack Gilson, all right.

"So the sergeant started one policeman after him, sent another to raise the alarm at Fort Walsh an' a post at East End. Then we got hold of two or three ranchers an' tore down the creek after them dry cows. We hazed 'em back to the Double G. They had a pasture full of calves. Most of them cows claimed their own. They hadn't branded 'em yet, but of course it was a

clear case of steal. So they got Grimes in jail."

Ruby stared at him. There was inquiry in her eyes.

"Gilson they cornered on the Frenchman a couple of days later. He resisted arrest an' got himself killed in the scrap," Don continued. "Old Windy, as I said, has vanished. So's Lockie. I made a flyin' trip to the RM after we got them cattle straightened out. Borrowed Cliff's two riders to hold her down until you got around to tend to it yourself. Cliff was plumb flabbergasted about Salter. Murdy's in Fort Benton, in hospital. They grabbed him on Milk River. They're holdin' him until you say what you want done. It's up to you."

"And Salter?"

"Oh, he was dead when he hit the ground, I reckon," Don said calmly. "Murdy would 'a' been too, only he's tough. I'm kinda glad, though, I didn't kill none of your people."

"He'll try to kill you, if he ever gets a chance," Ruby brooded. "I liked Murdy, too. But he's a wolf. He always wanted to be bad. His fingers always itched for a gun."

"Some of 'em won't itch no more," Don said soberly. "I shot all the fingers off his right hand, they say. He'll have to do his shootin', if any, left-handed from now on. I expect that'll tame him considerable. I guess that's all saved me—that lucky first shot that crippled him."

"Poor kid," Ruby sighed. "But he brought it on himself."

"He's a hard case, an' no mistake," Don agreed. "Still, I got no animosity against him. When it come to a showdown they kinda put it up to him to get me. He was tryin' to protect his own crowd. I think Salter was the lowest-down cuss in the bunch. You see, I talked pretty rough to this Grimes. He's a kinda tame sort of sneak thief. He tried to talk himself into bein' let down easy when he found he was up against the law. So that way I got the key to the whole combination.

"They been workin' on the RM for two seasons, Grimes & Gilson and Salter an' your uncle an' Murdy. Lockie knew about it, too. The idea was to make a killin' while Old Windy had the runnin' of your outfit. They'd haze cows with calves north along the Sage in the summer. In the fall they'd separate 'em, keep the calves in a pasture an' run the cows back to Milk River. After a while Grimes & Gilson would put the Double G on the calves. They've built up a herd of over a thousand head under the Double G outa nothin', at your expense.

"An' my sorrel horses spilled the beans. Murdy stole 'em, so Grimes says. Grimes claims the kid had a cravin' for sorrel horses."

"He has," Ruby confirmed. "He loves horses, but he's just crazy about a good-looking sorrel."

"Well, he brought 'em to the Double G next day, an' rebranded 'em. Bragged that he'd have 'em for his special mounts after he was through with the RM. Told Grimes to ride 'em to keep 'em gentle. Grimes did. Darn good thing for you he did. Salter's horses bein' by my camp was just an accident. Somebody did turn them loose on Milk River—some other feller crossin' the country in a hurry. Anyway, that don't matter.

"An' my two sorrels got away from the Double G. Bucked old Grimes off one day an' ran away with his saddle. He was leadin' the other. I guess they tore right outa the country. They'd come from the south, so they naturally headed back. Horses do. If I hadn't happened to locate at Antelope Springs I might never have seen 'em again.

"An' of course, Tom Salter was there at Cliff's that night we located the Donald G in the brand book. He figured I'd probably take a notion to look into

this Double G brand business. So when he found out we'd both started off that mornin' he tore down to the RM ahead of us to warn Murdy. Them was his cigarette stubs on the mantel all right. They had a powwow an' concluded they better beat me to the Double G, put Gilson wise, an' get all them RM cows off the upper part of Sage Creek before I showed up there. They figured I might use my head an' tumble to what they were doin'.

"Of course, they didn't know you had bought into it an' was headed north with me. They had no idea anybody saw 'em hazin' that herd of RMs down Sage Creek in the night. But they spotted us when we rode back to look at them cows in the mornin'. They kept outa sight. When we turned north again they trailed us, like we saw. When they finally recognized us both an' saw us headed for the Double G Ranch, Salter put it up to 'em to head us off an' put my light out. Murdy was to start it an' Salter would chip in."

"What did they think I would do about a killing like that?" Ruby stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Oh, Grimes said old Windy figured they could run a bluff on you that would keep you quiet. They were pretty desperate.

"Anyway, it all come out in the wash," Don observed after an interval. "Gilson an' Salter have passed out of the game. Grimes'll get a long stretch in the pen. It's a clear case, an' these Canadian courts don't waste no time. Grimes admits they stole most of these cattle from you. They'll bring Murdy back here from Montana soon as he's well, if you say you want to prosecute him for rustlin'."

"Or attempted murder," Ruby muttered. "They certainly meant to kill you. They came near killing me. What would you do, Don? About Murdy, I mean."

"What they tried to do to me don't give me no grudge," Don said slowly. "They're *your* people."

"I know," she sighed. "I hate what they tried to do. But I hate to think of Murdy in the penitentiary, too. Uncle Malcolm and Lockie have got away. What would you do if Murdy was your cousin, Don?"

Don thought a minute. He could put himself in her place.

"Give him a runnin' start," said he. "Let him hit the trail for parts unknown. He's done as a gun fighter, unless he cultivates his left hand. He'd never show up in Montana again."

"You're a white man, all right," Ruby murmured. "I just can't bear to send that kid over the road, even if he is bad, and crooked. I'm funny. I'm glad you killed Salter. I'd have felt awful if you'd killed either Uncle Malcolm or Murdy—much as they deserved killing."

Don laughed at her vehemence.

"I wonder," Ruby went on, looking at him soberly, "why Uncle Malcolm made that play about him bein' so dead set against Tom Salter, when all the time they were rustling off me in partnership. Tom wanted to marry me. It would have made it a lot simpler for them all if I had. Once or twice I thought I might."

"I got sort o' curious about that, too," Don confessed. "Happened to mention it to Grimes. He sure did talk, that man—like confession was good for his soul. He said old Windy figured a woman was so darned contrary that if he made a holler about Tom you probably *would* marry him, an' then they'd have the world by the tail, this MacDonald, Salter, Double-G combination. Besides, it helped to keep you from gettin' suspicious about how he handled your cattle, to have you all stirred up about a man."

She lay silent for a while, her fingers picking at the white counterpane. Don looked at her uneasily. Her red hair, tied with a piece of ribbon, was

like a flaming cloud about her head. Her gray eyes regarded him with that same mixture of curiosity and wistfulness that had stirred him at their first meeting. And when she smiled at him, it seemed to Don like the sun breaking through clouds. Only, he told himself, he had no business to think things like that. And then, again, he asked himself moodily, why not? He was used to taking chances. He could be determined enough—well, it wasn't that.

It simply seemed to Don that he had come to a forked trail. Ruby MacDonald had seemed desirable enough when they rode together looking for thieves. Now she looked too much like an unattainable goddess, lying among pillows, a white soft throat rising out of a lace-trimmed nightgown. Don shrank humbly to very small dimensions in his own estimation when he looked at her.

"Well, I reckon that's about all," he said, rather lamely.

"Is it?" she asked. "What about my reputation that agitated you so? Is it going to be torn to tatters? After me ridin' around with you for two or three days an' gettin' mixed up with rustlers in a gun fight."

"Oh, I suppose there'll be talk," Don said uneasily. "I can't do nothin' about that unless somebody makes a break in my hearin'."

"We've given them something to talk about." Ruby propped herself up on one elbow, a gleam of mischief shining in her eyes. "Let's give them another mouthful. You take me home, and then take hold and run the RM for me. I've got to have a range boss, somebody I can trust."

"An' you think I'll do?" Don asked.

"Sure you'll do," she answered promptly. "Of course you'll do."

"When I quit the Square and Compass this fall," Don said slowly, "I swore I'd done my last lick for anybody but myself. I said I'd never work for wages again. An' I've got myself a good little ranch located in the Sweetgrass. I don't know."

Ruby settled slowly back among her pillows. She stared at him fixedly for a minute.

"I think you're the stupidest man I ever knew," she said at last in a very aggrieved tone.

Don towered over her for a matter of seconds, indignant, mystified, hurt. Then at some faint flicker of amusement in Ruby's half-closed eyes he put reason and logic aside to let instinct guide him. This is, he bent over her and kissed her on her pouting mouth.

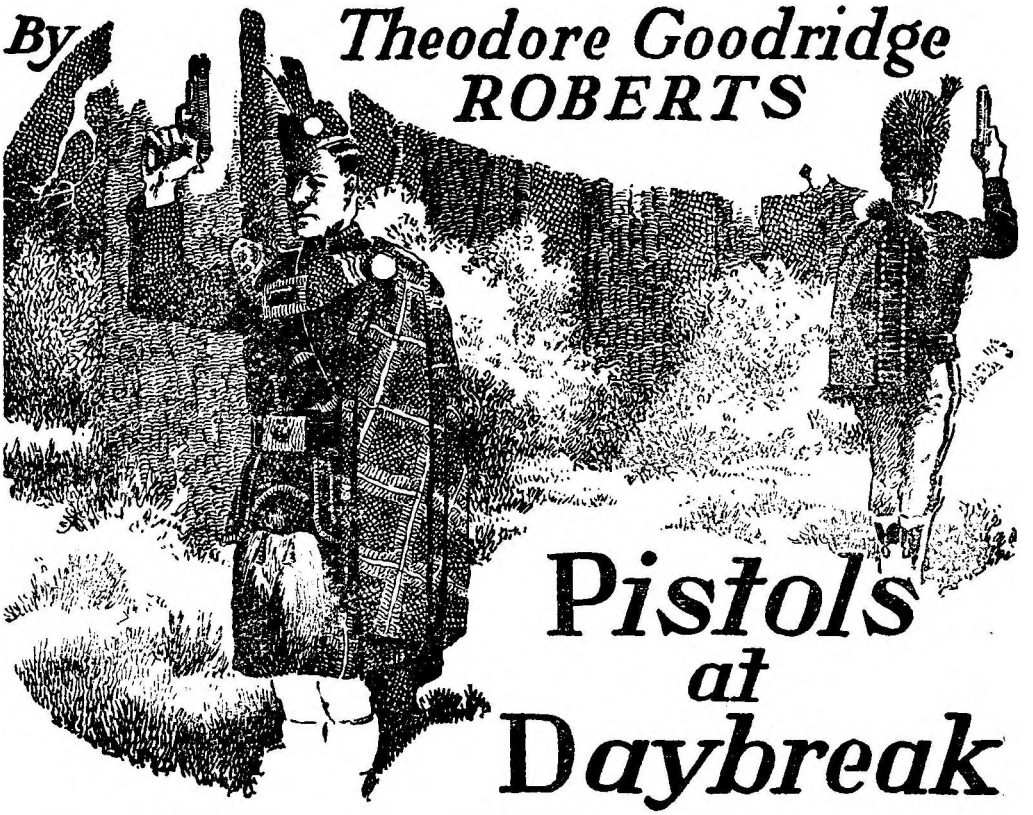
And she put her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear:

"I'll take that back. You're not stupid, after all. You're a dear—and I like you—heaps!"

A HORTICULTURAL NOTE

"Speaking of women," remarked Cash Nilomus, the village wit, "you see so few of the clinging-vine type now because they've been crowded out by the rambler roses."

By Theodore Goodridge ROBERTS



Pistols at Daybreak

Author of "The Night Attack," "The Return of the Gillicuddy," Etc.

Alasdair MacIver defends his honor like the gallant Highland gentleman he is.

MAJOR ROWLEY POTTLE was one of the three magistrates who sat in judgment of James ("Soldier") Megg and Jacob ("Slasher") Smith. Megg and Smith were charged with setting fire to the habitation of Alasdair MacAlasdair MacIan MacIver, thus destroying said habitation or abode and, by the same action, grieviously imperilling the life of the said MacIver, together with the lives of certain other persons; to wit, Angus MacDonald and "Two Blanket" Sabattis and Little Smoke Bear.

The charge was made by MacIver, but his friend Doctor Hammer of the garrison had written it out in proper English.

The three magistrates looked wise. Major Pottle, quite appropriately, looked the wisest of the three.

At a word—or was it a sneeze?—from one of the magistrates, Alasdair MacIver got to his feet and addressed the court. All dolled up for the occasion in his very best clothes—kilt and plaid and doublet and sporran—that golden Highlander cut an arresting figure. He let fly a broadside of Gaelic into their honors. Their honors shivered, but held their ground and tried to look intelligent, mistaking the wild speech of the Gael for the highly considered and more-than-respectable language of Virgil and Cicero. Up jumped Doctor Hammer and offered his services as interpreter. MacIver waved him down.

"Don't trouble yourself, Dave," said MacIver, still speaking his native tongue. "I was given a gentleman's education in my father's house, and I'll

do those three loons up there the politeness to suppose that they were given the same."

He addressed the court in the language of C. Cornelius Tacitus. Their honors braced themselves and exchanged desperate eye-corner glances. MacIver paused expectantly, as if for comment. Seconds of silence followed, during which their honors gazed at their hands in their laps. MacIver spoke again, this time in French. He rattled it off—yards of it. Again he paused expectantly; and again their honors failed to respond.

Then young Mr. Jones, an officer of the infantry regiment, garrisoned in Kingston, stood up at the back of the room.

"Gentlemen, my friend Mr. MacIver has had the honor of addressing you eloquently and to the point in three languages," said Mr. Jones.

"I don't believe a damn word of it!" exploded Major Pottle.

"Sir?" queried Mr. Jones.

Major Pottle lost color.

"You misunderstand me, sir!" he cried. "What I mean is, not a word of what he said—that fellow, MacIver."

"Ah!" sighed Mr. Jones, and sat down reluctantly.

Up jumped Doctor Hammer, for the second time, with his whiskers bristling, and told the court, in concise and vivid English, all that he had learned from MacIver and "Big John" MacDonald of the burning of the lodge on the Waakadoggan.

The magistrates whispered together. Urged by Pottle, Mr. Bunnet asked Doctor Hammer the whereabouts of the burned habitation.

"I'll tell you that, Bunnet," returned Hammer aggressively. "I know that country. I've been there with your friend Pottle, and I've been there with better men. It stood on the Waakadoggan, at the mouth of a tributary stream which is known to some as Gunwad Creek and to others as Glenbhrec."

"I understand that it was beyond the boundaries of that parcel of land which was appropriated to the settlement of the colony of Scottish immigrants to which this MacIver belongs, and that MacIver is nothing more than a masterless squatter."

"I know nothing of the boundaries of the land sold by your friend Pottle to the Highland settlers, but I have the honor to inform you that what I have heard from my friend MacIver and just now told to you is the truth in every particular. I know nothing of Major Pottle's boundaries, and not much more of the law than yourself, Bunnet—and that's as good as admitting absolute ignorance of the subject—but I know an honest man when I see him, not to mention a gentleman. And MacIver's both the one and the other, as I am myself; but I could point you out some who are neither.

"And my advice to you and your distinguished associates, Bunnet, is to jail these rogues, Megg and Smith, and to catch and jail the third rogue who was with him, and to discover the party—obviously a cowardly, low, ill-conditioned enemy of Mr. MacIver—who hired that scum to go up the Waakadoggan and try to burn MacIver in his blankets. There's David Hammer's opinion and there's his advice; and if you or Johnstone don't like it, send a friend to see a friend of mine to arrange whatever you want to do about it. But I wouldn't disgrace a finger by pulling a trigger on your friend Pottle."

There was confusion on the bench. There were cheers and confusion and laughter in the body of the court, with Mr. Jones leading the cheering. Constables and the clerk of the court ran aimlessly about. Big John MacDonald burst forth into an erruption of Gaelic. The courthouse was cleared,

with the constables pushing the populace, and the populace, led by young Mr. Jones, pushing the constables; and the three magistrates were left alone, wrangling hotly together. Soldier Megg and Slasher Smith, at a wink and nudge from "Honest" Ben Barley of the King's Head Tavern, had departed in the thick of the mêlée.

"I don't like this, damme if I do!" shouted Mr. Bunnet at Major Pottle. "I'm made to look a fool, and so's Johnstone, and the majesty of the law's held up to ridicule and contempt—and all your fault, Pottle!"

"And so it seems to me!" cried Mr. Johnstone. "We were fools to heed you, Pottle. You assured us the fellow was an ignorant, friendless squatter and outlaw, and hinted at worse things concerning him. And see what came of it!—the respectable young man himself givin' us the lie in three languages. and that fire-eatin' regimental doctor beratin' us like drunken grooms, and you sittin' there with a paralyzed tongue and a face of dirty tallow. I don't like it! And if you don't have that doctor out for plasterin' your face with insults, no man of breedin' or sensibility would take from royalty itself, I'll resign my commission of justice of the peace and tell the governor why."

"Me, too!" exclaimed Mr. Bunnet. "I'll tell his excellency I refuse to associate in any capacity with a lily-livered coward, major or no major! Put that in your pipe an' smoke it—and I hope it strangles you!"

Then Mr. Bunnet and Mr. Johnstone walked out on their brother magistrate, breathing heavily through their noses, and repaired hurriedly to a friend's house and did what they could to lose, in hot punch, the memory of the indignities to which they had been subjected. So hot and high was their indignation that they did not give a thought to their unfinished magisterial business or to the escape of James Megg and Jacob Smith. They drained a bowl, then departed for their respective homes—one for King's Hill, six miles upriver; the other for Gosfield, seven miles down river—each in a robe-lined sleigh behind a blood horse, each still breathing hot and hard through his nose.

Doctor Hammer and Mr. Jones caught Alasdair MacIver by the elbows and hurried him along the street toward the King's Head. Big John MacDonald and MacIver's faithful Malicetes followed close, Big John still proclaiming, in Gaelic, his single-handed victory over three ruffians armed with knives. Jones was still chuckling and Hammer was still bristling.

"There's law for you!" barked the doctor. "There's justice and justices! Pottle and Bunnet and Johnstone—a blackguard and two dunces! The court a bear pit; and the rogues who tried to roast you in your beds gone clean away! There's more to this than meets the eye, mark my words. I told them so. Where'd that cutthroat Lunk go to? And that smug taverner. What of him? Why the devil would he fit out an expedition of three men and provisions enough for weeks if all he wanted was a few hundredweight of moose meat? What's between him and Pottle? I caught some slants of the eye passing between them. I'll speak to the governor about it. I'll tell him all I know and all I suspect."

"Speaking of the governor, here comes Ruggleston," said Jones. "Oh, Lord! What a sight for a poor officer of a regiment of the line! Dear Heaven! What boots and spurs and swagger and otter skins! Doctor, tell our friend Mac that the gentleman approaching us makes him and his Highland vanities look like an ashman in a dust storm. I haven't the exact French for it, or I'd tell him myself."

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the doctor. "Let sleeping dogs lie. D'ye want our kilted friend to take to cramming his gentleman's education and his pedigree down the stiff neck of that gilded popinjay here in the public street?"

"It would be amusing," returned Mr. Jones. "I'd lay my money on the Highlander, bless his mangy sporran!"

Captain Ruggleston met and accosted them within a rod of the tavern door, with a bland smile for the doctor and Mr. Jones, a peaked eyebrow for MacIver's Gaelic finery, and an affable salute which included the entire gathering.

"Doctor, I've been instructed by his nibs to present his compliments to you and a Mr. McIver, and his invitation to both of you to dine and dance at Government House this evening," he said. "His nibs will be glad to see both of you early—even as early as four o'clock —particularly this Highland gentleman, whom I've not yet had the honor of meeting."

"Alasdair, this gorgeous person is Captain the Honorable Peter Ruggleston, of the Grenadier Guards, who is just now condescending to act as the governor's aid-de-camp," said Hammer, in Gaelic. "He has requested the pleasure of your acquaintance and delivered an invitation from his excellency."

MacIver doffed his bonnet and bowed. Ruggleston bowed. The Highlander straightened himself like a lance, returned his broad bonnet to his golden head, and cocked it. The guardsman, straight as a lance, smiled condescendingly.

"Now you're acquainted with him, but don't be too sure that yon know him," said the doctor in English. "He's a gentleman of very ancient family and true Highland temper. He's not to be judged by his worldly possessions."

"Quite so; and of a gentleman's education, I understand," returned the gorgeous captain politely.

Doctor Hammer and Alasdair MacIver presented themselves at Government House at four o'clock sharp. A servant in a maroon-and-buff livery had no more than opened the door to them than the governor himself appeared and welcomed them with flattering cordiality and led them to a little book-lined room where a fire of logs struck ruby and golden and topaz lights in the bellies of three decanters on a rosewood table—port and a rare old brandy and a pale sherry.

The doctor said that he always found a nip of brandy to be an excellent thing for the digestive organs if taken at exactly five minutes past four of the afternoon. MacIver took sherry. The governor took port, remarking that the best preparation he knew for a bottle or two of port after dinner was a glass of port before dinner. MacIver's palate was pleased with the pale sherry; but his stomach, unused to wines and bred to Highland spirits, did not so much as register its arrival.

Doctor Hammer gave his excellency a vivid description of the farcical attempted trial of the fellows whom MacIver and his men had brought down from Glenbhrec. The governor showed neither surprise nor excitement.

"I believe both Bunnet and Johnstone to be as honest as they have proved to be incompetent," he said pleasantly. "We can't expect too much from our voluntary magistrates. As to the accused, it is quite evident that they were nothing but tools. They had nothing against our young friend here, so far as I can learn; nor had the fellow Lunk. To-morrow will be time enough for us to discuss the matter. I have always made a point of using my brain as little as possible during the hour preceding dinner; and I don't intend to use it at all to-night. This is to be the best party, the best dinner,

and the best ball ever given in this province; for it is to celebrate a very great—that is to say, what seems to me personally a very great—— Well, suppose we charge our glasses and drink to—ah——"

"To a pair of green eyes!" cried Doctor Hammer, with a swift and complete change of look and manner. His arrogant eyes softened and twinkled. His arrogant whiskers ceased their bristling and lay flat. "Damme, sir! I've had my suspicions ever since Christmas!" And he prodded a thumb into the gubernatorial ribs with an air of infinite archness and finesse.

"Ever since Christmas, d'ye say?" giggled his excellency. "Then you're a cleverer man than I am, by a full month."

Sir James Hard, a bachelor of somewhat more than middle age, had been as proud and sure of his seasoned heart as of his seasoned head; and that pride had survived the first year of his administration. In the second year, the widow of a late attorney general of the province had come home to her father's house in Kingston from a round of visits among relatives in the old country. She had inscrutable green eyes and an inscrutable slow smile. She had a slender neck that somehow suggested the dancing of nymphs to Pan's piping in a leafy glade of Arcady. She possessed two dimples; one in her flawless left cheek and the other in her slender left shoulder. These things, eyes and smile and neck and dimples, and other of her possessions almost, perhaps quite, as enchanting, played the very devil with his excellency's hard head and seasoned heart.

To shorten a long story, the governor wooed and won that widow and gave a grand dinner and a grand ball in celebration of his success; and, to get back to Alasdair MacIver's story, the widow's daughter and only child attended both the dinner and the ball. Her name was Florence Lytton. Her age was eighteen; and that made her exactly nineteen years her mother's junior. But for those years, and the color and expression of her eyes, she might have been mistaken for her mother at even so short a distance as the width of a dining table. Miss Lytton's eyes were darker and tenderer than the widow's. So dark and tender were they that when Alasdair MacIver first encountered their gentle regard he almost mistook them for the eyes of Flora MacDonald. And when he looked again, the bewildering resemblance was even more striking than at first; and the more he looked, the greater the resemblance became.

MacIver enjoyed the bouquet and flavor of the governor's wines; but, thanks to his Highland head and stomach and his early training, they meant little more to him than smell and taste. A little more, of course, but so little as to pass as nothing in that company and that time.

MacIver behaved with decorum, and acquitted himself with distinction throughout the elaborate dinner. He had been trained to the elegant ceremony of the table in his father's house, though there the glasses and most of the dishes had been empty and a wild gillie or two had passed as powdered footmen. But the form of the thing had been a part of his gentlemen's education. As to the equipment of the table—the silver and crystal and napery—he had never seen its equal, even in the great house of Glenaora, the ancestral home of the head of his family. But did he gape and stare at the glitter and shine and glory of it under the soft radiance of the wax candles? Not he. Royalty itself could not have cast a calmer and more casual glance over that magnificence.

MacIver sat between Miss Lytton

and an elderly matron with a face like a war horse. He addressed the matron politely in his native tongue, because her cast of countenance reminded him of some of the more rugged of his native hills.

"I presume that to be the language of the Picts and Scots, young man, to judge from your petticoat and bare knees and the reticule with hair on it, which I was admiring before we took our seats. But the language means no more to me than so much Greek," said the matron.

Then he chatted to her in French, which she recognized as such after ten minutes of it. She took exception to his pronunciation. Miss Lytton turned from Captain Ruggleston on her other side and defended his pronunciation. He looked into her eyes; and that was the third time.

Sir James, being in love, left the table with the ladies that night. And as Sir James was governor, all the gentlemen did the same, but some of them stole back to the decanters and the gleaming mahogany at the first opportunity.

Dancing was one of MacIver's polite accomplishments. He could perform the most intricate steps with his gaze on his partner's gaze, without a look or a thought to his feet or hers. And at the waltz, a new form of polite diversion, he was a wonder. Looking into Miss Lytton's shadowed eyes, he could imagine that it was Flora MacDonald in the shelter of his strong right arm.

It was midnight, or thereabout, when Alasdair MacIver became aware of the fact that the heel of a Wellington boot was resting heavily on the toe of one of his elegant silver-buckled shoes. He was not dancing at the moment, nor were there any ladies within six or seven yards of him. But what of it? His thoughts were busy, in a pleasant confusion, with Florence Lytton and Flora MacDonald. He freed his toe without comment, without a glance. But when, a moment later, the heel returned to rest on the same spot, he looked to see who occupied that Wellington boot. It was Captain the Honorable Peter Ruggleston, who stood with his long and graceful scarlet back turned fairly to him.

"My foot, sir, if you please," he murmured in French.

Captain Ruggleston turned a flushed and contemptuous face upon him, and at the same time removed the heel with a grinding motion.

"Did you speak?" asked Ruggleston in English, "or was it the checks on your kilt I heard?"

MacIver got nothing of that but the sneer which accompanied it. The sneer surprised and shocked him. It was evident to him that the Englishman was angry with him. But why should the Englishman be angry with him or with any one? What ailed the blazing loon? Was he drunk?

"My foot," said MacIver in such English as he had learned from Little Smoke and Two Blanket. "You stand on him too much, Ruggleston."

"*Captain* Ruggleston to you, dammit!"

"Dammit to you!"

The A. D. C.'s flushed and contemptuous countenance fairly smoked. MacIver's eyes appeared to throw off sparks. The nostrils of both young men went white at the base, as if pinched by invisible fingers.

"This way," croaked Ruggleston.

He turned and left the ballroom. MacIver followed him. In the hall, in the gloom under the staircase, Ruggleston halted and turned and slapped the Highlander lightly across the mouth with a glove of white kid which he had removed from his hand for the purpose. MacIver recoiled as if he had been struck with an ax. Every muscle and nerve in him jerked and

froze as if he had received his death stroke. For slow seconds he stood motionless and speechless, staring with blank eyes, like a figure of stone. Then, in a queer whisper of his mother tongue, he voiced something of his staggering emotions.

"A blow! A slap in the face! A blow on the mouth!"

At that moment Doctor Hammer appeared, as if from nowhere. He appeared between the two tall young men, with his whiskers bristling.

"What's this?" he asked in a voice as harsh as the complaint of a knife on a grindstone. "A blow, d'ye say? Given and taken under the governor's roof! Are you crazy, Ruggleston?" He switched to Gaelic. "You took a blow, MacIver—you, a Highland gentleman!"

"My face took it; and pity the Sassenach fool who struck it!" whispered MacIver.

"Will you apologize for that blow?" asked the doctor of the captain.

"I'll see every red-kneed, strutting Scotch beggar in hell first!" replied Ruggleston.

"You're drunk."

"You're a liar."

"You've trouble enough on your hands already, my gay young cock, without drawing Dave Hammer's fire. Come along with me, both of you; and come quietly."

They went to the governor's secluded study, picking up a Mr. Spark on the way. The doctor shut the door, then lit a candle at the fallen fire on the hearth. He explained the situation to Mr. Spark, who was a middle-aged civilian with two bottles of port behind his waistcoat, a thousand acres of land, a stable of fast horses, and a high opinion of himself as an authority on etiquette, points of honor, and equine ailments. Doctor Hammer explained the situation briefly to Mr. Spark. The decanters of the afternoon still stood on the rosewood table; and Ruggleston helped himself to a brimming glass.

Mr. Spark said, with becoming gravity, that he was quite convinced that the gentleman in the scarlet tunic and gold lace had intended by his actions to express criticism of the person or character of the gentleman in the kilt, first by standing on the kilted gentleman's toe and afterward by applying a glove to his face; and that he, Collingwood Spark, was entirely at the service of all concerned.

So it was agreed that Doctor Hammer, representing Mr. MacIver, should call upon Mr. Spark, representing Captain the Honorable Peter Ruggleston, at noon, and that mum was the word in the meantime. Following that piece of business, Doctor Hammer returned to the dining room and Alasdair MacIver to the ballroom. The A. D. C. and Mr. Spark remained in the secluded study, seated at the rosewood table, emptied the three decanters, and fell asleep in their chairs. MacIver had another dance with the lady with the Flora MacDonald eyes.

Next morning MacIver told Big John MacDonald and the Malicetes that certain important matters would detain him in town until the following morning and perhaps later.

"Is it about land?" asked Big John.

"That, among other things," replied MacIver, thinking of the seven feet of ground which would very probably be required by himself or Ruggleston.

"And why not?" said MacDonald, looking shrewd. "You're a friend of the governor's, MacIver, no doubt of that; and governors and such are able to make gifts of land with no more trouble than a scratch of the pen. It was a great man I saved from being roasted to death in his blankets a few nights back, single-handed against three, and maybe four. Use your judgment, Glenbhrec, for you have the world under your brogues—and that's

John MacDonald's ripe opinion. Take your time and use your judgment; and you'll have land and power equal to your gentility and learning before you're many days older."

"I promise you to do my best, John," returned MacIver gravely. "My best for the honor of all true Highland hearts on the Waakadoggan."

Big John MacDonald and Two Blanket and Little Smoke set out for home shortly after noon, blissfully unsuspicious of the real and tragic nature of the business which detained Alasdair MacIver in town.

Doctor Hammer called on Mr. Spark, that sportsman having remained in town for the purpose of receiving him.

"There's got to be a meeting, Spark," said the doctor. "Nothing else for it. MacIver's a lad of very ancient family, devil a doubt of it; and even if he wasn't, there's no questioning the gentility of a guest of the governor. But I'll not force it. My principal is a reasonable man. If your principal will admit that he was drunk, there's the end of the matter."

"That's handsomely expressed, my dear sir," returned Mr. Spark. "But no chance. That's the last thing in the world my man will admit—that he was drunk, or even slightly under the influence. I was the same at his age—and so were you, Hammer—honestly of the opinion that I could carry all the wine in the world without showing it by so much as a flushed brow; and if I rolled in the ditch, or fell downstairs, I laid the blame on the ditch and the stairs, in all good faith."

"In that case, my man's the challenger."

"Quite so."

"Captain Ruggleston, as the challenged party, has the privilege of naming the weapons."

"Quite so. His choice is pistols."

Other details of the meeting were arranged. Two glasses of old brown sherry were poured and sipped.

"There must have been something behind the wine, so to speak," said Doctor Hammer reflectively. "It requires more than a skinful of wine to drive a well-bred man to the incivility of standing intentionally on another gentleman's feet."

"I'm of the same opinion," returned Mr. Spark, eying the sherry in his glass. "Sound sherry, this. It's been three times across the Atlantic in wood. I have a suspicion there is a lady behind it."

"I feared as much, damme!"

Doctor Hammer went to the King's Head, discovered Alasdair MacIver in his room writing verses, and informed him of all particulars of time, place and conditions. The Highlander expressed himself as being entirely satisfied with the arrangements and thanked the doctor cordially for his trouble.

"You're a cool hand," said Doctor Hammer. "Verses, is it? Jingling rhymes when you should be out in the open air steadying your nerves. Poetry! What manner of preparation is that for exchanging shots with an officer of the Grenadier Guards?"

"I'm prepared," returned MacIver pleasantly.

"Can you shoot?"

"My father gave me a gentleman's education."

"So I've heard; but did your respected father shoot back at you when he was educating you in that particular branch of polite learning? That's the point. That's the test."

"I've been out before. Can you give me a rhyme for Flora?"

"Flora? The chit's name is Florance."

Then MacIver explained his reason for his marked attentions to Miss Lytton. Doctor Hammer swore.

"If the MacDonald girl's eyes happened to be green, I suppose you would

have made an exhibition of the green-eyed widow, and so had Sir John Hard standing on your toes and slapping your face!" cried the doctor. "I never heard of such madness. If Ruggleston was aware of it, there'd be no fight. He'd laugh his silly head off. I believe it's my duty to inform him of the truth of the matter—through his second, of course. Knowing the truth, he would apologize handsomely."

The golden Highlander eyed his friend coldly, consideringly.

"No blow was ever wiped from the face of a MacIver of Glenaora with handsome apologies," he said.

Doctor Hammer realized the usefulness of pursuing that point farther, having the blood of clansmen in his own veins.

Twenty minutes later a bell jangled in the bar. Ten bells were there on the wall, each hung on a coiled spring and numbered for the chamber to which it was attached. The taverner looked quickly, then thoughtfully, at the number of that jangling bell. It was the number of Alasdair MacIver's room.

"I'll tend to that myself," he said to his assistant; and he unrolled his shirt sleeves and donned his jacket. "It's that young Scotchman wot was dancin' at Gover'ment House till dawn."

Honest Ben Barley was interested in the guest from Gunwad Creek on the Waakadoggan for another reason than the fact that the gentleman had dined and danced at Government House. He was beginning to think that MacIver, who was quite evidently not the friendless immigrant depicted by Major Pottle, might make a more valuable patron than the major himself. He was having difficulty with the major. He was growing a trifle weary of the major and his methods and his bluster; and he was beginning to doubt the major's importance in the general scheme of things. So he presented himself to MacIver and Doctor Hammer in a clean jacket and his best manner.

"Mr. MacIver and I have a little wager on the subject of snuffing candles with pistol balls," said the doctor. "We want a pair of candles and your permission, Barley, to discharge a brace of pistols in this room. Holes in the plaster to be plugged at my expense."

Barley glanced quickly but searchingly into the doctor's eyes, then into MacIver's. His swift suspicion was stilled. He chuckled deferentially.

"I was afeared for a moment ye meant mischief, sir," he said, with that respectful, guileless, confiding smirk of his which most of his social superiors accepted at its face value, and with which few of his equals, and none of his inferiors, were acquainted.

"Don't be a fool," returned Hammer.

So the taverner retired, warned his assistant and the half dozen customers in the bar not to get excited if they heard the popping of pistols overhead, as it would be nothing but two gentlemen upstairs shooting at wicks for a wager, then returned with the candles and a bottle of his best port. The candles were lit and stood on the chimney piece, one at each end of the five-foot shelf. MacIver's brace of short pistols lay on a table at the far end of the room, loaded and primed. Doctor Hammer gave Barley gracious permission to remain and see the sport.

MacIver took up the pistols, one with either hand, and stood edge-on to the candles. The doctor and the publican fell back from the line of fire. MacIver raised his right hand and let fly. One of the narrow yellow flames blinked and vanished. MacIver turned, presented his left side to the mantelpiece, raised his left arm and dis-

charged his second pistol. The flame of the second candle blinked to nothing.

MacIver smiled. No one spoke for ten seconds or so, though Ben Barley drew in a breath with a distinct, but entirely respectful, sound of whistling. The doctor was the first to speak.

"You win, Alasdair," he said. "Barley, draw the cork."

MacIver did no more than moisten his lips with the superior wine. Barley drank a glass to the healths and prosperity of the gentlemen, then started for the door.

"One moment," said Doctor Hammer. "Ten shillings for the port and ten for the plaster; and keep your mouth shut about this candle snuffing for it's no credit to a man of my age and position to make and lose wagers."

He passed two gold coins into Barley's hand; and as soon as the door had closed on the taverner's heels, he refilled his glass.

"I never saw it better done," he said. "I couldn't do it as well myself. But how about twenty paces?"

"I might spatter a trifle of tallow at twenty," admitted MacIver.

"Just so. A drop of half an inch, perhaps. This is a very sound wine, and I'm glad to see you have sense enough to leave it all to me."

Ben Barley returned to the bar only for long enough to say a few words in his assistant's ear, after which he donned hat and greatcoat and stepped out. In the joint capacities of taverner and importer of wines and spirits, he had a wide acquaintance among all classes in the little town and up and down the big river. Now he had what promised to be a bright idea. It had sprung into being at the instant of the discharge of MacIver's second pistol, as if the extinguished candle flame had transmitted a spark to his crafty brain.

He called upon a gentleman whom he knew to be in good standing at Government House, talked for a few minutes about a new consignment of old brandy, then asked a few apparently irrelevant questions concerning Sir James Hard's grand dinner and grand ball. He went away from there with his suspicion confirmed and his idea waxing brighter. He hastened home, harnessed his gray gelding and hitched him to a little red pung, and set out for King's Hill, the rural home of Mr. Rigby Bunnet, J. P. The road was good and the gelding was a stepper.

Barley's brain worked busily to the merry jingling of the sleigh bells. He found Mr. Bunnet at home, looking a trifle wan after his participation in his excellency's hospitality. Barley told Mr. Bunnet a very interesting story, in strictest confidence.

"D'ye tell me so?" exclaimed Bunnet. "But it's against the law!"

Barley reminded him respectfully that he had come to a sportsman and a gentleman and, if he might make so bold an admired patron and friend, and not to a magistrate. Mr. Bunnet hastened to reassure his visitor on that point.

"And you saw the candles snuffed with your own eyes?" he added.

"At nine full paces, sir; and with the left hand as clean as with the right—all as easy as sneezin', sir."

"Amazin'! And who's the person willing to wager against this marksman's success in the issue of this—ah—affair?"

The taverner spoke a name.

"Damn the fellow!" cried Squire Bunnet, with brightening eyes. "He made a fool of me in court, and a bigger fool of himself. I'll be glad to teach him a lesson!"

"I'll be glad to see that myself, yer honor. And about a gentleman to hold the stakes, sir—a gentleman of discretion like yerself, sir, who'll keep a poor man's name out of the matter?"

"I'll have one here, waiting for the bold major and his money."

Barley produced gold and bank notes, which Mr. Bunnet counted, made a note of, and pocketed.

"And I'll double it, Ben," said Mr. Bunnet. "Very friendly of you to think of me in this connection; and I'll not forget it. And your name and the entire matter is safe with me. That's some of the Bollington brandy at your elbow, Ben. Help yourself; and I'll join you in a nip. It's too bad you don't know the exact time and place, for it would be well worth seeing."

"But we can't help learnin' the result of it, sir. An' that'll be enough knowledge for you and me, sir; and too much for Major Pottle."

Ben Barley smiled frequently at his thoughts during his homeward drive. Arrived, he stabled the gelding, smartened up his dress, and made a hearty supper. After supper he called on Major Pottle.

The major did not want to see Honest Ben, but he lacked the courage to send his excuses to the door. The fact is, he not only regretted his past association with the taverner, but he was beginning to fear the fellow. He cursed himself for the senseless hatred which had prompted him to that mad and futile and disastrous attempt on the life of Alasdair MacIver. Madness! The action of a fool! He should have tried to scrape up a friendship with MacIver, licked his brogues and flattered his Highland vanity, gone into the wilderness and sung low and sweet to all those mangy immigrants—anything but the crazy, reckless thing he had done.

"I've no more money for you," he said to Barley, putting on a bold face. "I'm at an entire loss to guess why you claim money from me. Who'd believe your cock-and-bull story—against my word?"

"Calm yerself, sir," returned Barley. "Major Pottle's spoken word's as good as any other gentleman's written bond to Ben Barley—no matter what names yer honor may give to our little agreement in a moment of excitement. I'm here to-night to put money in yer pocket, sir; an' maybe a few guineas in my own."

He told the story of the affair between the wild Highlander and Captain the Honorable Peter Ruggleston; and to that he added another story, the second being an absolute creation of his brain. He said that he had been ordered to carry two candles to MacIver's room, and there had found Doctor Hammer instructing the Highlander in the use of pistols. MacIver had handled the weapons as if afraid they would explode in his fingers and destroy him. He had trembled like a leaf, though cold sober. The fire-eating doctor had been cruel sharp with him, cursing like a logger. The doctor had grabbed a pistol from McIver's trembling hand and shot the wick off one of the candles. Then the distracted MacIver had pulled trigger at the other candle and made a hole in the ceiling. It had been a distressing exhibition, and Honest Ben had been glad to leave the room.

"If that red-headed loon can't shoot, why the hell does he fight?" asked the major. "If he's got neither the skill nor the belly for it, why doesn't he eat dirt? It's been done before, by better men than that swaggering savage—so I've been told."

"The swagger's all out of him now, sir. It's Hammer's forcin' and holdin' him to it—for the honor of Scotland. to judge by his talk. There's Highland blood in the doctor, too, by what he was sayin'. The captain struck the kilted lad on the mouth; and Hammer saw it done. The poor calf's more afeared of the doctor nor he be of the Englishman; and he's got to fight one or tother of them, so he'll stand up

to the captain. There'll be a dead Highlander layin' out somewhere before long. Now if it was a fight with broadswords or axes or clubs, I wouldn't put it past MacIver to do his part, and maybe more'n his part; but the pistol's beyond him. He's afeared o' the very tool in his hand. But maybe he'll put a decent face on it if the doctor fills 'im up with liquor at the last minute."

"MacIver's naught to me, alive or dead," said Major Pottle. "But what was that talk of putting money in our pockets?"

Barley told him.

"I don't believe it!" cried the major. "Lay a wager—eighty pound sterling—on that fellow? Nobody'd be fool enough for that."

"Bunnet's his name, sir, and there's no denyin' he's drunk. Bunnet was always a bettin' fool, sir, drunk or sober. D'ye mind his wager on Cap'n Saxby's Blue Boy to distance Judge Anderson's Sparrer Grass by two lengths—and all because he was at outs with the judge."

"He's a fool, devil a doubt of it! But why's he laying a wager in this affair? And why against Ruggleston? And what does he know of it? Is it public property—common talk? If so, Hard will put a stop to it."

"Bunnet's got his reasons. Reasons enough for him, sir. He'll swaller down anything Hammer tells 'im—maybe for love o' the doctor, and maybe for fear. And Sir James' second butler, he was tellin' me this mornin' there's considerable feelin' amongst the so-called gentry hereabouts against the new aid-de-camp, him treatin' them more off-handed nor they're accustomed to. Captain Ruggleston spilt a glass o' negus onto Bunnet's weskit last night an' didn't even express his regrets—so the second butler was tellin' me whilst treatin' himself to trupenny-worth o' my rum. Well, sir, you know Squire Bunnet's nature."

"Did he approach you in this matter?"

"Bunnet? He did that, sir. He waved his money in my face, little knowin' what I'd been hearin' from the second butler about Cap'n Ruggleston shootin' the stems out from under wine glasses at ten paces, an' him drunk as billy-be-dam."

"Did the fellow see it?"

"The money, sir? *I* saw it—an' covered forty pound of it!"

"The breaking of the wineglasses, at ten paces."

"This very mornin', before breakfast—and him with a hangover."

"And Bunnet laid a wager with you?"

"Forty pounds. He had hundreds offerin'. Ask him."

But the major was not quite satisfied. He asked more questions, and the same ones again, and received answers to all. He applied to a bottle of blue glass for courage; and, by nine o'clock he was both satisfied of the truth of Barley's information and equipped with courage to take advantage of it. He ordered a horse and sleigh. He transferred notes and gold from his strong box to his pockets.

Arrived at King's Hill, Major Pottle entered the house alone. Ben Barley threw a robe over the horse, lit a pipe, and remained discreetly in the sleigh. Within, the major found the misguided Bunnet and a very respectable man from farther upriver, and accomplished his business without a hitch.

MacIver supped alone that night; then went for a long walk in the frosty starshine. He called at Doctor Hammer's quarters on his way back to the tavern. The doctor gave him a package containing beef sandwiches and raw eggs. He was in bed by nine thirty and sound asleep by ten. He awoke at exactly half past four, as if a hand of his watch had reached out

and pinched him. He left the warm bed, lit a candle at the hearth, shaved and bathed in ice-cold water, dressed in his best, and spread the contents of Doctor Hammer's package on the table —all without sound or haste. He breakfasted at his leisure on sandwiches, two raw eggs, and a little rum and water.

He blew out the candle and raised the blind at one of the windows. He gave ten minutes to the raising of the sash, which was frost-bound in the frame. He went out feet first and face-down across the sill, and lowered himself. He was hanging fully extended when he felt the icy ridge of the kitchen roof. He traveled the length of that roof on hands and knees, dropped from that to the roof of the woodshed and from the shed onto a pile of cordwood.

MacIver found Doctor Hammer awaiting him at the rendezvous behind the town. The doctor carried a case of pistols and another of surgical instruments. They started up a wide road sloping between walls of black firs, and walked for fifteen minutes in silence.

"I didn't sleep," said the doctor. "Damn the nighttime! It's all very well when a man's up and in company, but bedtime—that's the hell of it at my age. That's when a man of my age gets to thinking and worrying."

"He'll get nothing worse than a broken finger or two," said MacIver. "And don't worry about me, Dave. He's too high-strung to be dangerous at this game. He tries to look cool, with his damn lackadaisical manners; but he did not deceive me, for I took his measure in his eyes."

"He's been tippling, Spark tells me. The more his hand shakes, the more difficult your mark will be."

"There'll be mark enough, never fear."

"You wouldn't kill the poor devil?"

MacIver reassured the doctor on that point.

Dawn was gray along the east when they reached the chosen ground, which was a stumpy clearing in a wood of firs and spruces. The doctor examined MacIver's hands and rubbed them with brandy. Mr. Spark and Captain Ruggleston arrived ten minutes later in a pung, Spark driving. The captain had spent the night with his second. They had come by little used and unpopulous ways; and the bells had been removed from harness and shafts before the start. Mr. Spark hitched the horse to a small fir and blanketed it. Captain Ruggleston stepped to a bare hummock and stamped his booted feet on the frosty moss. Then Spark and the doctor looked over the ground and paced off what was required for their principals' polite purposes. MacIver and Ruggleston ignored each other.

The seconds loaded the pistols, whispering together gravely. Then each led his principal into position. The principals stood twenty paces apart, each with a pistol in his right hand. The light was gray and clear and sufficient. The young men had been placed so that neither had an advantage of light or ground. They received their simple instructions from Doctor Hammer, first in English, then in Gaelic. They faced in opposite directions. The captain was breathing very fast and short, and a nerve in his left cheek was twitching. MacIver breathed deep and slow, without a twitch of nerve or muscle. The guardsman's face wore an expression that was at once desperate and contemptuous. The Highlander looked thoughtful.

"One," cried Doctor Hammer.

Captain Ruggleston shivered and moistened his lips. MacIver flickered an eyelid, as if to clear his vision. A crow winged across the clearing and pitched on a treetop.

"Two."

The young men raised their right hands, each to the level of the shoulder. The muzzles of the pistols pointed straight up at the cloudless, brightening dome of heaven. The muzzle of Ruggleston's pistol shook; and Ruggleston cursed it in his shaking heart.

"Three."

Each made a right turn, at the same time straightening his elbow and dropping his wrist. The two reports sounded like one. Captain Ruggleston twitched, but stiffened instantly. The horse tossed its head, and the crow flapped up and away, cawing derisively. The smoke drifted slowly. The seconds stared at Ruggleston, who continued to stand very straight, with his right hand still extended and still gripped on the empty pistol. They moved suddenly, simultaneously, and ran toward the guardsman. But the pistol dropped from his red fingers before they reached him. One finger dangled. Blood dripped, spattering on the crusty snow. MacIver relaxed and joined the others. He reached them just as Captain Ruggleston sagged to his knees, white as a sheet.

Back at the King's Head, Alasdair MacIver disposed of a second breakfast. He had returned alone from the clearing in the wood, Doctor Hammer having driven away with Spark and the wounded Englishman in his professional capacity. He had walked in at the front door with a casual air, as if he had been abroad for the good of his appetite, and had been vastly relieved at finding his room exactly as he had left it—the window still open and the fire unreplenished. He had closed the window and built up the fire and pulled the bell; and the taverner himself had answered the bell and taken his order and fetched his breakfast. MacIver's vanity was touched by the deferential warmth of Barley's attentions.

"The fellow evidently knows a gentleman when he sees one," the Highlander reflected.

What his reflections might have been had he been aware of the taverner's activities of yesterday afternoon and last night, and of the facts that the smirking fellow had visited his deserted room and drawn a true conclusion from it, and drawn a second true conclusion from his reappearance, and would soon be in possession of handfuls of gold and bank notes as a result of the MacIver defense of the MacIver honor, is a question not worth considering.

MacIver's heart urged him to set out immediately for Glenranald and Glenbhrec, but his pride told him that a hasty departure from Kingston would, under the circumstances, look very much like flight; and an appearance of flight would surely suggest shame or fear to some minds. Shame! He had done nothing to feel ashamed of. On the contrary, he had done something to be proud of. Ruggleston had been at his mercy; and MacIver had been merciful. He had shot away one finger of the man who had insulted him, and declared honor satisfied. Was there another man in the province, high or low, from Sir James Hard down, with either character or skill enough to match that performance? None with marksmanship enough, certainly. And he could think of no reason for fearing the result of that highly creditable performance. The guardsman was not likely to feel the injury for more than a week, except in his pride. Hammer had completed the amputation of the finger without a moment's loss of time, and had cleaned and dressed the wound efficiently and promptly.

As for the law? Well, what of the law? If word of the affair should get out—and he could not imagine how it could—who would venture to take it to the law? Not the governor, cer-

tainly; for the insult had been given in his own house, to one of his guests, by a gentleman of his staff. If any lawyer tried to tell him, Alasdair MacIver, that the only thing a gentleman could do about a slap in the face was to go into a corner and sulk, then he would make a monkey of that lawyer. He was not ashamed, and he was not afraid; and though his heart yearned for Glenranald, his pride told him not to hasten his departure from Kingston.

Doctor Hammer called on MacIver early in the afternoon.

"You're to come to Government House instanter, my boy," said the doctor. "His excellency's orders. He knows all about it."

MacIver's gray eyes hardened and brightened.

"Then why does he send for me, if he knows all about it—unless it's to apologize to me for suffering insult under his roof?" The Highlander's voice matched his look. "And if that's the case, he should come to me—put his little jack-in-office dignity in his pocket and come to this house instead of ordering me to his house."

Doctor Hammer laughed until his eyes watered.

"Man, Alasdair MacIver, but you're a joy to my Highland heart!" he exclaimed at last. "The devil himself can't match you for pride, nor the holy prophets for vanity. You're all ready to cock your bonnet at Sir James, and doubtless shoot away a viceregal finger, without waiting to ask how he came to know he knows or what he wants you for."

"What does he know? You said he knew all about it. And how the devil did he come to know it? I've got no more vanity than yourself, Dave Hammer, and no more than any self-respecting Highland gentleman's decent pride. What does he want of me? He may get what he doesn't want."

"Keep your kilt on. The governor was at Spark's house, waiting for us, when we got there. He'd smelt a rat. He was amazin'ly mild. Milk and water. The effect green eyes has on him, it seems. Ruggleston blurted out half the story without waiting for a question. That young cock was unnerved, devil a doubt of it. He said that your attentions to Miss Lytton were more than human flesh and blood could stand. He described what took place, truthfully enough.

"His excellency asked him, in a voice of honey, if he had heard him aright. Had he mentioned the name of a lady in connection with the affair? The young fellow didn't deny it. He had mentioned the name of a young lady upon whom all his thoughts and affections were centered, and he was only waiting for an opportunity to ask permission of that young lady's guardian to make an offer of his heart and hand. He said it right out. He was quite eloquent, what with the pain in his hand and the brandy he'd swallowed to steady his nerves.

"Sir James couldn't canceal his satisfaction. It's no secret that young Ruggleston's a great catch—heir to a very respectable title and a vast fortune—and a noted philanderer; and it's no secret that the green-eyed widow's second ambition—second only to her ambition to become Lady Hard—is to see her daughter the Honorable Mrs. Peter Ruggleston. Sir James is evidently in sympathy with both her ambitions. So the poor young man made his declaration then and there, with plenty of encouragement from the governor.

"And after that, and a round of punch, we drove to Government House, where I put Ruggleston to bed. And after that, in private and in strict confidence, I told Sir James the rest of the story. I explained your attentions to the Lytton chit—her resemblance to the MacDonald girl, the kind, gentle brown eyes and so on. 'Green eyes for me,'

says James; 'but every man to his taste.' He was delighted to hear that your affections are not seriously engaged in the Lytton quarter. And when I told him how you'd given me your word not to do the Englishman a serious injury, and the masterly manner in which you had shot away his trigger finger, he was all but floored with admiration and gratitude.

" There's a man after my own heart, and yet nothing more than a squatter in the eyes of the law,' says he. 'There's a friend I'm proud to name as such—a gentleman of parts and breeding, with mercy and discretion equal to his courage. And I'm proud to be beholden to him—which I am, devil a doubt of it, for didn't he force this gay young cock of a Ruggleston to declare himself before witnesses in the matter of the young lady who's so soon to be my ward and stepdaughter. And if it's land he needs, being now no more than a squatter on the Waakadoggan, land he'll have, by royal grant —or I'm not the governor! Drink hearty!'

"That's how he talked—Sir James Hard and no other—and the sun as yet nowhere near the yardarm! And he's still talking in the same vein. By sundown he'll be thinking it was himself taught you the use of the pistol."

"I want nothing from the governor nor any man for defending the honor of my race and name," said MacIver.

"And what true Highlander would?" returned the artful doctor. "I wouldn't myself—and I'm only half a Highlander, and lowly born. The crown is the source of all wordly and material reward for honest men like you and me, Alasdair, my lad. Did David Hammer ever refuse an increase of pay, or a mention in dispatches? No! And where'll you find a prouder man than Dave Hammer, military or civil? Nowhere! Not even if you looked into the mirror. Come along with me."

The governor received Doctor Hammer and Alasdair MacIver in his little book-lined study. A fire burned on the hearth. The rosewood table was still there; and still—as at MacIver's first and second experiences with that table —decanters and glasses stood on it. His excellency's manner was cordial but ponderous. His movements and speech were slow, considered. One could see at a glance that the great man was an arena in which the governor, the high and just and impersonal official, struggled for temporary mastery over the lover of green eyes and red wine and good-fellowship. One could see at a glance that the lover and good fellow had been in the ascendant for some time past.

"Mr. MacIver, I've had your case under consideration ever since our first meeting at the moose yard back there in the woods," he said. "Hammer, you translate, there's a dear man. Under my best consideration, I saw your value to this province of mine, to British North America, to the Empire. Get that, Dave. Help yourself. I was deeply impressed by the integrity and force—force, quite so—of your character; and by your erudition and natural capacity for leadership. I have had my eye on you ever since. Mr. MacIver, I've brought the subject—this matter—your services and value to the crown—to the attention of my honorable council, and it gives me great pleasure, in my private as in my official capacity, to inform you that—to make known to you—— Well, my dear fellow, what d'ye say to a crown grant of sixteen hundred acres of land?"

MacIver could not find a word to say to it for a minute because of the swelling of his heart with pride and gratitued.

Further adventures of MacIver willbe recounted in these pages soon.

By
W.B.M.
Ferguson

In Six Parts
Part III

The Reckoning

Author of "The Dollar God," "Lightnin' Calvert," Etc.

Peter (Lightnin') Calvert, the most colorful gun fighter of the old West, finally settled down in Sagebrush, after defending the town against the Bargendy gang. He felt at liberty, at last, to marry Julie Vickers, niece of Pop Vickers who ran the general store; they had cared for Peter when he was wounded. Peter went away on a trip to see about the Gracie estate—he was Major Gracie's natural son, but had many grievances against his rascally father. There was a second reason for his trip—he had not been well. On his return he was told by Doctor Day that he had tuberculosis. Peter then knew that he could not marry Julie, and that he would have to go away. But new clouds had been coming up from the horizon. Julie, on a visit to the ranch of her old schoolmate, Lucy Long, had encountered two members of the old Bargendy gang. Their proximity to Sagebrush augured no good. When Peter departed from the town—perhaps forever—he was shot down by these outlaws, who left him for dead. But he was not dead. Sorely wounded, and suffering from almost complete loss of memory, he went on his way, and fell in with a band of vicious Indians. Believing him to be possessed of the Great Spirit, they did not kill him. Slowly he recovered his strength, so that, when several palefaces were captured, he arranged their escape.

CHAPTER XIII.

COMPANIONS OF THE NIGHT.

THEIR course was due south—Peter could tell that by the stars, if nothing more—and they rode until the horses were winded. The speed of an armada is that of the slowest ship, but that of a body of horsemen the ability of their worst rider.

They were handicapped by the foppish man who, now that all immediate danger was over, protested against what he called their senseless haste. He had become very brave, perhaps to hide the fact that he was afraid of falling off and breaking his neck, and that he was too tired and sore to proceed farther. He became quite angry and sulky when no attention was paid to his wishes.

They crossed what the teamster said was the Canadian, but, though the name sounded familiar to Peter, it brought with it no geography. A stranger in a strange land. A total stranger even to himself.

Finally they stopped to breathe the horses, and the foppish man groaned audibly as he heaved himself to the ground. Nobody but a savage could be expected to ride without a saddle, and he had been given the worst pony of the lot. Of course he had—a damned creature with a backbone like the Rockies and the action of a stern-wheeler. Not a solicitous word for the girl—she must be his sister or wife, thought Peter with cynical amusement—and not a thought for any but himself. He rubbed his cramped legs while he swore in an undertone.

"Start a fire, Hoskins," he said to the teamster. "I'm starved outside and in. Your infernal beans, bacon and coffee should be better than nothing."

"Why, we ain't got nothin' to eat, Mr. Bland," said Hoskins tolerantly. "The 'Paches don't pervide sich vittles fur their hosses. As fur a fire, we dassent light a stick 'less we want to be sculped."

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Bland, appealing to the stars. "Do you mean to say you've let us come away without provisions of *any* kind? What, in the name of common sense, do you expect us to eat?"

"We was dumb lucky to git off with our hides," said the teamster mildly. "How was we to git any grub?"

"It could have been arranged," retorted Mr. Bland. "If there was time to get the horses, there was time to see them properly provisioned. All that was needed was a little enterprise and forethought. I haven't had a mouthful since breakfast, such as *that* was. But if there's no food, at least a fire I must and will have."

"Then," said Peter bluntly, "we'll leave you to enjoy it. When Seconimo catches up with you, I reckon you'll be plenty warm enough."

Mr. Bland drew himself up haughtily and glared at Peter through the starlight.

"Do you know whom you're addressing, sir?"

"Whom or what?"

"Your manners appear to be no better than your wit," retorted Mr. Bland. "Let me tell you that I don't intend to suffer further intolerable inconvenience because you may happen to be in a state of funk."

"Funk or not," said Peter, "there'll be no fire."

"Bah, sir!" said Mr. Bland. "There's no necessity for this panic. We've outwitted those savages, taught them a lesson, as I knew we should."

"And who are 'we,' sir?" asked the round-faced young man politely. "Certainly neither you nor myself, but this gentleman——"

"No, nor me, nuther," put in the teamster. "Nobody but this young feller an' the gal."

"Exactly," smiled the round-faced man. "And now," he added, turning to Peter, "allow me to introduce myself. My name is Harvey Kemp, very much at your service, and this is my wife. Unnecessary to say, we owe you our lives, though how you managed to escape is beyond me."

Mrs. Kemp added her praise and thanks in a few well-chosen words, and Peter was at a loss how to introduce himself. If he said he did not know his own name they would set him down for an idiot; and no doubt Mr. Bland, who had snorted faintly but eloquently when Kemp said "gentleman," would put the worst construction on such an admission. After all, what did it matter? And these were only chance acquaintances, companions of the night,

whom he would never see again. He wanted neither pity nor ridicule from them.

"Jones," he said, voicing the first name that came to him, as he took the girl's proffered hand. "Tad Jones of —of any old place. A rolling stone, yes. The 'Paches jumped me, like they did you. They're a Jicarilla bunch from the Cimmaron and a few Utes. No, I've been with them quite a spell. You see, I'm half Injun myself."

This produced another muffled snort from Mr. Bland, and Peter added defiantly:

"No 'Pache blood, though. There's a difference. My mother was a Comanche, daughter of a chief. She was a good woman."

"I think that's quite obvious," said Mrs. Kemp, looking darkly at the dim figure of Mr. Bland.

None understood what had happened on the rock, nor indeed had Hoskins and Kemp waited for the climax. Sensing its imminent approach, they had taken prompt advantage of the fact that all eyes were concentrated in the opposite direction, making their escape before the actual shot was fired. They apologized later to Peter, explaining that they were afraid Mr. Bland would ruin everything if they didn't hustle him off before his nerves went completely, and that they meant to come back and give what help they could. Peter assured them that no apology was necessary, for they had acted precisely as he had wished and expected.

He had no desire now to tell them what had actually happened, relieve their lively curiosity with the truth. This uncanny skill with firearms, which somehow he possessed, was a matter to hide as though it were a reproach. Why? He could not tell, no more than he knew why he should like buffalo steak and hate other parts of the animal that the Indians loved. No doubt his unfathomable past contained a logical reason for this repugnance toward weapons to which he must have devoted years and years of practice. Perhaps he had been taught a lesson which his soul, if not mind, remembered in a measure. For all he knew to the contrary, he might be a double-dyed murderer and fugitive from justice.

"It was all hocus-pocus, of course," he said. "Just bluff. They thought I could make big medicine and I worked on their fear and superstition."

He told shortly of the death of Eagle Feather, how he had taken advantage of that lucky accident.

"I just got 'em all fixed like that, staring at one end, so that you fellows could walk out the other."

"But we heard a shot," said Kemp.

"Oh, that was the Injun," lied Peter, with a laugh. "You see, that Winchester he used was mine. I reckoned Seconimo would lend it to him because it's the best rifle they have. And I had it all fixed with a blank in the chamber. So I was safe as a church. And then, when they were wondering at my charmed life and waiting for the Great Spirit to perform, I sneaked off. It was dead easy. I had them buffaloed. You see, I know Injuns. Get 'em guessing, and you have 'em in your pocket."

"That's right," agreed Hoskins.

But it was questionable if his audience quite believed Peter's explanation, which smacked rather much of fortuitous circumstance, though there was really no valid reason to doubt it. Nor could they conceive a better.

But Mr. Bland appeared to think that not only the explanation, but Peter himself, should be a suspect. Was a half-breed to be trusted? How did they know that he wasn't privy to their capture in the first place? Might he not now be leading them into a trap for his own profit?

Mr. Bland's manner, if not speech, suggested this. Of course, there was no logic in such suspicion, but he was far from being in a logical humor. Personal comfort evidently bulked large in Mr. Bland's life and he was being denied the warmth and food he craved.

"These Indians won't attack us during the night, will they?" asked the girl. "I've heard that they don't."

"No," said Peter. "It's the 'Pache's religion that if he's killed at night his spirit will live forever in the dark and be tortured by others that can see. He won't fight without a light except at the greatest pinch. But they'll take up our trail and follow it as far as they dare. We'd better be moving if we don't want to find ourselves surrounded when the dawn breaks. That's the first we'll know that they're after us. They trail like a ferret."

"Yuh betcha," agreed Hoskins. "But we'd oughter be clear by daybreak. Them varmints won't come near the settlements. Now, sir"—as Mr. Bland began to protest—"this is a sculpin' matter, an' Jones knows what he's talkin' about. He shore does. Ain't no use talkin' of troops when they don't know nothin' of this hell raisin'. We ain't no safer here than Goliath was when he stepped out on the field of Armageddon to be slew by Absalom. Ain't no safety till we hit the main trail."

Thus, the horses rested, they started again, much to Mr. Bland's disgust, after Peter had learned no more than the names of these chance companions of the night. Where was their ultimate destination? No matter; it was all the same to him, and one place was as good as another.

The exhilaration he had experienced was now gone and he felt invincibly weary both in mind and body. The hard, unaccustomed exercise, the strain of not only the past few hours, but days and weeks, was demanding its toll. And, though he said nothing, he had been wounded. Still, he had no thought of capitulation. These companions of the night, his father's people, still had need of him.

Another hour passed and brought with it the realization of Mr. Bland's secret fear; he was thrown heavily by his falling horse, an accident avoidable by any but the most inexpert and careless of riders. He caught a kick from the struggling animal which, he swore, had broken his leg; but Kemp—it turned out that he was a doctor—told him otherwise with no mincing of words. It was the pony's leg that had snapped, and Peter, fearing the sound of a shot, put it out of its misery with the bowie knife. An ugly job, but his hand was mercifully quick and sure.

Surely now, said Mr. Bland, they would stop this senseless flight and make themselves as comfortable as possible for the rest of the night? But no; he must get up behind each of the others in turn and continue the maddening business in even less comfort. He had the choice of that or being left behind, and his new-found courage and optimism did not go to the point of facing the night alone.

Their former pace had now been cut in half, Mr. Bland distributing his generous weight at intervals among the three men, but they pushed on until it became evident that the horses were done.

"Ain't no use gauntin' 'em to death," said Hoskins. And so they awaited the dawn, the teamster reasonably satisfied of their safety and Mr. Bland entirely sure of it.

But Peter was not, though he saw no use in saying so. He gave Mrs. Kemp his blanket and this, with the one she had, helped to make a comfortable enough bed in which she fell asleep in the middle of a protesting sentence.

Mr. Bland, provided with a warm

coat, also went promptly asleep, thus being saved the pain of seeing Peter collect materials for a fire which he had no intention of lighting at present. One might have thought him woefully ignorant of such matters, for much of the material was unseasoned.

Kemp, though he strove valiantly to keep on the alert, was the next to succumb to sleep, and thus Peter and the old mule skinner were left to face the dawn alone. From their manner and talk they might have been in chuck house or saloon with no thought of anything but taking their ease.

CHAPTER XIV.

DAWN.

"WHAR yuh from, Jones?" asked Hoskins, biting off a fresh chew and hospitably offering the plug to Peter. "Ain't yuh never be'n in Mexico before?"

"Nope. I'm a cowhand, but I reckon I've had a shot at most anythin'. I was just driftin' along, braidin' myself south and aimin' to get me a job in here, when the 'Paches 'bushed me."

"Never knowed they was out," said Hoskins, as though speaking of flowers. "Hadn't no time to fix the gal before they was onto us. Got my podner fust crack—him an' a coupla wagons an' them that druv 'em."

"Who yuh teamin' for?" Peter had dropped unconsciously into the vernacular.

"Most anybody, 'ceptin' the Big Store. I ain't a Murphy man." There was a note of defiance in his voice, and he looked at Peter sharply. "Who are yuh fur?"

"Me? I'm for myself, first, last and always. Who's Murphy?"

"Say, whar was yuh raised?" asked Hoskins in astonishment. "Ain't yuh never heard tell of the Lincoln County war?"

Yes, the name was familiar. So was the Civil War and the Mexican War. Peter tried to remember details he had never really possessed. The rumble of this vendetta was heard the country over, but it was so involved, the various accounts so conflicting, that none in Sagebrush or elsewhere knew the rights of the matter. Some of the actual participants had even forgotten the original cause of the trouble. As in all such feuds, personal animosity became the paramount factor, the friends of both parties became involved and the friends of these friends. Those who had no stake in the game, or who wished to remain neutral, were drawn into the vortex until the whole county became involved, and this meant an area about the size of Pennsylvania. It had its repercussion throughout the whole territory and beyond.

"I never could make head nor tail of it," said Peter. "Cattle trouble, wasn't it?"

"That's what started it," nodded Hoskins. "Reckon it's started most things. Seems funny to meet a feller that don't know nothin' of Major Murphy, but if yuh ain't never be'n inside—— Reckon I'd be just th' same if I was outside. I ain't never be'n out of this territory since I was knee high to the infant Samuel." This was one of the unique occasions when Mr. Hoskins' biblical reference happened to be correct. "I know no more of this hombre they call the Lightnin' Bug than yuh do of Murphy or McSween. Ever met him?"

"The Lightnin' Bug?" Peter shook his head. Another familiar name, that was all. " 'Pears to me that I've heard of him."

"Yuh don't say!" retorted Hoskins, with good-humored sarcasm. "I was thinkin' if he ever drifted in here an' run up against El Chivato, McSween would be lookin' for a new boss killer.

Not that Bonney don't take some beatin', yuh can bet."

"El Chivato? Oh, yuh mean Billy, the Kid?"

"Who'd yuh think I meant? Yuh shore is ignerent, Jones. But if yuh've punched longhorns, mebbe then yuh've heard tell of John Chisum?"

"Of Bosque Grand? I sure have. His brand's the Long Rail and Jingle Bob."

"Fancy knowin' that!" said Hoskins admiringly. "A man with markets in Kansas an' Colorado, an' four herds on the trail all to once. Don't think nothin' of drivin' five or six thousand head to Dodge or Tucson. But he ain't at Bosque Grand no more. It's a good while back since he drifted down the Pecos to South Spring Ranch. An' that starts the story of the Lincoln County war."

The old teamster chewed for some minutes reflectively in silence, the long, flaming beard, in which hardly a gray hair showed, spread over his hunched knees like a blanket. He seemed not only anxious to talk of the vendetta, but determined.

"Settin' here like this," he said, blinking up at the stars, "makes yuh feel more'n ever how plumb stoopid an' wicked it all is, an' what a hell man makes of God's good green earth. Fellers that used to be friends, like Morton an' Baker who knowed Billy Bonney at Mesila—— I tell yuh, Jones, I ain't wonderin' yuh can't make head nor tail of it. Chisum's a good man, one of these yere empire builders that the hist'ry book'll crack up some day. He shore is. Alex McSween's a good man, too. Yes, an' so was Tunstall, the English johnny. Good fellers on both sides, an' bad, too. If that hoss thief an' cattle rustler, Major Murphy, with his dirty politics—— But I got to tell yuh the story impartial.

"Down thar at the mouth of Bonito Canyon, nigh in the shadder of Capitan Mountain, as lonely as the whale was in Jonah's belly, shut off from everythin' by the mountains an' parched plains——"

Peter had no interest in the tale, but he listened because he must. What did people like Dolan and Riley, Brewer and Pat Garrett mean to him? Or places like the Carriozza plains and Seven Rivers? Hoskins' voice droned on, and Peter fell asleep.

"Yuh ain't listenin', Jones."

"I am so. I wasn't asleep. I was just thinkin'. But where are the Kemps and Bland bound for?"

"I'm comin' to that if yuh give me time," said Hoskins, with dignity. "Don't never try to rush a man what's tellin' a good story. An' I'm tellin' yuh one that, when it's all finished, will go down in the hist'ry books of these yere United States. Yuh're gettin' it from the fountain head, like Abraham got water from the rock. An' I'm givin' it to yuh impartial, which is more'n yuh'd get from anybody else.

"Well, as I was sayin', thar never would be no trouble anywhere if it warn't for the Irish. Of course, thar's Irish an' Irish. But I mean yuh take them three—Murphy, Dolan, an' Riley and——"

Peter dozed off again.

"An' that's the whole impartial story," concluded Hoskins at length. "If yuh're a fightin' man, Jones, yuh can sell yuhr gun in Lincoln, like I've told yuh. Ain't no need of lookin' farther for a job."

"I'm no fightin' man," said Peter. "If I've got anythin' to do with it, fightin' takes place where I ain't. But yuh haven't told me anythin' about Bland and the Kemps."

"Them?" said the teamster. "Why, I know nothin' about them. I was goin' to the ra'lhead for supplies, an' Bland, he comes along as passenger. The gal

an' her hubby fell in with us on the way. That's all I know."

"It took yuh a long time to say so," remarked Peter. He raised his head and sniffed a sudden waft of strangely cold pure air. "Dawn's comin', old-timer. Wonder where those red devils are. Better be makin' ready to shift."

The glory of the morning came from across the rolling plains, signaling its approach from the highest peaks of the western hills, the Sangre de Cristo Range. Its beauty changed everything, even the character of Mr. Bland. The terrors and discomforts of the night had gone, and in all the wonderful panorama now revealed there was not the faintest sign of lurking murderous foe.

Hoskins' tension, a tension that had been there even while he yarned about the Lincoln vendetta, relaxed, and so also did Peter's in a measure. They had been keyed up to meet the rush that might come with the dawn, while the others slept, and now Hoskins gave Peter the short Colt borrowed from Mrs. Kemp.

"Reckon this is yourn, Jones. For a feller what ain't a fightin' man, yuh seem to go purty well heeled."

"Thought I might as well grab all I could from the Injuns when I was at it," said Peter.

Mr. Bland, as though anxious to remove any unflattering impression he had created, now came out in the colors of a debonair adventurer and squire of dames. He was very attentive to Mrs. Kemp, full of witty remarks concerning their experience and, at a bound, seemed to have taken command of the little party. Of course it was precisely as he had foretold; they had shaken off the savages long ago—it was questionable if any had pursued—and there had been absolutely no necessity for such headlong and sustained flight. He was an old campaigner, had fought in the ranks under Grant, and war was war whether the enemy was red or white.

"That's right," he said with condescension to Peter on sighting the prepared fire. "Better late than never. There's plenty of wild turkey and other game about. We shall breakfast royally before proceeding."

In that pitiless morning light, which exposes all sham, Peter saw that this man was older than he had thought. There were bags under his eyes and more than a promise of a double chin. Questionable also if the color of his hair in places had not been artificially "restored." Still, if properly groomed, according to his evident habit, he should present a handsome and quite youthful-looking figure.

"But, my dear young man," continued Mr. Bland, with an amused smile, "much of this material you've been at pains to gather is perfectly useless. You should never try to make a fire with green wood. As an old campaigner——"

"Don't worry," said Peter. "We aren't going to have any breakfast. The horses are fit to travel now."

"But this is preposterous!" cried Mr. Bland. "We must and shall eat! I've had enough of this foolishness. There isn't a redskin within thirty of forty miles of us."

"No," said Peter; "about a mile." He nudged Hoskins and pointed. "There's a smoke startin'."

A few faint puffs stained the clear morning blue, then a column followed by two puffs. It was the Indian Morse code.

"Reckon I give yuh back that gun a mite too soon, Jones," said the teamster apologetically, as he bit off a chew. "Looks like we're surrounded, huh?"

Peter checked Mr. Bland and Kemp as they were about to rush for the horses.

"Hold on!" he said sharply. "If

we're being surrounded there's no use trying to run away unless you know the best place to run. I can read this smoke. Wait."

All Mr. Bland's debonair valor had vanished and he looked haggard and shaken. He muttered something about having known, and said, from the first that this half-breed was leading them into a trap. This was why he had waited on the excuse of resting the horses. They should pay no attention to him but try to escape while they could, keep the lead they held; even though small it was better than nothing. In fact, Mr. Bland seemed strongly inclined to dash off on one of the horses rather than share it with his companions later on, but Hoskins had seized the bridles of all four.

The teamster beckoned Kemp aside.

"If the wust comes to the wust, don't ferget yuhr wife. Thar's got to be no mistake this trip. She'd ruther take it from yuh, I reckon. An', bein' a sawbones, yuh'll know how to make it easy for her. We ain't got no ca'tridges to waste, nuther. But see that yuh make it *sure,* too."

Kemp was pale but composed. He brought a little case from an inside pocket and took out a bistoury which he concealed in his hand.

"But if I'd had time to make sure before, what then?" he asked.

"Makes no diff'rence," said Hoskins. "Miracles don't happen twice. She mustn't be too alive."

Peter was lighting the fire, piling on the unseasoned wood to make smoke. Then he took his blanket and, holding it over the fire, manipulated it deftly in such a manner that the smoke escaped in long and short puffs. He wrote his message in the sky, and presently it was answered from the west as well as north.

"All right, Hoskins," he said at length, as he kicked out the fire. "We can drift straight south. Reckon we've fooled 'em."

They had, or rather he had, for two hours later they entered a Mexican village without further adventure, thus bringing the first intimation that Seconimo had begun the great game of harrying the palefaces.

"It was nothing," explained Peter to the Kemps. "You see, the whole band was after us, as I thought it would be, because they had to shift anyway. That was the main body to the north, but they had sent out parties to work round us. They thought my smoke one of these, and each of these thought it the other.

"I sent out a general alarm, told them the Long Knives were out and that we'd spotted a troop of cavalry coming up fast from the south and that we'd have to run for it. That's all. You could have done it yourself, anybody could, if you knew their smoke language. It was nothing."

Here Peter, as though to prove the utter triviality of his performance, and that a convalescent may safely tackle anything, keeled over and fainted.

CHAPTER XV.

GATHERING SHADOWS.

MEANWHILE, Sagebrush was experiencing the biggest sensation it had known since the night of the terror, this sensation being Peter's continued absence.

Miss Vickers had not hurried home. Sam Long, as though to make up for arrears, had proved a most entertaining and lavish host, and Julie assured herself that she was having the time of her young life. But her thoughts were ever with Peter, and, as the days passed and he did not appear, her resentment flamed anew. It is all very well to teach a lesson, but what if the pupil does not care? Peter must have returned, yet

he did not take the trouble to ride over nor even send a message.

At length fear began to creep into her thoughts. Supposing he had not returned, that something had happened to him? But surely, in that case her uncle would have let her know. She concealed both her anger and fear from the Longs and it was with very mixed feelings that she finally returned home, Anderson and his two cronies seeing her safely within sight of Sagebrush.

"Ain't seen nothin' of them fellers Ullman an' White," he remarked as they parted. "Reckon they've took our warnin' an' hopped the country. All the same, Miss Julie, I wish yuh'd had let me leave word of them for Calvert."

As she rode up to the store in the fading light she thought there was something rather odd in the joyous greetings of those whom she passed. Perhaps it was fancy, yet she glimpsed Uncle Joe Sidebottom scuttling into the Come Inn as though anxious to be first with a choice morsel of news. She was aware that Mr. Sidebottom never exerted himself otherwise.

Her uncle came out on the gallery and peered at her benevolently. In that light, and without his glasses, he was not much better than blind.

"Welcome back!" he exclaimed. "I knowed it was you. Knowed old Rosie's hoofs. Supper's most ready, and a bang-up supper 'tis, too. I ain't forgot how to cook, and Joe and me have done fine. Guess you and Peter had a good time, eh?"

Julie's heart went stone cold. She was off the horse in a flash, sudden terror in her eyes, and had caught her astonished relative in a convulsive grip.

"What do you mean? I haven't seen Peter since he left here. Where is he? Speak up, can't you? Say something! Don't stand there like an idiot."

"Why, I thought he was with you!" mumbled Pop, and peered about as though expecting Peter to materialize suddenly. "Why ain't he here? Are you sure he ain't? He should be here. Didn't he go over to the Long's ranch for you? Of course he did! He told me he was goin'. And I says, 'Stay as long as you like, you and Julie. I be fitten.' That's what I says."

The girl's hand dropped to her side. She had become quite calm, as was her habit when face to face with the worst. And this was the worst. Why had she not let Anderson go back that day with the information that should have served as a warning? All the time while treasuring resentment and anger, nursing her petty pride——

"When did he leave for the Longs'?" she asked quietly.

"The day he come home." Pop's voice, hands and goatee were now trembling in unison. Age and infirmity had not improved his mental faculties nor the ability to stand a shock. He seemed dazed. "When did he come back? Let me see. Most a week ago, I reckon. Yes, more'n that. I was settin' here—— And you say you ain't seen him? Gosh, Julie, if he didn't go to Sam Long's, where on earth *did* he go? Why, he must have went."

She no longer heard him. Nightmare! It was like the night when she thought she had sent him to his death, and now again she was to blame. Then she had been given another chance, and this was how she had used it! Anger, resentment, misunderstanding, pique —— And he had tried to reach her the very day of his return! Over a week ago!

She pushed the old man gently into the house. Something must be done, and done at once—a posse organized, a search party with herself in the lead. And all the time a jeering voice in her soul kept repeating: "Too late! Too late by over a week. Why did you go away when you knew he was coming

home? Or why didn't you return when you should have?"

She was about to leave the house when Doctor Day, the man of all others whom she wished to see, arrived. Day no longer rode the old crow-bait pony but drove a spanking team and the latest thing in buckboards. He climbed out leisurely, lifted his hat to the girl waiting on the gallery.

"Hurry!" said Julie, and stopped his words of welcome. She grasped him by the coat, lifted a white, strained face. "Peter hasn't been at the Long ranch, as everybody thinks!"

"No?" said Day.

"Something has happened to him, Doodah! It's those men, Ullman and White. I'm sure of it! We met them that day. It's all my fault. I should have sent word, or come home sooner."

Day said nothing, and she shook him.

"Don't you understand? It's those men, his sworn enemies. He had no idea they were here. They've 'bushed him. I never thought they'd stay."

"But maybe he didn't go to the Longs."

"He did! He told my uncle he was going. And where else should he go? Why do you say that?"

The doctor produced a handsome wallet.

"He left a letter at my house, Julie, with instructions that it should be given to you on your return. I suppose he thought that Pop might forget it." Day was patently relieved at being able thus far to speak the truth.

"I thought," he continued, "that he hadn't gone to the Longs', though, of course, I didn't say anything. I mean, why should he leave the letter here if he intended going to see you? Anyway, the first thing for you to do is to read it."

Julie took the letter with a small, cold hand. A sudden chill had gone through her, quite as acute as, yet otherwise different from, that experienced at her uncle's greeting. It was with a visible effort that at length she brought herself to open the envelope.

Day shifted his weight from foot to foot, fingered his tie, his seal ring; looked up and down the street, hummed the perennial ditty of the Camptown ladies. Of course, one could hardly see to read, but Julie was taking an unconscionable time over that letter. It made him nervous. Finally he stole a glance at her.

The letter was crumpled tightly in her hand and she was staring out at the gathering darkness that seemed to be creeping up like an implacable foe. Symbolic, perhaps.

She turned, as though feeling his eyes upon her, and said quietly:

"You were right, Doodah, and I've been a fool. He has gone—gone somewhere on business."

"Oh," said Day, and fixed his tie anew. "I suppose it has something to do with Mrs. Gracie's estate, something he learned from the lawyer in Austin?"

"How do you know he went there instead of to Dodge?"

"Because he told me—not that I think he meant to. It—it sort of slipped out."

"Then you saw him?"

"Oh, yes," said Day, aware that the town knew of his visit. But the point was that it did not know of Peter's subsequent visit to Day's home. "I dropped in to see him, of course, when I heard he was back."

"How was he? Was his cough better?"

"Fine," said Day, like one who spoke the truth. "The trip did him a world of good. Cough all gone, dried up. Never saw him looking better, nor in better spirits either."

Julie, as though suddenly extremely tired, sat down in the chair that Pop

always occupied. Her hands were folded passively in her lap, the crumpled letter between them. She said nothing, nor did Day.

Sam Biggart came out of the Come Inn and approached with an elaborately casual air, discovered the girl in the shadows, touched his hat, leaned cross-legged against the gallery, and proceeded to pick his teeth.

"Howdy, Miss Julie. I'm shore glad to see yuh back. Hope yuh an' Calvert had a real slap-up time at the Longs'. I'd like a word with him, if he's convenient."

"He didn't return with me, Mr. Biggart, because he wasn't at the Longs'." Julie's tone was casual, her manner unruffled. She laughed a little. "I suppose it was natural for people to jump to that conclusion, but, as a matter of fact, he went elsewhere on business."

"Oh," said Biggart, and scratched the bristles on his long, burned neck. "How long mought he be figgerin' to be away this trip, Miss Julie?"

"Why, that's impossible to say, Mr. Biggart. I suppose just as long as his business makes it necessary."

"H'm," said Biggart, now scratching his chin. He kicked his toes in the dust, hitched at his gun belt, cleared his throat. Then: "If it ain't too pussonal a question, ma'am, what mought this yere business of hisn be?"

"Why, it might be anything," said Julie sweetly. "But business is always business, isn't it?"

Biggart joined in the laugh, remarked that it certainly was a fine evening, pretended to walk down the street but dodged back and entered the Come Inn.

Julie said nothing further concerning Peter, nor did Day reopen the subject. Old friend though he was, the one in whom she confided most, she could not bring herself to voice the thoughts to which this letter gave rise, the new fear that gripped her heart. Pride forbade her. But, when the doctor had gone, she questioned her uncle.

"I don't understand," she said, with a forced laugh, "why Peter should say he was going to the Longs' when he left this letter explaining that he was called away on urgent business. He can't have told you that."

Pressed further, Pop finally recollected that the statement had emanated entirely from himself.

"But I took it for granted he was goin' there, Julie, and he never said he weren't. That's the p'int. Why-for did he leave me to think he was goin' there? And why didn't he tell me about this business? Let me see that letter."

"No, it's for me. Peter didn't tell you because he couldn't. It's—it's private business."

"Ain't I one of the fambly?" asked Pop plaintively. "Don't I count no more? 'Tain't like as if I ever was a gossip, like Joe Sidebottom and the rest. Of course, if you and Peter don't think I'm fitten to be trusted no more with the store's affairs——"

"It has got nothing to do with the store, otherwise he would have told us," broke in Julie gently. "Why, I don't even know myself exactly what this business is! It's Peter's private affair, perhaps something he learned in Austin about Mrs. Gracie's estate. He'll tell us about it when he returns. But it's something he doesn't wish discussed by the whole town. Everybody is entitled to have his private affairs respected."

She comforted herself with this thought during the long lonely night. Yes, it must be about the estate, and perhaps his father. Major Gracie was dead and Peter had to prove his claim, maybe in the courts of another State. That was why, as she had ascertained first thing, he had taken with him practically all his little possessions. It meant he would be gone some time.

Yes, that was the explanation, and it was ridiculous for her to think of the letter in a woman's writing that he had received from Austin. More than ridiculous; it was dishonorable, unworthy. She owed far more to herself and Peter. Never again would she allow suspicion and jealousy to drag her into such degrading mental and spiritual depths.

No, he was not tired of her, and he had no thought of breaking the engagement. Neither was he in love with some one else. There was no other woman in the case, in his past or present. And he had not mistaken gratitude for love. He loved her, Julie, and her alone, even though he didn't say very much. Yes, she reflected, she certainly had had her lesson about misjudging him.

But why had he not said in the letter, knowing it was for her eyes alone, something of the nature of this business? Why had he omitted to say even where he was going? Was that not his elementary duty and her right? Why was that letter so cold, formal, meager?

Never mind; it wasn't his fault if his pen was no more eloquent than his tongue. She was done with thinking of duty and rights, Love does not speak in such language. He had his own good reason for acting thus, as she should learn all in good time. Perhaps she would get a letter to-morrow; if not then, the day after.

Meanwhile, there could be no question of his well-being and safety, which was all that mattered. Day had said that Peter was never better in health or spirits, and Doodah was a doctor who made no mistakes. As for those evil birds of prey, Ullman and White, they had passed on. She had had ocular proof of that to-day. They had gone before Peter left Sagebrush. Yes, everything was all right. What was required of her was simply a little patience and faith.

In the early morning hours she finally went asleep on this thought, after silently asking the Almighty to bring Peter back to her sound in body and heart.

"And please, Lord, bring him quickly," she finished.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DARKNESS DEEPENS.

MEANWHILE, at this moment those two happy-go-lucky birds of prey, Ullman and White, were slowly recuperating in no man's land from the indirect result of their spree on the night they thought Peter had been triumphantly finished.

Their efforts to reach Sagebrush and more whisky had ended with both very nearly breaking their necks. Their proud boast that they were "never too full to stick on a bronc," lost some of its point when the fact was taken into consideration that in such prime condition they had little idea where the animal might be going.

On this occasion, however, both were prolific in ideas as to which of the heavenly bodies was the North Star and where the route to Sagebrush lay; and, having finally compromised on the matter, they circled round and round in the rim-rock country until Ullman, insisting on his mount stepping on what he thought was nothing but a shadow, was precipitated headfirst into a gully. White, always following the other's lead, shared the fall.

"Reckon I bust my gizzard," opined Ullman, as he strove unsuccessfully to arise.

"Nope, only yuhr suspenders," said White, the optimist. "Time we was restin' anyway. Bet we've rode a thousand miles. Some danged fool must have went an' moved Sagebrush since

the last time we was there. Anyway, we'll find her in the mornin'. She's got to be somewheres around."

"'Tain't the town they've went an' moved," said Ullman aggrievedly. "It's the North Star. Can't expect to find nothin' if they keep shiftin' her around. Look at her now!"

"That ain't her, Flash. I told yuh it weren't. That's Venice."

"Venice, hell! Ain't no such word. Yuh mean venison. Yuh're skin tight, Beef. I *knowed* yuh'd got most of the bottle, yuh ole hawss thief yuh."

"I drunk fair, Flash. It was *yuh* got most. I just holt mine better."

And so they wrangled until profound alcoholic slumber suddenly overtook them.

In the morning they discovered that Ullman's alleged broken suspenders was in reality a broken leg, which he had not improved by lying out in the open all night unattended. Drunken stupor had prevented him feeling the pain.

This couple, despite their many failings, possessed at least one golden virtue; they were loyal to each other, if to nobody else, though that did not prevent them from wrangling continually and even coming to blows on occasion. They had deserted their erstwhile chief, Bargendy, in his hour of trial, but, whatever the crisis, it never crossed their minds to desert each other.

"Reckon we was tol'able full last night," White remarked, as he finished setting the broken limb, Ullman freely cursing the rude operation. "We can't be nowhere near Sagebrush. I'll go have a look-see."

He climbed out of the arroyo, not without difficulty for he was stiff from exposure and lame from his fall. The horses were grazing near by, cropping the short buffalo grass, their bridles trailing. Although of comparatively recent acquisition, they had become accustomed in the eccentricities of their masters.

"Know where we are?" said White, on returning to his companion. "We ain't five miles from Bargendy's old dump. That's the place for us, Flash. One of the broncs is a bit lame, but that's all."

"Wish they'd broke their fool necks. It was all their fault. But what's the use of goin' to the dump when it ain't there? Yuh know Calvert blowed it to hell an' back."

White pointed out that the ruin, however, complete, was bound to furnish sanctuary of a sort. Moreover, that scarce commodity, water, was to be found there. They must den up somewhere until Ullman was better, and their old headquarters, owing to its location and even history, was the logical place.

"I be'n thinkin' of it afore this," said White. "We don't want to be caught out in the open with yuh crippled like this. Nobody'd ever suspicion we was at the ole dump. Don't forget we heard tell that some of them danged rangers was movin' up here."

Ullman gave his frank opinion of the buckskin men. He wasn't afraid of the whole force. He could still shoot, even if his leg was broken. Moreover, the rangers had no call to interfere with them. At the same time he conceded White's point. If Calvert's precise fate was never known, his continued absence must provoke inquiry. Just as well not to court awkward questions at present. And, apart from that, these horses and supplies they possessed were stolen. Yes, they must den up somewhere.

"It's danged hard luck," he complained, as White hoisted him into the saddle. "Here we got Calvert all properly polished off an' we can't take no advantage of it. We could stand Sagebrush on its ear."

"Mebbe it's all for the best, Flash,"

said the optimist. "If we'd rode in there last night we shouldn't have be'n really fitten to do ourselves justice. Even that bladder Biggart might have took a crack at us. An' they'd have be'n shore to connect us with Calvert's disappearance when he don't turn up. The ways of Providence is best, Flash. The gals an' whisky can wait."

"Yuh quit thinkin' of women," growled Ullman. "I don't holt with 'em. The Bible says Eve was only a side issue, an' that's all she ever oughter be."

The quality of sanctuary they found at the ruined settlement, cunningly hidden away in the valley draw, exceeded even White's most sanguine expectations. Few but those of Bargendy's old gang knew its precise location, and those whom Peter had driven out, the survivors of his single-handed battle, were so terrorized that they had not dared to return. They, with their women, had been driven over the line into New Mexico. Moreover, since that memorable day the locality had achieved a sinister name of another kind. It was said to be haunted by Gooseneck Gurk and Big Frank, two of the fallen leaders left in charge during Bargendy's absence.

All this accounted for the fact that Ullman and White found the ruins deserted, and a number of articles well worth the claiming. Peter had done his work thoroughly, but he had had no time to account for every small item; nor had he ever thought it worth while, in revisiting the scene, to do more than satisfy himself that it no longer harbored any of the gang.

Thus in the ruins of the *tendejon* the two prowlers, to their delight, unearthed several bottles of mescal, cheap whisky, and cheaper wines. So also with the big loopholed dobe house that had commanded the draw, part of which had been used as a store. Here they found enough unspoiled supplies to aid substantially their own.

"Flour an' salt an' sugar an' bacon!" exclaimed White jubilantly. "An' looky here, a whole pound of plug! Yes, an' cawfee, too. Say, Providence was shore leadin' us by the hand like little innercent children. We can live like kings."

Nor was this all. Though black powder had sent the main building sky high, part of a wing had escaped so that with a little labor it could be made habitable and even, if need be, capable of formidable defense. Plenty of game was to be had for the shooting, so that White's remark was well founded.

Yet the desolation of the scene, marked by ruin, decay, and death, would have stirred the least imaginative. The windmill lay like a gaunt specter, the sheep corral empty and wrecked; what had once been jacals was now a heap of sod and wood debris. Human bones lay scattered here and there, picked clean by winged and four-footed scavengers.

As the sun declined, the place became more desolate still. Scrub oak lined the edges of the draw and, against the darkening sky, they looked like skeletons. Silence and solitude reigned supreme. These two men were the only humans in all the vast and dreary picture.

"Ain't what yuh'd call right cheerful," remarked Ullman. "If I was Gurk an' Frank, I'd ha'nt a livelier-lookin' place. Yuh-all don't believe in ghosts, Beef?"

"Yuh bet I don't. Never did an' never will. Any things I even seen in that line come outen a bottle of whisky."

"That's right," agreed Ullman. "I never believed in 'em neither. There ain't no such thing as ghosts."

Yet more than once both men, as the shadows deepened, glanced over their

shoulders apprehensively. It was an admirable sanctuary; yet, though neither believed in supernatural phenomena, each considered privately that perhaps it would have been just as well if the bones of their slain comrades reposed elsewhere and the place lacked the reputation it had.

They had no means of knowing how groundless was their belief that Peter's continued absence must provoke investigation and search.

Julie Vickers was the last one to force an inquiry where evidently it was not wanted. She grew paler as the days lengthened into weeks with still no word from Peter, but she held her head high and pretended even to Doctor Day that all was well. Nor could the now thoroughly uneasy Biggart receive any satisfaction.

"But Miss Julie," he protested finally, "if yuh know whar he's went, an' when he'll probably be back, why don't yuh give it out official? Yuh owe it to the town, ma'am. I tell yuh that the riffraff is startin' to r'ar up their heads ag'in——"

"You are the marshal, Mr. Biggart, not Peter. Do your duty."

"I'm doin' it," said Biggart, with dignity. "All the same, I took office on the understandin' that Calvert was backin' me. I can take care of the home talent, ma'am, but I can't undertake to engage in no furrin relations."

Julie smiled faintly. It was the old cry. This man's new-found valor had been derived solely from Peter. It was not capable of standing alone.

"There won't be any foreign relations, Mr. Biggart, seeing that Bargendy and his gang no longer exist."

"But thar's no tellin' what sort of disciples'll drift in if they think Calvert's gone for good."

"Who says he has gone for good? Besides, the rangers are here now."

"Fifty miles away!" snorted Biggart. "An' only a handful. Ain't yuh never thought that somethin' might have happened Calvert? If yuh ain't got no word all this time——"

"That's my business," said the girl icily. "And—and if he should never happen to return, that's his business. There's no law compelling him to stay in a place like Sagebrush for the rest of his life."

Pop, his goatee vibrating, came to her a few nights later.

"They're sayin', Julie, that you and Peter had a fallin' out, before he left, an' that you sent him packin'. They say he only come back for his duds, knowin' you was at the Longs'."

"They say a great many things in this town that aren't true. That's one of them."

"Well, it's queer he don't write, Julie. That ain't like Peter. And you ain't wrote neither. Maybe you don't know rightly where he is?"

"Maybe I don't," said Julie, with forced calm. "But I've said all I intend saying on the subject."

But it was to Doctor Day, perhaps the only one who had not tried to probe the terrible wound, that she finally broke down and confessed her anguish, though not in so many words. Day's silent and discreet sympathy had its reward. She opened the subject one night as they sat alone on the gallery, came to it straight and squarely in characteristic fashion.

"You've heard, of course, what the town's saying—that Peter has jilted me?"

Day cleared his throat, made some inarticulate rejoinder.

"Oh, don't try to dodge, Doodah. What's the use? Of course I suspected long ago that you knew something was wrong. Yes, I know you didn't want to say anything, and I didn't either. I couldn't. But now I must talk, and I

can say to you what I couldn't say to any one else. I think you're the only one who can understand, and who can do Peter justice."

Day could not see her face, but in the darkness he discerned dimly the white hands tightly clenched in her lap. Her voice, however, was quite self-possessed.

"I mean you aren't really a Sagebrusher, any more than is Peter," she continued. "You've traveled, lived abroad. You're a man of the world, capable of looking at these things broadly."

"If you mean I'd condemn a man in the popular fashion for breaking a marriage engagement—why, no. I told Peter it was far better to admit the mistake before marriage than after."

She drew in her breath sharply.

"Oh, so he discussed it with you? You knew about it all the time?"

"No, I didn't, Julie. And I don't know yet. Why should you think he doesn't mean to come back?"

"There are many reasons," she replied slowly. "That letter, Doodah—it didn't say where or why he had gone, but it left no doubt that he didn't want me to try and find him. Oh, no doubt at all! He didn't say in so many words that he had realized his mistake, but it was all there between the lines. Yes, all there."

"What exactly did he say?"

"That he might be back in a month. That I wasn't to worry or think anything had happened to him. That he wanted a rest, change, and that there was some private business he wished to see to. He hoped I would have a good time at the Longs'. That was all. And you say he was in the best of spirits?"

Day nodded, fumbled in his pocket and brought out a long envelope.

"I knew a bit more than I said, Julie, but it had nothing to do with your engagement. Peter never told me he meant to break it. But he left *two* sealed envelopes at my home; the one I gave you and this one. And with this one there was a note asking me, in the name of our friendship, to say nothing about it and not to give it to you until a month had passed. Well, the month is up to-night, so here it is. Don't condemn him until you've read it."

She arose and stretched out a firm hand for the letter.

"I shan't condemn him in any case, Doodah. I condemn myself. I should have seen long ago that he never cared for me in that way. It was only gratitude and friendship, the fear of hurting me. What is there here for a man like Peter? What am I?"

"The finest girl in the world!" blurted Day.

"Thank you, Doodah. It's nice to hear some one tell such ridiculous fibs. Let us go inside. My uncle and you are entitled to know whatever news is here."

It was a legal-looking document, and Julie's pallor increased as she read it through. But when at length she spoke it was without a tremor.

"This is Peter's good-by. He drew it up at the lawyer's in Austin. It makes his share in the business over to you and me, uncle."

"W-what!" stammered Pop, curving a withered hand about his ear. "Say that ag'in. Why—why, Peter ain't dead, is he!"

"No, this isn't a will—merely a deed of transfer. It means simply that he won't be back. It's his way of saying good-by to us and Sagebrush."

"Is there no letter?" asked Day.

She shook her head and showed the empty envelope. The last hope had gone now, the final blow fallen, and she was steeling herself to meet it.

"Mean to say that all the talk is true and that he's jilted you?" cried Pop.

"Put it that way if you like," said Julie calmly.

Her uncle crashed a trembling fist on the table, almost upsetting the lamp. He jumped up and down like an enraged child.

"Throwed you over, hey? I never would have believed it of him. I loved him like a son, I did, but now I'll blow the head offn him! I'll show him I'm fitten for that! I'll show him you got somebody to protect you. He'll toe the line with you, my gal, and make good his promise, or I'll fill him full of buckshot!" And, as though Peter were in the immediate vicinity, the old man made a stumbling rush for the corner where stood his ten-gauge weapon.

Julie took it from him and forced him into a chair where he continued to fulminate. Had his personal liking for Peter been less, his anger would have been less.

"He's a scoundrel!" he cried. "All the old talk about him was true. A viper that was took into our j'int bosom, and now turns and bites the hand that warmed it! A ingrate——"

"Be quiet," commanded Julie. "I won't allow you to talk like that. This is *my* affair. I won't allow you, or any one, to say a word against him. Only for Peter Calvert, you and I would be dead, the store bankrupt, the town in ruins. You forget all he has done, all we can never repay. I dare say others have, too."

"No, not I," said Day.

"It concerns nobody but me, and it's nobody's fault but mine," she continued. "If I hadn't told Doodah I loved Peter, he wouldn't have told him. I virtually forced Peter into this position. He never made love to me. He meant to sacrifice himself, as he sacrificed himself for Mrs. Gracie—that is the keynote of his character—but he found at the last he couldn't go through with it, that it was fairer to me not to. And, rather than tell me, he let me discover the truth this way. That's the whole story. I—I suspected it long ago, but I was too selfish and cowardly to speak out as I should."

Pop mumbled in his goatee something about a man of honor keeping his marriage promise at any cost, and she took him up instantly.

"Yes, and I suppose everybody who has kept that kind of promise, because it suited them, and broken every other that didn't, will dare to condemn him and plume themselves on being so much superior. It isn't presence of honor, but absence of courage, that makes most of the marriages that should never have been made. The only excuse for marriage is love, and love isn't a thing made to order, a thing you can command."

"No," said Day, "it commands one. You're looking at this the right way, Julie."

"There's no other way to look at it," she replied, and turned again to her uncle. "Do you think I should want Peter forced into marrying me? Do you think that you, or any one, could force him? Why, all I want is his happiness! That is what love means. I don't want any one to pity me. I don't need it. I'm happy in knowing that Peter is happy. There was somebody else in his life before I came into it."

"Another woman!" exclaimed Day, while Pop looked his surprise. "How do you know?"

"I know," replied Julie. "Never mind how. Peter has done perfectly right; done what I should have done. I'll not allow the town to condemn him, men who aren't fit to stand in his shadow. He will always be to me what he is—a man among a million."

Thus Julie met the mortal blow to her heart without quailing, with such fine courage that Day was justified in believing himself right—that her love

for Peter Calvert was no more than romantic girlish fancy. She had been caught by the glamour of his name and deeds which, ere this, had begun to wear thin. Time would soon heal the wound.

CHAPTER XVII.

DENNED UP

ULLMAN'S recovery was slow, but toward the end of the sixth week he was able to hobble with the aid of an improvised crutch.

By this time the nerves of the partners were on edge. The store of alcoholic cheer had been consumed long since and there was nothing to take its place. Birds of passage as well as of prey, continually on the move, they chafed at the forced and unwonted inaction. They spent the time playing monte with a greasy pack of cards, and in calling each other names. Ullman said his leg had been set wrong, and unquestionably he was doomed to a limp for the rest of his life. But then the optimistic amateur surgeon pointed out that he was lucky to have a leg at all.

"Tell yuh what I'll do, Flash," proposed White one day. "I'll mosey over to Sagebrush, see how the land lays, and get me a coupla bottles of good ole forty rod. Bacon's runnin' out, too."

"Let her run!" snapped Ullman. "But *yuh* ain't goin' to do no runnin'. When yuh go to Cottontail, yuh go with me. Yuh-all think I'm goin' to spend the night here alone? No, yuh can't be back by dark; it's nigh on a hundred miles, there an' back, an' yuh knows it."

"But there ain't no such thing as ghosts, Flash. Yuh said yuhrself there wasn't, an' we agreed on it long ago."

"I don't care what we agreed. I ain't doin' to stay in this danged coffin alone, an' it wouldn't be one night, neither. Yuh'd get skin tight an' raise hell. I know yuh. Yuh-all ain't fitten to handle the town alone without me, anyway. Don't yuh dast leave me alone in this coffin, Beef. Yuh promise now, cross yuhr heart solemn, or I'll plug yuh!"

"Aw, I wasn't thinkin' of quittin' yuh," said White. "I was only aimin' to hear a diff'rent voice from yourn. An' I'd shore admire to look at a diff'rent face, too."

"Yes, I know what yuh was aimin' for, all right. Let me tell yuh, yuh ain't much on faces yuhrself. I've seen better in the zoo. My eyes have stood a lot more'n yourn."

"Shut up," said White, with weary good nature. He lifted his buffalo rifle. "Reckon I'll go see what I can get for the pot."

"Well, see yuh get somethin', an' don't be all day about it," growled Ullman, as he fell to his eternal game of solitaire. "Yuhr company ain't much, the Lord knows, but it's better than these danged skulls an' bones. Yuh ain't never had to stay here alone like me."

White, after making a suitable reply, disappeared toward the mesa. It was his one relaxation of the day. His fund of easy-going good nature and real affection for Ullman was at low ebb. Monotony had steadily sapped it, the loneliness, desolation. Not even a distant glimpse of another human being had they caught since coming here.

But, if the days were bad, the nights were worse. Their sleep was broken by phantom fears and strange sounds. Once Ullman awoke with the cry that Gurk was standing over him, swinging his flat head by its long neck. And once White could have sworn he saw in the moonlight Big Frank trying to piece himself together from the scattered bones. If they did not believe in ghosts, it could not be much longer before they would.

And night and day there was the tormenting thought that Sagebrush, with

all it offered, was less than a five-hour ride away. There could be no doubt that, with Calvert gone, it was once again a town of rabbits, worthy of the old name Cottontail. In such terror had its citizens held Ullman and White that the latter felt certain he alone could impose his dominion on it. Ullman, of course, had a reason for declaring his own presence essential.

Supposing, thought White, he were to sneak off or go boldly, despite his partner's protests? He toyed with the idea, as he had toyed with it for some time. He had many plausible arguments to support it. They needed bacon, whisky—oh, lots of things. It couldn't be called desertion. He would come back just as soon as possible. And such a break in their intercourse might save them from a fatal quarrel. They were living on each other, and he owed it to their old friendship to lessen the tension. It was becoming insupportable, and there was bound to be a flare up before Ullman would be fit to take the saddle.

It is impossible to say what decision White might have reached had not something happened to break the tension and monotony, something that had not occurred since they took up residence in the "coffin."

White came scrambling suddenly through the shin oak and down the side of the draw to where Ullman sat brooding over the cards.

"Coupla riders 'bout a mile off, headin' this way!" he exclaimed, pointing to the northwest. "Mebbe lookin' for Calvert or that rustled stock."

"They'll pass," growled his partner. "Ain't comin' here at all. Why-for should they?"

"We can't be sure they won't, Flash. Mebbe a coupla of them danged rangers, for all we know. They always hunt in couples, they say. Best not to wave 'em round, 'less we've got to. There's only two of 'em," he repeated significantly. "One apiece. If they mean trouble, I'll get 'em down here with their backs to the dobe."

The reception committee was quickly organized from long practice, Ullman hobbling to the section of ruined wing they had made their living quarters. Its loopholes commanded the draw, and here he took his stand with the buffalo rifle and twin six-shooters, while White, after removing any signs that might betray his partner's presence in the neighborhood, climbed up to his lookout among the scrub oaks. He had no desire to remain in the draw and court a possible shot from above.

The riders were now about a quarter of a mile distant and heading straight for the draw as though it was their objective. In that clear air one could see far, and White saw that these were no rangers. At least, they were not dressed in the buckskin which he had heard they wore. Nor were they cowhands; their attire was nondescript, and they rode badly. One of them was shorter and more thickset than the other; and, though unable to distinguish his features, White fancied there was something vaguely familiar about him.

As the couple approached, White stepped into the open and waved a friendly hand. He had recognized the thickset man.

"Howdy, Tim. Where have yuh be'n herdin' all this time?"

"Beef White! Cursed if it ain't!"

The thickset man, who had a blue jowl and cruel mouth, heaved himself from the saddle and thumped White jovially on the back. He was Tim Scoby, erstwhile owner of the Lone Star. A coyote who did his thieving in the shadows, while the wolves stole in the sun, he had never dared to be so familiar with Bargendy's men while they were in power.

"Meet my friend, Mr. Strong," he

said, waving a pulpy hand at his companion. "He's O. K. This is Beef White, Strong, that I was tellin' you of. Yeah, used to be one of Bargendy's right bowers."

Strong nodded and shook hands. He was perhaps the same age as Scoby but a different type, so far as appearance went. A man obviously accustomed to more polite society than this. White put him down as a gentleman gambler, one of the many Easterners come out to try his fortune in the West. Mr. Strong looked as if he might have made and lost several fortunes in his day.

"Where yuh headin'?" asked White of Scoby. "Last I heard of yuh, yuh was pointin' due west on a rail. Run yuh out of Sagebrush, huh?"

Scoby's face darkened.

"Well, you and Ullman didn't wait to be rode out. Thought it best not to wait and meet Calvert? Seein' what Bargendy got, I guess you was wise."

It was White's turn to scowl.

"What are you doin' here at the old dump?" pursued Scoby.

"Livin'," replied White shortly. "So's Ullman. Or mebbe it ain't livin'. Be'n here nigh six weeks. Flash bust his laig, an' it ain't be'n mendin' none too well. Thought it a good place to den up in. Mebbe yuh was hit by the same idea, huh?"

"Somethin' like that," nodded Scoby, "though there ain't nobody after us. I was comin' this way, and Mr. Strong wanted to see this place. It seems he used to have a friend called Gurk, an' he thinks it's the same man that Calvert killed. I was tellin' him about it."

"I'm sure of it, from the description," said Strong. "I knew Gurk back East before he came out here. I should like to settle accounts for him with this fellow they call the Lightnin' Bug."

"Huh," said White. "Yuh're real modest. Reckon more'n yuh have wanted that."

"I don't care what his reputation is," said Strong. "There are more ways than one of putting 'paid' to a bill. I understand his name's Calvert and that he lives in Sagebrush?"

"I've got an account of my own to settle with him, as I was tellin' Strong," said Scoby. "I guess you have, too, White; you and Ullman. Well, mebbe we can think up a way of doin' the job good and proper. Four heads is better than one."

"C'me on down," said White, and led the way to the draw. "Four's company anyway, specially if yuh've brung any liquor. The only spirits round here is the kind yuh don't get no heat out of."

Ullman appeared at White's hail, greeted Scoby with a tolerant contempt he made no effort to conceal, and acknowledged the introduction to Strong with a brief nod. He viewed the latter's handsome person and clothes with open suspicion.

"If yuh're lookin' for Gurk," he said, with mordant humor, "here he is." And from among the débris of the *tendejon* he lifted a skull. There was a splintered hole between the eye sockets, and something rattled as Ullman shook it.

"Lead," he explained laconically. "That's Calvert's trade mark—plumb center every time. Take Gurk with yuh, stranger. We won't miss him a-tall. Plenty more like him layin' round. I be'n dreamin' too much of him, anyway."

"I don't want it," snapped Strong, pushing the skull away with a look of horror. "My object is to settle with the murderer."

"Who says it was murder?" demanded Ullman, bristling. "Calvert was no friend of mine, but fair is fair. The West never seen a greater gun artist—barrin' me. Do yuh call sixteen to one murder? That's what it was,

sixteen an' more. A greater gun fighter never lived—barrin' me."

"Why didn't you stay that night and prove you was best man?" asked Scoby slyly.

"That's my business," retorted Ullman, impaling the other on his reptilian eyes. "Don't yuh try to get high-heeled with me, Scoby. If Bargendy's dead, *I* ain't. Whitey an' me had a danged good reason for leavin' that night, but it weren't fear of Calvert. We pay our bills when we're good an' ready."

Scoby cringed, afraid to show his disbelief, and Ullman swelled visibly.

"I ain't a-goin' to have a man like Calvert, even if he was my enemy, tradooced by no shorthorns," he declared, his scowl embracing both visitors. "If yuh-all got contrary views, now's the time to surge up an' declar' 'em."

"Now, now," said Scoby pacifically, while his companion looked uneasy. "Ain't no call for that kind of talk, Ullman. We're meanin' the best, an' Calvert always meant you the worst. You know that."

"I ain't sayin' he didn't. But I'm sayin' he weren't no skulkin' murderer. It took a *man* to stand up agin' him."

"It shore did," agreed White. "A man, or men, better'n Bargendy hisself. Gurk was killed in fair fight. Nothin' fairer."

"That may be," said Strong, "but what about the killing of young Gracie?" His face grew dark with sudden passion. "That was a dastardly deed!"

Scoby spoke quickly. He knew that Freddie Gracie, who had acted solely as spy for the gang, had never been held in high esteem by any of its members. His passing had evoked no tears.

"I guess," he said, "I'd best tell you boys now that this gent is Freddie Gracie's pa—Major Gracie of Noo York."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PARTNERSHIP IS FORMED.

MAJOR GRACIE, to give the visitor his right name, had never known West Point except by hearsay. He had volunteered, to escape the draft, during the Civil War, and family influence got him a soft billet far from the firing line. But he was given to speaking of his sanguinary and thrilling war experiences, and now he drew himself up with a martial air.

"Yes, Major Gracie, late of Sherman's command," he said. "I came out here to discover what had happened to my boy, and for—h'm!—certain reasons I considered it advisable to pursue my inquiries incognito."

Ullman and White were staring at each other. Not only had they heard something of Peter Calvert's history, but that of Major Gracie. They knew at least that the latter considered it expedient to leave New York and had not been heard of, even by his wife, up to the time of her death.

"In-cog-ni-to," mused White aloud. "Yes, I've seen that funny word in print somewheres. It means when Queen Victorious of England, or any of them folks in the king business, go gallivantin' round and don't want to be recognized—even by th' police."

"What yuh might call a alias," nodded Ullman. "Well, it sure comes in handy at times."

Major Gracie frowned and drew himself straighter.

"It's evident you've heard something of the unfortunate political trouble I had at home, but you've drawn the wrong conclusions. I'm not a fugitive from justice, and I was the innocent victim of a vile conspiracy. At the same time, I've still powerful political enemies who, if they knew my whereabouts, would try to trump up further charges against me. Moreover, when I

learned of the fate of my son I didn't wish his murderer to know that the avenger was close on his track."

"But, say!" burst out White, "Calvert's yuhr son, too, ain't he?"

"He is not!" lied Major Gracie, with an oath. "He tried to blackmail me with that absurd falsehood long ago, and I suppose he has spread it round here. Because I happened to be acquainted with that unfortunate woman, his mother, and because I was wealthy in those days, he picked me for a likely victim. He hatched the scheme with that mountebank, Colonel Moon, he used to travel with."

Certainly, apart from their coloring, none would have taken this man for Peter's father, nor were White and Ullman greatly concerned whether he was or not. He seemed astonishingly young to be Peter's parent, but then the latter looked and acted far older than his years. Moreover, though Major Gracie had in truth hardly reached the prime of life, his suggestion of youth was greatly bogus when one examined him closely at leisure. Dissipation and self-indulgence, bad temper and intolerance, all the bandit passions that were his master, had left their ineradicable marks.

"Calvert's not my son!" he repeated. "But he took my son's name after murdering him. Mr. Scoby has told me of that, and also how my dear wife—who had come out here for her health—was imposed on by this rascal whose only object was her money. I've been told how she was accidentally killed, but I hold Calvert responsible. Your old chief, Bargendy, wouldn't have acted as he did if Calvert hadn't acted as he did—and acted first. I've come to avenge both my wife and son."

Decidedly this was a novel way of looking at, not only the late Bargendy's actions, but the major's own. He had never bothered heretofore about his son whom he had packed off and left to shift for himself. His own bad character had been primarily responsible for the luckless Freddie ending as he did.

Nor had Major Gracie ever treasured any personal regard for Gurk, a thug who was simply a paid tool, a small but necessary cog in the corrupt political machine. But when he learned of the fate of these two it added fresh fuel to his old hatred of Peter; a hatred that had its genesis in the knowledge of the irreparable wrong done him and his mother. Peter had capped all the trouble he had caused by daring, not only to kill Gurk, as he had killed another henchman in New York, but Major Gracie's son and heir.

Both Ullman and White knew the real reason why the major's wife had "come out for her health," as they knew how Freddie Gracie met his death in the Golden Glory in Timberly, nor had they any hesitancy now in suggesting that he got no more than he deserved.

"He was caught stackin' th' deck, tried to gun Calvert in the back, an' was plugged with a mirror shot," said Ullman. "An' Calvert had told him he was the Lightnin' Bug. Suicide, not murder; that's was it was."

"An' Calvert didn't know he was his half brother, neither," added White.

"Because he wasn't his half brother!" exclaimed Major Gracie angrily. "How often must I tell you that? One would think you were friends of this man Calvert instead of enemies."

"Fair is fair," said Ullman. "I won't have a gun artist like Calvert tradooced. That mirror shot of hisn was one of the purtiest things that ever happened—barrin' what I can do in that line myself. However, yuh needn't to worry none about settlin' with Calvert; that's be'n done by a better man than yuh."

"Men," corrected White.

"What do you mean?" cried Scoby. "Mean to say Calvert's *dead?*"

"Nigh on six weeks," replied Ullman, elaborately casual as he rolled a cigarette.

"Is that the truth?" demanded Major Gracie, showing the liveliest pleasure and astonishment. "How do you know? Who killed him?"

"Me," said Ullman, tapping his breast.

"Us," said White, thumbs thrust in the armholes of his calfskin vest. "He shore was a great fighter, but we're a sight greater. We've proved it."

"He come a-shootin', but I dusted him both sides," said Ullman. "Then Whitey joined in. I told yuh we paid our debts when we was good an' ready. See that bum ear? That's where he got me."

"We told yuh it took men to stand up agin' him," said White complacently. "Both of us is men, Flash an' me. We done what even Bargendy hisself couldn't."

"You ain't foolin', boys?" asked Scoby anxiously. "I ain't meanin' no offense. But to think of Calvert bein' stiffened—— Say, where did it happen? Tell us all about it, won't you?"

The heroes obliged, nor was the bottle of whisky that Scoby generously produced required to loosen their tongues or stimulate their imagination. Indeed, for weeks they had been bursting to boast about it to an audience that was not composed solely of themselves.

Meanwhile the exploit had grown with the mere telling of it to each other, putting out new flower and fruit, so that now it bore little relation to the actual facts. And they had told it to each other so often that they believed it. There was no suggestion now of Ullman hiding in the dark and Peter walking into the firelight, ignorant of his enemy; no word of White sneaking up from ambush with clubbed rifle. No, it was fair fight, a chance encounter in daylight with Ullman proving a split second faster and surer on the draw, his partner putting in the finishing touch. White had to be content with this minor rôle because Ullman was unquestionably the superior gunman of the two, and, moreover, had actually been the first to hit Peter.

When at length the tale was finished, Major Gracie and Scoby shook hands with the heroes, expressing their intense admiration and satisfaction.

"Best news I've heard in years!" exclaimed Scoby. "And it couldn't have come at a better time."

"It explains the rumor we heard in Trinidad," added the major. "Somebody told us that Calvert had left Sagebrush."

"But ain't no hunt be'n made for him?" asked White in surprise.

"Mebbe not," replied Scoby. "We heard he'd gone for good because he'd had a dust-up with that Vickers gal, his fiancy. They say he's throwed her over, but we couldn't rightly believe it."

"But yuh hoped it was true?" said Ullman. "That's why yuh come over?"

"Partly," replied Major Gracie. "We meant to make this place our headquarters for the time being. But I was concerned with more than bringing Calvert to account for the murder of my son. By your leave, I still call it that. My boy knew nothing about weapons, and, of course, Calvert knew rightly who he was. He struck at me through him. And then it was a necessary part of the plot to foist himself on my dear wife——"

"Well, well," broke in Scoby, "it don't matter now. Calvert's dead, curse him, and that's all that matters. Let's get to the point and tell these fine boys the rest."

"Well, the point is this," said the major. "My wife owned the majority of stock in this general store, run by Calvert and Vickers, and I'm entitled to it by law. I understand it's a valuable

property and, with Calvert out of the way, should be worth holding."

"It was me told him about it," explained Scoby. He told of the advertisement in the papers and how he had met the major.

Scoby drifted to Trinidad, after being run out of Sagebrush, but had managed to keep in touch with the gossip of his former home. Major Gracie had come to the Colorado town a few days ago, and these two rogues quickly struck up an acquaintance which led to mutual confidences.

Ullman and White understood more than was explained to them. If the major had really come out to inquire for his son, he had taken a very long time about it. What about his "dear wife" whom he had not seen, and never would see? Why had he missed the advertisement that Scoby found? It seemed reasonably clear that the gallant major was afraid to come to Sagebrush while Peter Calvert lived there, and that he had only decided to claim his inheritance if it should prove true that Peter had gone.

"Now," said Scoby, "Sagebrush owes me somethin', too. They burned my joint, took away my livin', let fellers who was in my debt run out of payin' me. They ruined me, Calvert and Biggart and that bunch. But now my time's come ag'in. I'm goin' back, and Major Gracie's goin' with me. I'm goin' to open another Lone Star and he's goin' to run Vickers' store. We've formed a partnership, and there ain't no reason why you fine boys shouldn't make it four."

"No reason in the world," said Major Gracie. "We don't expect any trouble but—well, Scoby and I don't pretend to be gun fighters. Every town needs a government, and I don't see what's to stop us governing Sagebrush."

"Nothin'!" exclaimed Scoby. "We'll run her wide open, the way she used to be. I got a lot of friends there yet, fellers like Bill Wyman, and all they need is for somebody to give 'em a lead. They're scairt of Sam Biggart, but you fine boys ain't."

"I reckon not!" chorused the fine boys, with a derisive laugh. But the cautious White added: "Know anythin' about these danged rangers that have moved up here?"

"They're stationed in Mobeetie," replied Scoby, "an' there's only a handful. Anyway, they've got no call to pick on us."

"Certainly not," said the major. "A town has the right to elect its own government, and the majority should rule. That isn't the case in Sagebrush, I understand. It's Calvert and his little gang of hypocritical reformers that have broken all laws by imposing their will on the majority. I've no use for reformers, and we'll change all that. But everything will be done legally."

"Gracie knows all about how to run these things," said Scoby admiringly. "He didn't live in Noo York for nothin'. He's a better man to have backin' you than Bargendy ever was, for he's got ejication, experience, and influence. He'll handle any of these rangers, if they try to horn in, and without any gun play either."

"We don't want any trouble of that sort with the State force," said the major. "And in order the better to avoid it, I think it advisable that the fact and manner of Calvert's death should be kept secret, more especially if he meant to leave Sagebrush for good. Clearly he had left it for good when you two fell in with him."

The heroes objected to this. It meant being robbed of immense prestige. Half the beauty of the exploit would vanish if they could not boast about it, especially in Sagebrush.

"That's all very well," said the major, "but celebrity carries its own penal-

ties. We don't want these rangers poking about. Yes, of course it was fair fight, but the point is you've no witnesses. You're known to be Calvert's enemies and they'll be sure to say it was murder. They may start an investigation that may lead to all sorts of trouble."

"Gracie's right," said Scoby. "The rangers comin' up here have changed things a bit. It ain't like the good old days when you could get away with anythin', open and aboveboard. Now it's best to use some eyewash."

"Besides," continued Major Gracie, "there's your old association with Bargendy. I can fix all that much easier if there isn't this new suspicion against you. Finally, we don't want any more attention focused on Sagebrush than we can help, not until everything's running smoothly. Personally I want to avoid the limelight as much as possible because of these political enemies I've spoken of. So, for the time being at least, we don't know what has happened to Calvert. Not a thing. Believe me, that's by far the best and wisest course."

"All right," agreed Ullman. "I reckon mebbe it's best. But now what just does Whitey an' me get out of this combination? We know what Scoby an' yuh get, but what does *we* get? We could stand Cottontail on its ear without your help, but yuh couldn't without ours."

"I don't know about that," said the major. "I've no desire to stand it on its ear, in the sense that you mean. Your rule would be very short, no more than long enough for word to be sent to the rangers, if there was any wanton killing. Then you'd be on the run. That sort of thing isn't good enough. We aim for permanency, or until we've got out of the town all that's in it in the way of pleasure and profit. We want leisure and freedom to enjoy it."

"Yes, we could do with some of that," agreed White, with a sigh. "I'm kinda tired bein' on the prod."

"Well," continued the major, "you'll get with us more than you ever got with Bargendy. You won't have to hide in no man's land like outlaws. You'll be on the other side of the table—the paying side. Brains can get you more than bullets, if you know how to go about it. I'll show you how to get far more profit working with the law than against it. Nothing pays, boys, like law-abiding honesty," said the major, and closed an eye.

And so these four prime rogues planned for the future, as the whisky bottle continued to circulate, and there was no doubt that Major Gracie had asserted the dominion to which his mental equipment entitled him. They might despise him for certain qualities, or the lack of others, but they had to admit that he possessed what they did not, qualities that carried with them the right of leadership in such an undertaking.

To this the member of a fine old family had descended. From a notable figure in New York's business and social world he had, in the years succeeding Tweed's eclipse, sunk to the level of these three rascals. His descent had been steady and progressive, and in some ways he had reached lower levels than any of his new associates, though that fact was known to himself alone.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE POLISHED VILLAIN OF FACT.

THOSE who believe the old saying that there is good in the worst of us, could have found little support for their faith had they known Major Frederick Gracie, though perhaps he was the exception that proves the rule. At all events he was a thoroughly bad man, one who rejoiced in doing evil,

and there was practically no variety of evil that he had not attempted or done. A far more dangerous and malignant type than any of his new associates. There was always something human about their sinning.

Apart from the profit he meant to find in Sagebrush—and he was in need of money—the major rejoiced exceedingly to think what his influence would be on the town, how he would undo all that Peter had accomplished. He had heard from Scoby that it had been Calvert's ambition to make it the first town in the Panhandle, a model of civic virtue—well, this memorial he had been at such pains to erect would become something of a different order. The scurvy dog was dead, but he would turn in his grave if he knew who was about to step into his shoes and show Sagebrush the way to perdition instead of glory.

The major came alone to the town, it being no part of his plan for his former association with the other three rogues to be known. They would arrive separately later, by which time Ullman's leg should be fully mended.

No one could play the part of hail-fellow-well-met with a more gracious and charming air, when occasion demanded, and seldom had Sagebrush seen a more distinguished figure than Major Gracie. He knew not only the importance of dress, but how to dress, and none could have suspected that he had spent almost his last dollar at a certain lawyer's office in Mobeetie.

Uncle Joe Sidebottom, sunning himself on the gallery of the Come Inn, rushed inside with the information that a strange gentleman was visiting the Vickerses—a real gentleman who had genially passed the time of day and given him two bits wherewith to drink his health.

"Took ye fur a beggar, hey?" cackled Jase Webb, who never asked Mr. Sidebottom to share his morning lotion. "Must be a feller of discernment."

"Took me fur the fust inhabitant, which I be, an' knowed what was doo me as sich," retorted Uncle Joe. "A real gentleman, with a gold watch an' chain an' all."

"But ye ain't the fust inhabitant," said Mr. Webb. "That's gettin' money under false purtenses, Joe Sidebottom, an' I'll have to speak to Sam Biggart. I've told ye a dozen times, an' proved it, too, that I knowed this yere town——" And the perennial argument was on.

By this time the major had satisfied himself of the truth of the rumor he had heard in Trinidad concerning Peter. The tale that he had jilted Miss Vickers was now common property; and, in the person of Julie Vickers, Major Gracie expected to find a very ordinary type. She was alone in the store when he entered, and his eyes dilated at sight of her. Julie was far from looking or feeling her best, but even her worst was worth a second glance from an expert like the major.

"Is it possible, ma'am, that I have the honor and privilege of addressing Miss Vickers?" he asked, as he doffed his hat and bowed deeply.

"It is possible," agreed Julie. "Your name and business, sir?"

"Major Frederick Gracie, of whom, no doubt, you've heard. Very much at your service, ma'am."

She looked at him in silence. This was the last straw, the culmination of the nightmare in which she seemed to have been living for years. Every petty thing that could go wrong with the store, had gone wrong since Peter's desertion, as though the gods were bent on making a wreck of everything. There were matters to which only an experienced man could attend, and all the fugitive help of people like Day and Tupman, the silent sympathy of the

town, could not compensate for the loss of the man of men. She now realized more than ever all that Peter had meant even as a business partner.

She had no one on whom to rely but herself, though her uncle had insisted on taking the reins abandoned by Peter, his proud and zestful muddling adding to her distraction. Her old judgment had gone, and with it the joy of work. She had no longer any real interest in the business, nor even in life itself. She did not wish to live, yet she must fight on for the sake of her uncle, her pride, her mere bread and butter. And now, in spite of all her efforts, the worst had happened. The man whom she had thought dead was here to claim the capital whose withdrawal meant the utter ruin of the business.

"This is a rather awkward and very distressful duty on which I've come," continued the major. "Distressful to me, as well as to you and your uncle. But the law takes no account of feelings."

"Nor you either," said Julie. "If you had chosen to put in an appearance before your wife died, it would have saved her much suffering."

"Ah, that was my misfortune," said the major. "I have been the consistent victim of misfortune and conspiracy—yes, and calumny. Owing to the machinations of my enemies, it was impossible for me to arrive here sooner. Then, when at length I was able to go in search of my dear wife and son, it was only to learn of their deaths. What tragedy! I need not dilate on it, ma'am. You can, I'm sure, picture the feelings of such a bereaved husband and father."

"I can," said Julie. "Especially when you saw the advertisement informing you that your wife had left no will."

"That is an unwarranted and cruel thing to say, ma'am."

"More warranted and less cruel than your conduct, Major Gracie. Of course, you've legal proof that you are whom you claim to be?"

The major bowed and tapped his breast.

"I think you shall find everything in order. I understand from my lawyer in Mobeetie—I thought it advisable, before I came here, to engage one who practiced in this State—that my dear wife's affairs are in the hands of your lawyer in Austin. Well, these gentlemen can unroll the necessary red tape between them. No doubt there will be yards and yards of it. For the present, no doubt you will wish to see my credentials."

Julie, as one in a dream, found herself giving the store in charge of the staring Joe Baker, and ushering the unwelcome visitor into the living room that served also as an office. The thought that now engrossed her most was that here stood Peter's father, the father of the man whom she worshiped. Somehow, despite all she had heard to the major's discredit, that fact in itself served to bring her nearer to Peter. It was a link, however tenuous and questionable, connecting her with him.

It seemed so unnatural, impossible, to believe that this parent was his son's deadly enemy and had even tried to murder him by proxy. Quite credible when related by Peter, but incredible when this man stood before her in the flesh. Her hungry soul sought to find in the features and form this strangely young-looking man some likeness to the cherished image in her heart, but it sought in vain. And yet there was a certain vague resemblance in manner if not form—a graceful trick of hand and voice, enough to set her heart to beating.

Though she gave no sign, she was agreeably astonished and impressed by Major Gracie. Rascality always conjures up an image of something low and

brutal, and unconsciously her idea of him had been something totally different from the outward man himself. Moreover, apart from her St. Louis experience, she had little knowledge of the world, or that stratum of society to which this man belonged by right of birth. She had read of, and laughed at, polished villains, but they are far more formidable and convincing in fact than fiction.

Yet Julie had little vanity, that chink in the stoutest armor, and a great fund of common sense. She had every reason to believe that this man was a scoundrel, and she determined that no prompting of sentiment or spacious outward appeal should alter her attitude of uncompromising hostility.

Meanwhile, the major was thoroughly enjoying himself. By Jove, this was a find! It was like having his unexpected inheritance served up on a golden salver. That dog Peter had at least inherited the paternal eye for beauty and grace. A rose in the wilderness! The major's eyes sparkled as they gazed at Julie seated at her desk, going through with meticulous and unflattering care the documents he had presented. Her obvious hostility only served to interest him more.

"Everything would appear to be in order, so far," she said tonelessly at length, and tossed the papers aside.

"I am afraid," said the major sadly, and with a droop of his handsome eyes, "you cannot forgive me for being also the victim of the law. It is only natural, of course, and I have the utmost respect for your feelings."

"There are many things I cannot forgive, but that isn't one of them, Major Gracie. It's not the fact of you inheriting this money, but the manner. You're entitled to it by law and the accident of chance, but nothing else. Mrs. Gracie never intended it for you, but for your son, Peter Calvert."

"My son?" The major appeared not to comprehend. He laughed immoderately, then suddenly sobered. "Ah, I see! But, my dear young lady, is it possible that the rascal caught you also with that unutterable falsehood? But why? How? You weren't blind, like my poor wife."

"No, I wasn't blind, nor am I now. You can tell me nothing to Mr. Calvert's discredit that I'll believe. No, nothing."

"Oh, well, in that case——" The major shrugged, smiled, sighed and regarded her with tolerant pity. "Why, as for discredit," he burst out, "what's this tale I've been hearing everywhere —that the fellow has cleared out, jilted you? Is that true or not?"

"That's my affair," said Julie, the color flaring in her cheek.

"Mine also, Miss Vickers, by your leave. This fellow claims to be my son, and thereby makes me identified in a sense with such reprehensible conduct. Surely I have the right to defend my name? I tell you he is no son of mine, has no claim on me whatsoever. He murdered the only son I ever had. His only connection with me is that of frustrated blackmail, and he fled New York before I could clap him in jail. Nor am I the only man, by any means, whom he has tried to claim as his father. Given a rich prospective victim, and he'll claim anybody."

"I don't believe a word of that," said Julie calmly. "No, not a single word. You are only wasting your time and mine."

The major laughed with bogus anger, walked the floor and took snuff from a handsome enameled box.

"Upon my word, madam, such credulity and faithfulness does your heart credit, if not your head, but it's highly exasperating to the victim. What proof did this Mr. Calvert offer that he was my son? Not an atom, of course. Yet

you believed him! Doesn't your own common sense inform you that he would have taken his case to the courts had there been a speck of truth in it? Did he? No! And why this cruel desertion of you? Not, I'll swear, that he hasn't an eye for beauty and worth. No, but because he was afraid to stay and meet me. He knew that, sooner or later, I was bound to come here and that exposure was inevitable."

"Enough," she said. "Further talk of this kind will only force me to be ruder than I wish. Let us get to business. I may tell you at once that we haven't the money to pay you. All our capital has gone toward expansion; we started an ambitious program that hasn't brought a return yet. Things haven't been going of late quite as they should. If we had time—— But, of course, you'll want cash."

"Not at all," replied the major, with a baronial gesture. "I am here as a friend, not an enemy. Surely you will believe that? I am sensible of the great kindness done my dear wife by you, much of which I've learned. Nor am I your pound-of-flesh sort of man, no matter what you may prefer to believe to my detriment. There need be no talk of a receiver."

"Oh," said Julie coolly, "I haven't said anything about that. I could borrow the money." But she knew that their credit was pledged to the hilt, and that the only possible chance was a private loan from Sam Long.

"There's no necessity for that," said Major Gracie. "I needn't pretend that I'm still a wealthy man and in no need of this money; if I were as rich as I once was, I should be very glad to renounce this inheritance in your favor as some small expression of my gratitude for the kindness shown my wife. Indeed, I should insist upon it.

"But I am now a poor man, Miss Vickers, a man ruined by politics and enemies. Yet, though poor, I couldn't think of profiting at your expense. I'm more than willing to meet you halfway, accept any reasonable compromise. What I then suggest is this: Rather than cash, I assume my wife's responsibilities and liabilities in this business."

"You—you mean as a partner?"

"A silent partner," said the major, with a wave of the hand. "If it should never pay a dividend—well, that will be another of my misfortunes. However, it's a risk I'm quite willing to accept."

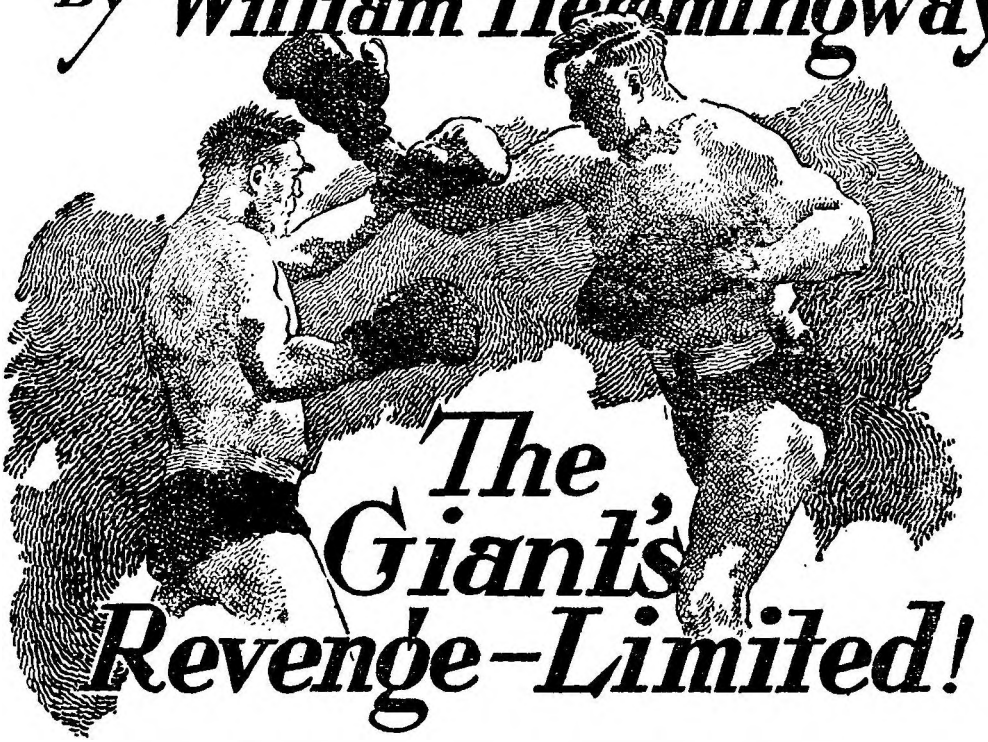
"No," said Julie. "Not that. Never. I couldn't think of it."

"Well, of course if you know of a better way——" Major Gracie shrugged and spread his hands. "I'm only anxious to be of service, help you all I can. I intend making this town, which my wife loved, my home in any case. I don't see why things shouldn't go on as they were. I'm not really a business man, otherwise I shouldn't have lost my fortune as I have. I shouldn't have been the easy dupe of knaves. I am a soldier, not a merchant. You wouldn't be bothered very much with my interest in the company. All I wish is peace and a modest competence —a crust of bread, a quiet nook, a book, and a few friends. Most of my life is behind me, my fighting days over. Life has very little to offer me now, Miss Vickers. I'm done with men and cities.

"At any rate," he added, as she made no reply, "it can surely do no harm to think over my suggestion. I want you to understand that there's absolutely no necessity to cripple or handicap the business. I'm no Shylock who must have his claim satisfied at all costs. That at least I shall prove."

To be continued next week.

By William Hemmingway



The Giant's Revenge—Limited!

Author of "The Amateur Who Slammed John L.," Etc.

A mean-spirited ex-fighter tries to pull a dirty trick on the game old-timer who had shamed him out of the ring. But fate is almost always generous to the brave.

IT is odd how often being right will get a man into trouble—that is, if he speaks up for the right, regardless of who is against it. When Mike Donovan was so sure of his facts and faced down "Big" Steve O'Bannon, he was unconsciously preparing for one of the most exciting battles of his life. He almost lost his reputation in it; and without one dollar of stake or purse for all his risk and pain. Worst of all, the fellow who nearly got him was an amateur.

The trouble began on the night of the great Fitzgibbons-Ruland fight in Madison Square Garden, in which Fitz knocked out Ruland. There was no room for dispute about that; at least three-quarters of the spectators, after two minutes in the sixth round, saw Fitz drive his left full into Ruland's solar plexus, and, as the "Ohio Giant" toppled forward, deal him a short right jolt on the chin that sent him diving into oblivion. The referee could have counted ten hundred if he liked; for they had to get a doctor to bring Ruland back to consciousness, and he took a long half hour on the job.

In the lobby of the Garden as the crowds slowly worked their way to the doors, a dozen fighting men, ex-fighters and, followers of the game were congratulating one another on having looked at one of the best exhibitions ever seen in little old New York. O'Bannon was telling just how the victory was won; and the group listened to him attentively, because he had fought both men and knew their ring tactics. True, he had barely made a six-round draw with Ruland, and Fitz-

gibbons had outed him in the fifth; yet everybody knew that he was one of the cleverest heavies that ever came out of the West and had all of the qualities of a champion except the heart.

"Right at the end of the fifth, it was," said Big Steve. "Ruland had been jabbing Fitz's head back for the last three rounds, and, just as he thought he had him going, Fitz came back with a right cross to the jaw that shook him and softened him for the K. O. in the sixth."

"That wasn't the way of it," said Mike Donovan. "Ruland was jabbing Fitz's nose and jaw all through the first; then, near the end of the round, looked over to his corner as if he was asking Billy Padden what he ought to do next. While he looked around, Fitz stepped forward with his right foot and swung up a long left uppercut into the belly that raised Ruland's heels off the floor—it was the shift. That's when Fitz softened him. Gus went back to his corner very slow, with the muscles at the back of his thighs shaking. He never came back from the effects of that shift of Fitz's.

"You're crazy!" Big Steve growled in disgust. "Fitz never hurt him in the first round—nor any other, till the end of the fifth."

"Crazy, eh, you big stuffed shirt?" Mike exclaimed. "I'll leave it to Tom O'Rourke here that I'm right. He sat beside me, and he saw it."

"That's right," Tom agreed, as the crowd turned to him. "Mike's right."

"And for two cents," Mike broke out at O'Bannon, "I'd make you crazy inside of two minutes, you overgrown false alarm!"

Mike's temples were gray, but his blue eyes flashed fire, and Big Steve, although he towered nearly a head over him, involuntarily stepped back. The smaller man had retired long ago from the ring and taken up teaching. But he had been middleweight champion for years; and after several years of retirement, had shown up his successor, the famous "Nonpareil," in an exhibition bout. Everybody knew how good Mike was.

"Aw," Steve began, looking sheepish; "aw, this is no place to have a scrap. No money nor nothin' in it."

"Any time and place is good enough," said Mike. "Put up your hands now, if you're a man!"

"Aw, well—I'm no rough-and-tumble fighter," Steve explained. Then he turned and walked away, looking back apprehensively over his shoulder as he slowly made for the exit.

But Mike did not follow him. He still stood there, silent and watchful, eyes aflame, his left foot still advanced, head proudly up, and chin well tucked in out of harm's way, each hand doubled into a most effective fist inside of its neat brown dogskin glove; a perfect picture of the man of action. The others of the group snickered at the big man's discomfiture; and a newsboy, who had wedged his way through the crowd and taken in the whole debate, mockingly shouted:

"T'ree cheers fer de champeen Big Cheese!"

O'Bannon could hardly push through the crowd that milled around him, those nearest discreetly silent, while from the outer circles again and again came ironic cheers and the title, "Big Cheese." Reporters hurrying from the ringside to the office to write the story of the big fight lingered long enough to take in the incident, and every paper next day told of it, with "Big Cheese" displayed in the headlines. Cartoonists and paragraphers took up the idea and played with it. Soon O'Bannon could not walk down Broadway without drawing a crowd to his heels, those in the outskirts yelling "Big Cheese!" Within a week he was driven into hiding. Then he went home to the great open spaces for a rest, got up a little

courage, fought two or three easy marks and won back some shreds of reputation, and finally landed a job as boxing instructor in an Eastern university of high standing.

* * *

(Reader, each one of those three stars represents three months, and you will please take notice that during all that time Big Steve was trying to work out a good, safe plan to revenge himself upon the man who caused him to be laughed out of New York, where the easy money grows. Also, among his pupils were many husky young men, athletes in fine fettle.)

On the afternoon of the last day in November Professor Mike Donovan came into the boxing room of the old Athletic Club a few minutes before three o'clock. He was out of his street clothes and into his boxing togs in less time than it takes to tell it; then he stretched at ease on a long, wicker lounge with his warm bath robe well wrapped around him and read a newspaper while he waited for his pupils to come in. Within five minutes the first arrived. He was a tall, lathy lad of seventeen from prep school, whom Mike had been teaching for two years. They shook hands and peppered each other all round the room, Mike hitting, parrying and countering with the lively boy, meantime shooting words of wisdom at him as fast as his fists. It was a treat to watch and hear him:

"Now, then, 'Longlegs,' put a little ginger into that footwork! Don't stand and wait for me to come to you. Not too eager, though! That's it: be shifty. But don't be too shifty! That's more like it! Watch yourself! Don't leave yourself open like that when you lead; my right cross could have dropped you that time if I'd sent it in hard. There! That's more like it. By golly! you'll soon be as good a man as your father; and he's a real fighting man!"

At the end of fifteen minutes the boy went away, happy because Mike told him he was improving fast, and puffing because the teacher had made the pace so hot in the last two minutes. Mike, breathing as easily as if he were still reading his newspaper, shook hands with the next pupil, and began anew. This one was bald and middle-aged, trying to lose a lot of fat and find his lost youth; so Mike stepped in and out of his range and kept him ducking left and right swings; for the violent stooping as he ducked the blows was fine for burning off adipose tissue from his too-rounded front.

Ten minutes sent "Fatty" off to the showers, smiling and beaming. Mike had let him land a wabbly left on his nose, and had yelled as if in pain, thus laying the foundation for weeks of something like this:

"D'you know, there's nothing like the straight left. Fastest punch in the world, really! I actually landed it on Mike the other day; and you know he's no easy mark."

A serious young lawyer with a great sock in his right fist now came into the room, and for twelve minutes by the big wall-clock kept Mike on tiptoe, watching, blocking or evading that wicked right, always taking pains not to injure or mark the face of the rising young jurist. It is a prime rule among good teachers that the pupil shall never be hurt or disfigured. So Mike gave the lawyer a fast work-out, plus a few steadying jolts in the ribs when he got too gay, not forgetting to call "Time!" precisely at the end of the twelve minutes which the young man devoted to sparring every day.

The stream of pupils kept flowing in for an hour and a half; and during all that time Mike was constantly at work, boxing with them all in turn, playing at ease with most of them, and now and then facing a Tartar who made him go full speed. He was in the midst of a

hot rally with a swift, ambitious Wall Street man, when a tall, bronzed and handsome youth entered the room. Mike was dimly aware of him with a glance out of the corner of one eye; and when the progress of the bout took him to the farther side of the room, whence he took a good look over the pupil's shoulder, he saw that here was a bit of the real stuff. The lad was not only tall, but he had a pair of shoulders that Mart, Schaffner and Harx would rave over, a deep chest, and unusually long and thick arms. Moreover he stepped as briskly as a dancing master. A man of parts.

"That'll be all for to-day, Mr. Padelford," Mike exclaimed, and suddenly shook hands with the swift and ambitious Wall Street man. Before he could exclaim at the stoppage of his precious lesson, Mike winked a warning to him, and he went away without protest.

Then, as the teacher moved forward, the stranger asked: "Are you Professor Donovan?"

"I am," Mike responded.

"I'd like to have a lesson," the visitor continued. "My name is Castleton Warden." There was such a look of determination in his face and his voice sounded so resolute that something in Mike took warning.

"Are you a member of the club, sir?" he asked.

"I—ah—er—oh, yes; I am a member," he answered. "That is—er—yes."

"Not very long?" Mike ventured.

"Why, er—no," said the young man, his pink cheeks turning a fiery red.

"I'll give you a lesson as soon as you're ready," said Mike, at the same time ringing for a boy and stretching himself on the couch with his robe over him. When the boy arrived, he instructed him to show Mr. Warden a locker.

"By, golly; there's something coming off," said Mike to me, as the tall and stalwart youth disappeared. "Did you notice what fine fix that lad is in? Did you see his eyes—bright as new dollars? My, my! but he's a nice boy. I wish I could get half an hour's sleep before I take him on. Well, I'll relax and rest all I can."

Fortunately, it took the young stranger all of twenty minutes to dispose of his clothes in the locker, get into his ring costume, and fasten the leather supporter around his right wrist. Mike meanwhile had closed his eyes, and not one of us pupils waiting for our lessons had the audacity to break his repose. It must have been profound, for he did not stir when the soft footfall of the big youth's boxing shoes invaded the room. One of us called him:

"Hey, Mike! Here's Mister Warden!"

"Oh, yes," he said, opening his eyes and yawning—a little ostentatiously, I thought. "Yes, yes, Mr. Warden. Your lesson. You'll get it right away."

Now, you couldn't say exactly that there was a threat in all this, because there was a happy smile on the old boy's face and his voice was not unkind; but I remember thinking that I wouldn't have him come at me that way for a nice, new thousand-dollar bill.

"Now then, Mr. Warden," said Mike briskly, as our group settled ourselves on the couch to watch the fun, and he stepped up to the big fellow, "have you had any instruction?"

"Y-yes, some," the young man replied hesitatingly.

"Good!" Mike exclaimed, though there was a slight frown on his forehead. "We won't bother with any teaching at first. We'll just box, and I'll size you up as we go. Shake hands, now." Then, stepping swiftly aside, he called, "Time!"

The teacher came up within striking distance and shot forth his left fist for the head with a light, flicking motion.

The big youth guarded with his right arm and stopped the blow. Before he could return it, Mike was gone. In he came again, again feinted and stepped out of distance, watching the eyes and every movement of the adversary.

The contrast between the two boxers was almost ridiculous—except that you could not think of the word "ridiculous" in connection with Mike Donovan. He stood only five feet nine inches, yet so erectly and proudly that he looked taller; weighed one hundred and fifty-four pounds, with a broad, high chest, and long, well-muscled arms that worked back and forth like well-oiled piston rods. The stranger, half his age, loomed over him like a sky-scraper over an old house. He was an inch or more above six feet in height, with a broad, deep torso, big shoulders, mighty forearms, and a fine pair of legs that carried him to and fro in an easy, swift stride. Heavily muscled he was, but with the smooth, flowing movement that showed perfect coördination, not a trace of stiffness anywhere. He weighed well over two hundred, if he weighed an ounce.

That was a beautiful first round. Mr. Warden was quite content to let Mike make the pace; and the master did it prettily, stepping around the big man with disconcerting swiftness, occasionally driving a straight left to the chin —not hard, but smartly enough to score—luring the big fellow into a left lead in turn, which Mike crossed accurately with the right to the jaw. We could see that Mike was measuring the stranger, getting his length of reach as he led or countered, and finding out all about his various abilities, as a business expert would analyze the accounts and processes of a going concern.

After a minute and a half, and apropos of nothing that we could see, Mike suddenly cried "Oh!" and laughed heartily. Every time he made the tall fellow miss a shot he smiled mockingly at his blunder, then encouraged him to try again with a reassuring nod. In a word, he was making the pace and showing himself master of the situation at every stage, dominating the youth thoroughly yet kindly, with here and there a hint of what he could do to him if he chose.

The visitor seemed well within himself, did not try too hard to get home nor extend himself too far. He gave us the impression that he was waiting for something. He didn't accomplish much because he was not trying very hard; that was it. And not once did he offer to send in his right. That, I thought, was probably the amateur of it, for most amateurs have nothing but a left hand.

Archie Thomason called time at the end of three minutes. The two simply walked back to their corners and stood there, for there were no chairs in the boxing room. Mike was smiling at some joke we knew nothing about; and the stranger was grim as a meat ax.

Archie called time again, and the two advanced with caution, Mike still making the pace as he drove a long left into the floating ribs with a force that made the big boy grunt and bend over a little —just in time to meet the professor's right fist with his chin. It was not a hard blow, but as Mr. Warden ran his chin into it, it shook him for a few seconds, during which Mike let loose a squall of left and right jabs and hooks that buzzed and bumped into the younger man's eyes and cheeks like a swarm of hornets.

This did not faze young Warden, though; for he covered up neatly, drew in his chin and protected himself until the flurry was over, meantime regaining his wits and his breath, both of which had been pretty well jolted out of him. Mike kept him busy protecting himself. And Mortimer Staples, an old-time amateur who still used the language of the ancient London prize ring, whis-

pered to me: "Mike's going round him like a cooper round a barrel."

It was so one-sided that we were beginning to lose interest in the boxing lesson and think Mike had overestimated the worth of the visitor, and one or two of our fellows had drifted out of the room, when a subtle change came over the scene. Mike still bossed the big fellow around; yet, instead of showing discouragement, Mr. Warden seemed to be growing eager. More than ever he appeared to be watching for something.

They were in the middle of the room, sparring fast but cautiously, when Mike suddenly let loose a long, straight left drive for the chin. At the same instant, or perhaps one-tenth of a second before it, the stranger swung his right fist, for the first time that day and with force enough to knock down a horse. You could almost hear the whiz of it through the tense and quiet air. Mike saw it start, and saw that he had no time to duck under it. He sprang forward to get inside of the blow, and with the greatest luck in the world, managed to do so.

The upper part of Mr. Warden's forearm struck Mike on the side of the neck, and even that, with only half the leverage of the blow in it, was enough to stun him as he fell into a clinch. It was a "honey-cooler," as the boys say. For a moment Mike's head swam and his knees bent; then the old heart and keen mind, tempered in many a battle, came to his rescue. He held on for three or four seconds, despite the youngster's efforts to shake him off. Then the professor stepped back out of the clinch and dropped his hands. He needed time to breathe, and this was the way he got it:

"That was a pretty punch," he said, smiling with an air of patronage, "but you had a fault that spoiled it—your feet were too far apart. That cut off your reach. Try again some time, with your feet closer together, and you'll do better."

"That's what Steve always tells me," the youth admitted. Mike had him rehearse the blow, again and again, praising him when he kept his feet right—and meantime recovering his breath and strength. Then he commanded, "Let's go!"

The crowd did not know how near Mike had been to a knock-out, but wise old Mortimer Staples did. "Watch him now: he's going to get that big boy," he said. And even then we thought he was mistaken; for the professor sparred rather softly for the rest of the three minutes.

But when he came up for the third round, refreshed by one minute's rest, a ten-year-old child could see that he was bent on serious business. He stepped more to the big lad's left, so that his right swing should have farther to travel when it came, and peppered him with his own bulletlike left jabs, sometimes high, sometimes low. Now that he had let out the secret of his devastating right, Mr. Warden tried it again and again, but never got it within hailing distance of the professor.

After the fourth swing had sped past him, Mike darted in and drove left-right, left-right, hard and fast as he could into Warden's mid-section. The big boy threw both arms around Mike in a futile clinch, but the teacher drew back his hips to give himself more room and drilled in those lefts and rights with all his force. No cooper ever thumped a barrel half so hard; it would have burst the barrel.

The heavy smashes drove the visitor back against the wall. His arms fell helpless at his sides. His eyes began to roll upward. In the technical language of the ring, he was "out on his feet." Only the wall at his back kept him from falling down. For the space of half a minute Mike said nothing, watching Warden's eyes until he saw

that full consciousness had come back to him. Then he drew near and shook the big fellow's hand heartily.

"That'll be enough for you to-day, Mister Warden," he said, smiling. "I think you've had all you need for the first lesson. Besides, I'm a little tired to-day, after working with so many pupils. You come here at three o'clock to-morrow, when I'm fresh, and I'll give you a real lesson."

"Certainly—er—professor," the visitor responded, still looking a bit dazed. "Thanks a lot. Good day."

"Good day. Call again," Mike cried gayly. "Mr. Thomason, please show Mr. Warden the way to the shower room. I must give the rest of the boys their lessons."

Archie Thomason came in presently; told us he had bidden our distinguished visitor farewell, and didn't think he'd ever come back. (He didn't.) Then Mike called the club office on the telephone and asked how long Mr. Castleton Warden had been a member of the Athletic Club.

"Oh, I see," he said. "Here on a visitor's card from his cousin, eh? Then he's not a real member—though he is too, in a way. All right.

"Boys," Mike exclaimed as he put down the telephone and turned to us, 'you all know who that lad is, of course —the Harbin University right guard, just come out of the line-up and trained to the minute! I remembered all about him in the first round. You heard him admit he's a pupil of Big Steve O'Bannon's. What do you know about that for yellow, eh? That big counterfeit is sore on me and afraid of me, so he persuades this poor innocent to come here and try to knock me out."

"But you trimmed him easily, Mike," said young Plaisted, a beginner in the boxing class.

"Easily my eye!" cried Mike. "That fellow took me by surprise, after carrying his right hand dead for so long, then turning loose that awful swing. I barely had time to get inside of it, and even then the half of it nearly put me out. No man living has hit me like that since John L. dropped me in Boston. Well, O'Bannon won't get his laugh out of it. Here, boys, read this."

We all looked over Mike's shoulders as he addressed an envelope to: "Professor Steve O'Bannon, Harbin University, Camden, Massachusetts." Then, smiling and occasionally giving vent to a quiet chuckle, Mike wrote his letter:

FRIEND STEVE: That was a likely young fellow, your pupil, you sent down to me. He is big and quick and *game*. He has the makings of a good man—if he's properly taught.

I remain, Your friend,
M. J. DONOVAN.

Another story by William Hemmingway will appear in an early issue.

MR. SHINGLE INTRODUCES HIMSELF

BOB SHINGLE, shot full of snap, spring, and sparkle, is the genial and able Republican National Committeeman from Hawaii. When he joined the party chiefs in Washington last fall, a Southern politician who was deaf had trouble in understanding his name.

"Bob Shingle!" shouted Bob with a grin. "Shingle! Know how the girls have their hair cut? Then you get it. Shingle bob. Maybe they named it after me; I don't know. Shingle bob: Bob Shingle—— What? Bob Hare? No! Shingle! Bob, for short."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Bobb," said the deaf one, and smiled his delight at getting the name right.

Silence

By Moran Tudury

Author of "The Gentlemen's Race," "The Lightning Pilot," Etc.

In the heyday of steamboating there were pilots and pilots. Here are two—one the type the old Mississippi was rightly proud of, the other lower than a worm.

RIP" WEATHERBEE was a mystery from the very first day the old Mississippi clapped eyes on him. The first time the tall, lanky youngster swung his long legs across a steamboat deck, rivermen—from the stokers up to the pilot himself—stared. It was his face that first got them: sharp, intent eyes that bored augerwise into you, a solemn mouth that hardly ever puckered as most men's mouths do. But in the end people forgot his quiet, almost expressionless face; they remembered only his silence.

"I seen tight-mouthed galoots in my time," the engineer of the *Prophet Daniel* observed. "I seen poker players in Natchez-under-th'-hill that didn't make no more sound than a windy tomb. An' I seen pilots on the upper river that got so outa th' habit of talkin' that they forgot how to use special words. But this here Rip Weatherbee's got 'em laid out cold. If everybody'd 'a' been like him they wouldn't never have even got up the human language!"

And this eloquence, in time, became the Mississippi's verdict on Rip Weatherbee. That first day he boarded the *Prophet Daniel* she was tied up at Cairo for repairs. When he asked to see Regan, one of the steamboat's two pilots, there was a titter behind him. This because Rip Weatherbee was hardly the kind of soul to expect to be interviewing as exalted a personage as one of the lightning pilots of the *Prophet Daniel*. He was overmodest, even for the rough style of the river, in his attire. His dungarees were discolored and his flannel shirt was ragged. Only his manner—intent and stubborn—and those black, narrowing eyes that bent on his questioner were compelling.

Under the disconcerting stare of those eyes the watchman of the *Prophet Daniel* stirred uneasily. "What you want with Mistuh Regan, sonny?" he asked. He didn't miss the queer, steady way that the other was watching his face.

Rip Weatherbee muttered something to himself. It seemed to the watchman that his words were being repeated in a curious sort of way. Then he said slowly, and in a flat, toneless voice:

"There's a steersman job open here, ain't there? I'm a-lookin' for a cub pilot birth. Somebody sent word to Mistuh Regan I was coming along here." Then he stopped.

Once again the watchman was nervously conscious of that inscrutable, unwavering stare that seemed to cover every square inch of his countenance. Finally he nodded and jerked his thumb toward a stateroom door.

"He's in there. Just give a rap on the door." Then he stood back, aware that other members of the steamboat's crew—stokers, deckhands, and engineers—were staring at the stranger in a curious, puzzled manner.

For a minute Rip Weatherbee halted, pulled his dungarees up like a man girding up his loins before an ordeal; and then he stepped up to the stateroom door. Twice he knocked loudly. His back was turned to the crowd of onlookers by this time; so nobody got a view of his face.

But they could see "Spike" Regan's face as the pilot opened the door. He stared queerly.

"I'm Rip Weatherbee," the youngster said.

And Regan, his face jerking into an expression of instant curiosity, whispered, "I'm damned!" so audibly that the knot of spectators heard it. It added to their wonderment. The next minute Regan stood back, glanced sharply, resentfully at the onlookers, and held the door open for his visitor. Weatherbee passed in, the door slammed shut, and the crowd dispersed, mumbling. Nevertheless, they all seemed to manage somehow, twenty minutes later, to be about when Regan came forth with the youngster who wanted to be a cub pilot.

And every one of them heard Regan's words as he told the captain up on the hurricane deck: "This is Weatherbee, cap'n. I'm takin' him on as steersman."

But speculation wasn't quieted by this simple announcement. They forgot what a customary thing it was to behold a pilot take on an apprentice. Because this didn't seem to be a customary procedure at all. Something furtive in Spike Regan's manner made it somehow different; and the heavy flush that had come into Rip Weatherbee's face made that difference even more pronounced. He was positively blushing under the captain's scrutiny. He appeared so badly confused that twice the master of the *Prophet Daniel* had to repeat a remark to him.

"Funny business," the chief engineer grunted to a wiper. "But there's no tellin' what'll come outa Cairo when you're laid up for repairs there."

"That there's a mighty queer-actin' white man Mistuh Regan's tuck on for his cub!" was what the stoker before the middle door declared to the furnace room.

"Got a sorta dead-lookin' face, an' he don't say nothin' a-tall!" a passer wailed nervously. "Bad times a-comin'. Watch an' see!"

But that, in the end, was the queer part about the whole business. Because Rip Weatherbee did not bring bad luck to the *Prophet Daniel*. From the day he stepped into the immaculate pilot house—with its wheel as high as his head, its wire tiller-rope and bright brass knobs for the bells—he went his way as the Mississippi had first seen him. When Spike Regan stood at his wheel, sliding the spokes, a cheroot cocked arrogantly in his jaw, Rip Weatherbee

stood beside him, his eyes learning to read the heart of the river, to tell wind reefs from a bluff reef. He didn't open his mouth unless Regan drawled: "This here baby hates shoal water just naturally. Gotta keep her well in hand. Take her over." And when Regan cried: "Cramp her down! Snatch her!" without a word, Rip Weatherbee snatched her.

When the bench behind was crammed with visiting pilots, smoking and squirting deadly accurate tobacco juice at the big brass cuspidors, Rip Weatherbee stood alone, unheeded. Sometimes, his back turned, men nudged each other or muttered to Regan: "What's that you learnin' to be a lightnin' pilot, Spike—a cigar-store Injun?" But never a sign did Rip Weatherbee make of recognition; never did the expression of his face alter. He was there, he seemed to say, to learn the Mississippi, to learn twelve hundred miles of water, ever changing, daily different; nothing else mattered. And, after a while, people began to accept Weatherbee the way he was—this for the simple reason that nothing on the face of the river could change him.

Once a striker, up for a breath of air and a little fooling as well, said loudly to somebody: "There's that there tight-mouthed galoot who come on at Cairo. 'Spect he's too damn good to talk to poor whites like me 'n' you. Reckon he needs a takin' down."

The other stirred uncomfortably, because there was no getting away from the fact that, whatever else might be charged to him, Rip Weatherbee was not a weak-looking citizen. Big shoulders he had, and a neck like a steamboat stack.

"Shut up, you fool!" the striker's companion snapped. "You fixin' to get a bust in the eye!"

But, back turned and less than ten feet away, Rip Weatherbee never even turned around. Even when the striker continued: "I'm a hard customer an' I'm aimin' on makin' monkeyshines with somebody," there was no motion from the cub pilot. Angered, contemptuous, the striker brushed his friend aside and strode around in front of Weatherbee. For the first time the newcomer appeared to realize that a menace was in his vicinity. He straightened, his surprised gaze turning into something level and searching as the striker faced him. Not a word he said, but his intent black eyes were staring.

For an instant the striker wavered before those appraising, curious eyes; then a snicker from his companion nerved him, and he stuck his jaw out. He even closed his fingers into a fist, his right arm curving as a man's does when he is going to hit something for keeps. But that ended his preparations; for abruptly Rip Weatherbee's mouth went into a deadly straight line, one big shoulder reared back, and something happened like a falling streak of light.

Three minutes later the striker was stumbling to his feet, one grimy hand on his jaw, his lament for the benefit of all: "Cyclone a-comin'! An' by the Valley o' the Shadow o' Death, it's already struck!"

That was the last time anybody ever attempted physical horse-play with Rip Weatherbee. And the little meeting with the striker had made Rip automatically a part of the *Prophet Daniel.* Queer he was—would always be; but he had proved that fear was not a part of his queerness. Those level, ever-appraising eyes were disturbed in their complacent course by no man; they hesitated before nothing—not even an overly playful striker with a gash for a forehead and a nose that had been hammered into the pugilistic litany of wharf rows. In time the crew of the *Prophet Daniel* even became a little proud of this human curiosity of theirs—this tight-mouthed cub pilot who spoke first to nobody and who answered in mono-

syllables. His silence was making him into a celebrity; ashore he was even defended against the sarcasm of other crews.

"He's a shut-mouth, maybe," they admitted. "He don't talk no more'n a cotton bale. But he'll whale the pants offn anybody that comes givin' him lip."

And presently the crew of the *Prophet Daniel*—the whole river, in fact—was beginning to repeat something else about Rip Weatherbee. He was a pilot; those intent black eyes were made to see reef ripples. Those big hands were born to spin a big wheel in a shining pilot house. Nights—up there in the darkness all alone, save when Regan, his instructor, stuck his head in to see how matters were going—Weatherbee seemed in his element. It was a silent, lonely job—just the kind of a job for a shut-mouth with good eyes. So Rip Weatherbee picked up the secrets of the old Mississippi. So he stood sliding the big wheel, shaving the shore.

"He's a shut-mouth, maybe," the river was repeating. "But he can lick hell outa any Natchez bully. And"—they repeated this with the most relish of all —"he's a-goin' to be an ace pilot, 'fore he's done. Mind what I'm sayin'."

For himself, as before, Rip Weatherbee said as little as possible. Speech seemed to embarrass him. But one thing didn't bother him: Now, at last, that long solemn face was lighting. And, alone in the pilot house, standing by his wheel as the Mississippi thundered by, Rip Weatherbee was grinning.

It was not until Spike Regan gave up piloting to accept the captaincy of the *Prophet Daniel* and Weatherbee became a full-fledged pilot, that he came up with Bullock. It was not until Regan had said: "Got a partner for you, Rip," and the new pilot came aboard the *Prophet Daniel,* that Weatherbee, for the first time, gazed into the greenish eyes of Adam Bullock. There, in the captain's office, with Spike Regan looking curiously on, the two men shook hands.

A short, rugged fellow, Bullock looked almost small in comparison with the tall, lanky figure of Rip Weatherbee. And beside the youngster's solemn, quiet countenance, Bullock's face looked wide, spreading, and boisterous. He looked for a minute into Rip Weatherbee's intent black eyes—and looked away. What he saw there made him sense the kind of appraisement that made him uncomfortable.

And Weatherbee saw that which made him thoughtful.

"A reg'lar cricket, this Bullock," Regan observed to Weatherbee later.

"You said 'cricket?'" Weatherbee repeated. He shook his head. "Maybe. He is kinda spry, that feller." And he moved off, shaking his head.

Regan was right; Adam Bullock, short and bow-legged as a cowboy, was as spry as a cricket. He found favor with the crew at once. His sprawling, loose features seemed always grinning. At his trick at the wheel he whistled and laughed with the visiting pilots; when a scow pulled in across the bow of the *Prophet Daniel* he crackled the atmosphere with choice, enlivening profanity. He knew a lot of fancy swearing that delighted the deckhands. And at night when he plucked on his guitar "Buffalo Gals, Can't You Come Out To-night," the texas deck was audible with admiration. They swarmed round him, begged for more. And he bent his shoulders over, lifted a fair tenor voice, singing:

"There was a woman in our town,
In our town did dwell.
She loved her husband dearly,
But another man twice as well."

He had all the tricks and gestures that appealed to the river—this man Bullock. Beside him Rip Weatherbee looked like a mournful-faced under-

taker. Like flies the strikers and stokers hung around Bullock. And the fellow showed that he liked it. He smoked his good Havanas, put a side curl in his hair with bear grease, and ogled the lady passengers outrageously.

"Killin', ain't he?" Regan demanded of Weatherbee. "Never seen such a dude in all my days!"

But the pilot merely shook his head. "He's a card, all right," Weatherbee said slowly. Then he spat coolly, calculatingly for the sand box eight feet away.

It was inevitable, in the end, that the two pilots should clash. Even if there hadn't been a girl in it—which there was—they must have locked horns. The very fact that, as senior pilot aboard the *Prophet Daniel,* Weatherbee ranked Bullock both in official rating and pay was enough to make a man like the newcomer uncomfortable. Not that Weatherbee wasn't soft-spoken, he was. When, after four hours off, Bullock was repeatedly late for his watch, Weatherbee said nothing; even though lateness was the unpardonable sin in a pilot house. And when the other, standing behind the wheel in the daytime as Weatherbee steered the boat, made remarks, still the youngster kept his mouth shut.

Only once, when Weatherbee was driving his boat toward Hat Island and trying to keep all senses awake for the bad turns, did he show indignation. Then it had been scarcely his fault. Crossing over to the window, Bullock turned and faced him: "Mind that snag above the point——" he began. "Snatch her!"

And, spitting curtly into the brass cuspidor, Weatherbee winced.

"Better make a square crossin' there," Bulock went on serenely. "I ain't aimin' to butt in, but you'd better——"

"Hell, man!" Weatherbee grunted savagely. "Hadn't you better go set down somewheres?"

For a minute, reddening in ugly splotches, Bullock swallowed his mistake. His lip curled; and he didn't seem so genial, so cricketlike. Then his mouth clamped shut, and he stamped out of the pilot house. He never repeated his error.

"How're you two hellions makin' it together?" Regan asked Weatherbee a few days later. He wondered at the other's grin.

"Pretty good," the pilot nodded. "You see, we understand one another better now." And he chuckled softly.

Outwardly Adam Bullock gave no sign of animosity. Unceasingly he plunked the Spanish guitar, sang, and winked at the lady passengers in their little bonnets and wasp-waisted dresses. He even smiled in friendly fashion when he encountered Weatherbee in the pilot house, changing watches.

Days passed, Weatherbee relenting a little in his earlier skepticism regarding his partner. Once, rather shyly, he even offered him a cheroot. And Bullock, his little piglike eyes curiously slitted, took it. He studied Weatherbee, and smiled. "Thankee kindly," he drawled. And behind Weatherbee's back, he studied his partner again.

When Rip Weatherbee began to wear a clean shirt and a waistcoat with brass buttons on it, the *Prophet Daniel* grinned; when he began to twist the tusks of his Pike County mustache into stylish shapes, the *Prophet Daniel* laughed out loud. They knew what it was, even before Weatherbee brought the lady aboard, one Sunday afternoon at New Orleans. But after they saw Annie Travers they didn't blame him.

"Like one of them whitish magnolias —that Miss Travers," the mate sighed romantically. And even Spike Regan shook his head in approval.

The girl's face was pale as uncut ivory; and her eyes were blue as the Gulf in springtime. She wasn't small;

but beside Rip Weatherbee she looked little and dainty. It was one reason why Spike Regan's pupil kept looking down at her as he showed her the gingerbread trimmings in the pilot house; but there was a funny, gentle light in those usually intent eyes that told Rip would have looked protectingly down at her no matter whether she was little or not. Strikers nodded genially, seeing the two together.

"It's purty seein' the way that there gal looks at ol' Rip," an engineer muttered. "Purty and sweet."

But he noticed that Weatherbee seemed as silent as ever. The girl didn't speak much to him, either—so far as words went. But there was an interchange of lingering glances and sparkling eyes. It almost made Rip Weatherbee look handsome.

It was only natural that Adam Bullock should be introduced to Annie Travers. It was as natural that he should set himself to show off before her. Eagerly he got out the guitar; softly he sang "Father in Heaven, the Day Is Declining," while the more sentimental wept furtively. Shameless, regardless of Rip Weatherbee's presence, Adam Bullock did his tricks for Annie Travers.

At first the girl applauded enthusiastically, exchanging little compliments with Bullock. But suddenly, as Bullock's gaze became bolder, she seemed to draw instinctively away from him. It tantalized the man; he overreached himself, his eyes looking at her the way some men look at a woman. And, Weatherbee's back being turned for the moment, Bullock murmured: "I'd like for to be seein' you some time ashore, Miss Travers. Just you 'n' me."

She turned instinctively toward Weatherbee's broad back. At the same time a look of dismay crossed her face. It appeared almost as if she felt alone—an odd thing, inasmuch as Weatherbee was close enough to be touched by her outstretched hand. Bullock saw her reaction. "She ain't relyin' on Weatherbee," he muttered to himself. "She's scared he cain't take keer of her." He repeated more loudly—his words plain enough for even Weatherbee to hear: "Just you 'n' me, Miss Travers. How 'bout it, some time?" Then he laughed contemptuously, because he saw that Weatherbee hadn't heeded the challenge at all; hadn't even turned round from his scrutiny of the water.

"I can wait," Bullock was muttering as he shook hands with her. "Weatherbee ain't got guts to stand in the way—standin' right there while I was cuttin' him out, an' not sayin' a word." He chuckled; he shook her hand leisurely, fondly.

"Some time soon, maybe?" he asked the girl. "We'll have times together. You wait 'n' see." What did he care that Weatherbee had turned round now, confronting them with a flush in his cheeks, his eyes darting from one to the other? What difference did it make that they went down the gangplank together, the girl's hand in Weatherbee's arm? "No hurry," Bullock said musingly. "That gal was made for me. She needs a feller like me, an' not no yellow-back like Weatherbee." He picked up his guitar and began to sing. It was a pleasing song; but its effect was marred by one singular defect: Adam Bullock's eyes, always narrowed, were now mere slits of cold, calculating light.

Now, if Rip Weatherbee was one of the mysteries of the old Mississippi, his pilot-house partner was one of its commonplaces. Adam Bullock was a type: Against the thirty-year banner of steamboat smoke that swept the big river, pilots like Bullock were every-day specimens. On the mighty refrain of steamboat whistles he came down—and hundreds like him. For thirty years, the reign of the steamboat, he and his

brothers did their stuff: They were there at the big wheel, jangling the bells, cursing the scows; they were in the pilot house snarling through the tube to the engine room: "Stand by!" while the cries of the leadsmen echoed around them: "Mark three! Half twain!" Like Bullock they drained their bourbon, bit into Havanas, and shaved rival craft like a man peeling an apple. If they were good, they died young, lightning pilots. If they were, on the other hand, like Bullock, they clung on until a mammoth Civil War shattered the steamboat's glory and sent them to bartending, gambling, and worse.

There was the broad, clean, tiger sweep of the Mississippi—that was Rip Weatherbee. There was its soiled surface froth—that was Adam Bullock.

In taking the course of action he did, Adam Bullock did not deviate particularly from the ways of orthodox steamboating; he simply overreached himself. What he did took nerve; but piloting gives a man nothing, if not that. The Bullock who had steered the *Prophet Daniel* down floodtime chutes was not a Bullock to shirk other hazardous proceedings. And when he made up his mind to lick Rip Weatherbee, he went into it with his greenish eyes wide open.

"There's ways an' ways," he muttered to himself, his upper lip twitching. "Here's a purty gal an' a big jack-rabbit; an' it's up to me." He welcomed the coming battle, warmed to it in his own peculiar, furtive manner. For a long time he had made up his mind upon one point—there was something outlandishly queer about Rip Weatherbee. "It ain't just his tight mouth an' his long face," he told himself. "It's something else."

What it actually was was the very thing that had first puzzled the whole Mississippi: it was Rip Weatherbee's perpetual, everlasting silence.

Daily—every four hours, to be exact—Adam Bullock came in close contact with Rip Weatherbee's silence. It haunted, pestered him. It wasn't natural for a man to be so tight-mouthed; it wasn't customary for a man to say so little and apparently listen to even less. It annoyed Bullock, when they changed watches, to make a remark to Weatherbee's big back and obtain no answer. It annoyed him to say something and have Weatherbee repeat, with that funny stare, his very words, as if uncertain of their meaning. It wasn't natural. It could mean only one of two things.

"He's either goin' batty," Bullock decided, "or he's broodin' over something. Somethin' turrible, too."

And because it was pleasanter to believe that his rival for Annie Travers' affections might be guilty of some distant, oppressive crime, Bullock clung to the latter belief. It made his enmity for his pilot-house partner seem natural; it gave a sort of moral impetus to his hatred. But there was nothing either moral or natural about the steps that Bullock took to gratify his animosity. In that he went even beyond the limits of a reckless fool of a river pilot.

It wasn't only a girl, in the end, that made Bullock's plans what they turned out to be. The pale, magnolia-white face of Annie Travers contributed to his incentive, his hatred of Weatherbee added to it; but it was something more tangible and alluring that shaped Bullock's scheme.

In a back room of a Vicksburg saloon Bullock sat at table with a well-dressed, curt individual. His name was Marks and, next to the *Prophet Daniel,* he owned the finest steamboat on twelve hundred miles of river water. That was the rub: Mr. Marks, staring in envy at the amount of passenger and freight business by which the *Prophet Daniel* overtopped his own boat, wanted riddance of his rival. That was what made him, that May morning, murmur seductively to Adam Bullock:

"Five thousand dollars of hard, ready money. It's yours for the taking. You don't have to do much. On a dark night the river's hell—everybody knows that." The steamboat owner winked. "Anything's liable to happen. Snags floating downstream, a mistake at the wheel such as might happen to any pilot —and there you are!"

Bullock squirmed. "I'll lose my job. I can't rip the belly of a steamboat open an' keep my job."

The other man made a gesture of disdain. "There's other boats, other jobs. And this five thousand dollars——" His voice died away tantalizingly.

"Marks is right; it can be done," Bullock whispered to himself through dry lips. "Any pilot on a night watch might accident'ly rip a boat open. It ain't like it hasn't never happened before. An' five thousand dollars——" Suddenly something seemed, for the first time, to occur to him. His eyes narrowed and he licked his lips quietly. "Rip Weatherbee!" he muttered. "It might be things could be kinda fixed to look like Weatherbee done it." Then, suddenly, his face brightening, he turned back to his tempter.

"I'll do it," he said shortly. He got eagerly to his feet, while the ship owner chuckled with satisfaction. "I'll do it," Bullock repeated. For a moment he listened to the long wail of a steamboat out on the shining river; then he grasped the other's hand, nodded and was gone.

But his brow was furrowed as he went up the gangplank to the *Prophet Daniel;* and his thin, twisting lips were whispering: "I'll do it! An' it might be it can be made to look like this here Weatherbee was the man who done it." Twice he bumped into people as he ascended the stairs to the pilot house.

Adam Bullock was of the breed that spawned Attila, Cyrus of Persia, and Cortez; in his heart he was a wrecker. So he stood, that May morning in the pilot house of the *Prophet Daniel* and planned his game. Little shivers of excitement possessed him as his eyes roamed over the glory of the steamboat, and he came to a full realization of what he was going to do. Cunningly he dwelt on the long, sharp lines of the *Prophet Daniel,* her two tall, fancy-topped chimneys with the gilded device glinting between them, the paddle-boxes gorgeous with painted suns. Down by the big bell, cool and serene, stood Captain Spike Regan. Bullock laughed harshly as he realized how different would be Regan's bearing before the day ended. Like the quick, eager glance of a hawk, Bullock's eyes surveyed the *Prophet Daniel.*

Down below, off watch, Rip Weatherbee slumbered peacefully. The thought of Weatherbe's innocence of the whole business made the man in the pilot house grin. He'd fix it safe and sure. "No mistakes, no blunderin'," Bullock promised himself. "Everythin' fixed up pretty."

All that morning he worked out the details in his mind, checking and rechecking his plan, his explanation, his every move. There mustn't be any slip-up, or any loophole left for Weatherbee to wiggle through; he must make his own position afterward as unimpeachable as human ingenuity could arrange it. But it was going to be simple; he saw that long before the afternoon wore away and, having been relieved by Weatherbee at noon, he in turn took over the wheel again at four. At eight o'clock that night the watch would change once more, with Weatherbee going into the pilot house, his trick to last until midnight. But before midnight was reached it would all be over. "All," Bullock repeated, chuckling, "but the shoutin'. An' even that'll be over by then."

Rip Weatherbee, strolling about the boat that afternoon, found her crowded with planters, brokers, and commercial

travelers. On the hurricane and texas decks he wandered among the tall beavers and slight, striped parasols. But he was quieter than usual—which meant he was practically dumb. It was no secret that Rip Weatherbee and Annie Travers were going to be married. It could never have been a secret, with that new, eager light in Rip Weatherbee's eyes. But if he had been silent before, the crew stood aghast at his speechlessness now.

"Growin' more tight-mouth all the time," a striker observed to Captain Regan. "Don't never seem to open his trap no more a-tall."

Captain Regan fidgeted, like a man under fire. The striker noted it—remembered the legend that there was some secret between Regan and Rip Weatherbee. People even said it had something to do with Weatherbee's perpetual silence, and his curious, absent-minded habit of repeating words aimed at him. The river had grown accustomed to Weatherbee's peculiarities; but it still wondered over them—hoped, some day, to have the mystery solved.

Now Captain Regan eyed the striker disdainfully. "Love don't never make a loud-mouth outa a man, sonny. An' all pilots is naturally silentlike."

"Maybe," agreed the striker. But he couldn't help recalling the loquaciousness of Adam Bullock. It almost looked like Regan was trying to make excuses for his ex-pupil, as if he were trying hastily to cover up the thing with jocularity.

Meanwhile, Rip Weatherbee stretched his long legs about the decks of the *Prophet Daniel,* and, up in the pilot house, Adam Bullock slid the wheel while he emitted his dry, intermittent chuckles. So the afternoon, like the morning, ended; and all at once the river was twinkling with lights and people were streaming down to the saloon for supper. At eight o'clock Bullock surrendered the wheel to Weatherbee. He was studiously agreeable as he prepared to leave the pilot house. He commented on the swiftness of the current, pointed out how close he had been shaving the shore. "Upstream's hell in a current like this, ain't it?" Bullock nodded to himself.

But Weatherbee, his back turned as he worked the wheel, made no reply. It angered Bullock. That damned, everlasting silence!

"Why 'n't you talk to a man now 'n' then?" he exploded sharply, his nerves on end. "It's like pullin' teeth gettin' a word outa you, Weatherbee!"

And still there was no answer. Still Rip Weatherbee's broad back faced Bullock. A sneer came into Bullock's face. "I'll show him to-night!" he snarled to himself. "I'll get his girl, five thousand dollars—an' I'll crimp him, into the bargain!"

At that instant, almost as if by instinct, Weatherbee turned, looking at his partner over his shoulder. His face was calm and cheerful; there was no indication of animosity. "Goin' to be tight travelin' to-night, Bullock," he said quietly. "Got to keep my eyes open, I reckon!" But Bullock, despite his resolution to keep cool, could not succeed now. Why should he bother about replying to a man who gave no heed to his own pleasantries? He turned abruptly away, while Rip Weatherbee stared wonderingly, puzzling after him.

Down in the saloon Bullock ate little; his nerves were shredding under the strain, and he stared unceasingly at the big clock. Once Regan passed by and said pleasantly:

"Not snoozin' to-night, pilot?"

And the other, startled by the realization that he was making a show out of himself, nodded quickly.

"Just goin' down now, cap'n."

He went down to his bunk, his watch propped up on a table before him. He smoked continuously at the long, villainous Havanas; now and again he indulged himself with a sizable bottle

of genuine bourbon. So the night wore on. And presently the only sound that came to Bullock's attentive ears were the dry rattle of chips below, where a group of planters were playing poker; now and then a passing steamboat whistling hoarsely; and the long rollers from a stern-wheeler splashing the paddle-boxes of the *Prophet Daniel.* Now there were only the lonely, windy night sounds of the river; and they beat in chill echoes around Adam Bullock's heart. He found himself starting as footsteps went past his door; discovered sweat on his brow as slowly the hands of his watch crept round toward midnight.

Up above, in the gingerbread pilot house, he knew, stood Rip Weatherbee—the man whom he was going to break for good; the fellow whose girl he was going to take; whose senior piloting job he was going to annex; and who was going to be sacrificed to shield him, Adam Bullock. It made it less hard on his conscience to realize that he had always hated Weatherbee—hated his shut mouth and queer, exasperating ways. That was the man who was going to cover his tracks while he, Bullock, got a girl, a big job, and five thousand dollars.

"Nothin' to it," Bullock told himself harshly. But the palms of his hands were damp with sweat.

Up above, Rip Weatherbee stood beside his great wheel. He was grinning to himself, his mind on a girl with a face white as magnolias. Everything, for Rip Weatherbee, was breaking right. He was a river pilot now, accepted and made. Ahead stretched a vista of confident, brave days on a rushing, boisterous river, for a man who had rightly learned his trade. The pilot-house clock told him it lacked but ten minutes to midnight; already he could hear Bullock climbing the ladder. Four hours' sleep, now, before the next watch; he yawned comfortably, turning his head as Adam Bullock's short, squat figure stood in the doorway.

"Early, ain't you?" he inquired genially. "You got ten minutes more before your watch."

Bullock waved one hand in magnanimous gesture. "Couldn't sleep no more; might as well take her over. Get down an' have a snooze yourself." His tone was one of simulated generosity; but there was a false note in it that caused the other pilot to look up sharply, to remember it queerly ten minutes later.

He surrendered the wheel willingly enough; he had had hard going of it and it was entirely customary, ethical, for one partner to relieve another a little before the watch went off. "We're comin' on Vicksburg," Weatherbee volunteered affably—it was too dark on the river now to be able, immediately, to get bearings. Bullock nodded. For the first time Weatherbee was aware of the smell of whisky on his breath. But Bullock drank every day; so this was nothing to become concerned over. He gave up the wheel, yawned, and muttered: "'Bliged to you, Bullock; I am kinda groggy," and went down the ladder. The boat was deserted; the decks empty. But Weatherbee couldn't realize that Bullock had already reassured himself upon that point.

Just about the moment that Rip Weatherbee put his hand on his stateroom door, up there in the pilot house Adam Bullock suddenly peered quickly, shudderingly, through the glass-plated window. His breath suddenly came in great jerks and his heart hammered painfully at his ribs. Keenly, quickly, his eyes went out upon the black river; as swiftly he found what he was looking for. There it was—a bluff reef! Ripplingly, treacherously the water went over it, plainly revealed now over the bow in the reflected lights from the *Prophet Daniel.* It was bad—just how bad Bullock knew. One turn of the wheel now and he could slip his steam-

boat aside to safety. But he was not up there that night for safety. Abruptly, shutting his eyes, he drove her square onto the reef.

The crash, splitting thunderously, rocking the *Prophet Daniel* like a leaf in a black squall, hurled Rip Weatherbee clean into his stateroom, smacking him against a bunk end. But he was on his feet in a minute, racing for the pilot-house ladder, while the steamboat shuddered and swayed like a drunkard. But, quick as he was, swiftly though terror drove him on, he was not at the foot of the ladder before Adam Bullock. The second he had crashed the reef, Bullock had fled from the wheel. And he had timed Weatherbee's departure well—he had ample time to gain his own stateroom by the time the other pilot careened into the tilting, crazy pilot house. That was why, as he sprang for the wheel, Rip Weatherbee suddenly made a startling discovery. The pilot house was empty; Bullock was gone, and nobody stood at the wheel. But it was not until two minutes later, when Spike Regan, a mate, and a couple of deckhands flooded the pilot house, that Rip Weatherbee realized another blinding, stunning fact.

The pilot-house clock pointed to exactly five minutes of twelve—his own watch was not over. No wonder now that Spike Regan stared aghast at him; no wonder that horror and doubt stood in the others' eyes. For Regan was yelling: "Good Lord, Rip! What happened!" And from the decks below, as the *Prophet Daniel* began to slump sidewise like a weary elephant, came a harsh burst of women's screaming and heavy, masculine oaths.

"I—I——" Weatherbee began, his hands grasping the now useless wheel.

"You've sunk her!" Regan cried savagely. "How the devil——"

But suddenly Rip Weatherbee knew the worst. He knew that his boat had been smashed on his watch; he knew, too, that the empty pilot house told its own tale. Adam Bullock had wrecked the *Prophet Daniel* and fled; and now he, Rip Weatherbee, stood there licked. His very presence at the wheel, the fact that it still lacked five minutes before his watch ended, proved to everybody that he had run the boat on the reef. Why deny it? He knew now why Adam Bullock had relieved him ten minutes ahead of time; knew also the meaning of those constant, furtive, simmering glances. But he braced his shoulders, turned wildly on Spike Regan. Even above the roar of the panic surging below his voice carried: "I didn't do it, Spike! I didn't do it!" And then the uproar drowned his words.

At that moment, gallantly assisting lady passengers into the lifeboats, Adam Bullock grinned. "It worked!" he told himself grinning crookedly. "I put the damn thing over!"

In the two days that passed between the time of the smashing of the *Prophet Daniel* and the meeting of the inquiry board to establish the blame for her fate, Rip Weatherbee knew the real hell of the river. He knew what it was to go down sunny streets while people jerked heads his way, whispering: "It was *him* that done it. It was him that smashed the *Prophet Daniel.*" He was made aware of the distrust, the outraged feeling of the old Mississippi; because she is a mother who does not fondle failures. Rip Weatherbee walked the path of outcasts—a narrow, stumbling lane beween clouds of innuendo, suspicion and accusation. He could stand before a slim girl with a white face and mutter brokenly: "It was Bullock, I'm tellin' you, Annie! I wasn't even at the wheel!" But the verdict of the crowd was against him.

"Allers was somethin funny about this Rip Weatherbee," they told each other. "Allers kinda tight-mouth an' seemin' not to be listenin' to what hon-

est folks had to say. Broodin'. I bet you he's done even worse things than smashin' a steamboat!" And they were words that stuck. Two days before Rip Weatherbee had looked calmly, contentedly ahead at a long vista of pleasing years; now he stared dejectedly at the hard, malignant face of the river.

He had told his version of that fatal night to Spike Regan; and he knew the captain of the *Prophet Daniel* believed him. But convincing the steamboat's owner was another matter; he had refused to see it in the same light.

"It's one pilot's word against another's," he said sharply to Regan. "And the fact remains that it was Weatherbee who was there at the wheel, five minutes before his watch ended. You saw him there yourself."

An attempt to cow Adam Bullock had been equally futile. He knew that he was safe, secure—nothing could shake his story. He denied ever having been up in the pilot house at that time. He swore he was pulling his clothes on when the crash came. Not yet had he looked into Rip Weatherbee's accusing eyes; but he was not afraid even to face them. He was arrogant, cocky, when the day dawned for the meeting of the inquiry board. He went to its meeting confident, assured that he could stand his ground. He had no other course open to him, anyhow; to slip away now would not only mean the loss of the senior pilot berth which he was going to obtain by Weatherbee's dismissal, but would cast suspicion on him as well. So he hoisted a bottle of bourbon, with effect, and appeared promptly before the inquiry board. He did flinch a little before Captain Regan's stern gaze; he did tremble visibly before Rip Weatherbee's savage stare; but he stood his ground, just the same.

"We'll get this over quick, gentlemen," the State inspector told them, looking around his little office. "Reports show that the boat itself is capable of being repaired—thanks to your efficient work, Captain Regan. I've got the report of Pilot Weatherbee here before me, and I confess this is less easily disposed of." He frowned, and tapped his desk-top with a forefinger.

Now bourbon whisky is capable of many things; in this case it was fully equal to the task of making Adam Bullock brazenly confident. He repeated his story—that he had not been in the pilot house for at least four hours before the smash came. He saw "Liar!" whispered sullenly on Rip Weatherbee's lips; saw, too, with a tremor, the gnarled, knotted fists of the tall, lanky pilot. But he went on just the same. The whisky got into his tongue, loosened it, made him anxious to pile even more onto the head of the man he hated.

So it was that, presently, he was saying: "I kinda thought somethin' like that might happen—that Weatherbee might pull somethin' like that. I was watchin' him all the time. You see, somethin' funny happened a week before the smash. I didn't want to say nothin' before, but——"

The State inspector leaned forward. "It is your duty to reveal anything which may throw light on this matter."

"Well——" Bullock began. He reddened. "As I was sayin' just about a week before the smash come I found out somethin'—that Weatherbee was goin' crooked. It was just accident, my findin' it out; but I did, just the same." He stared at the floor, trying to collect his thoughts and words. He'd make this good—remove the last vestige of doubt about his part in the wrecking of the *Prophet Daniel*. He'd fix this Weatherbee for keeps. "It was one night at New Orleans in a saloon. I stepped out into the back yard to get a breath of air, an' I seen two men talkin' together. One of 'em was a man with a voice I didn't recognize, an' the other was Weatherbee here. I couldn't see their faces; it was that dark. But I could

hear what they was mutterin'. It seems this other feller was offerin' Weatherbee money to wreck the *Prophet Daniel*——"

Only Spike Regan's leap stopped Rip Weatherbee as he flung himself across the room at the snarling face of Adam Bullock. But he did stop him just in time. Regan pushed his man down into a chair and turned to face Bullock. And suddenly there was a strange light in the eyes of the captain of the *Prophet Daniel*. The State inspector saw that glare, wondered at it. Bullock saw it, too, puzzled and disconcerted. His mouth sagged a trifle as Regan faced him.

"You're sure about it?" Regan began, his eyes raking Adam Bullock. "You don't know the name of the man who offered Weatherbee money to wreck the boat?" Queer, odd light shone in the questioner's eyes now.

Bullock shook his head. "I told you I couldn't—I told you it was too dark to see their faces. I wouldn't have knowed who they was if I hadn't heard Weatherbee's voice." Suddenly he was uneasy, shaken. It couldn't be possible that, at the last moment, he had given himself away. His eyes stared at Captain Regan, as the other repeated: "Pitch-black dark, huh? Couldn't see a thing?"

"Couldn't see nothin'!" Bullock gasped, trembling. "Couldn't see your hand before your face!"

And at last, like a swift curtain-rise, the concern, the lines of worry went from Spike Regan's face. He didn't turn even to look at Weatherbee, who had gone to the window, his back turned dejectedly to the room. There was something gleaming and triumphant in Spike Regan's eyes now, as they fastened upon Adam Bullock; something mysterious, confident, in their depths, as he turned to the State inspector:

"You heard that story, suh? You heard Bullock say it was so dark he couldn't see a thing, an' yet Weatherbee was acceptin' a bribe from an unknown man? Well, I'll prove that story's a lie—an' that the man who made it lied when he swore he didn't run the *Prophet Daniel* on that reef!"

Bullock squirmed; the State inspector stared. Captain Regan said: "Watch!" and jerked his thumb over to the broad back of Weatherbee, still staring from the window. They watched. And suddenly Regan flung out his arm and crashed to the floor a huge glass carboy which had been standing, half filled, on the table. Like a terrific explosion it broke on the still air; the State inspector jumped, startled; and Bullock cursed. "Look!" Regan shouted. Both men did.

And, following his outstretched hand, they beheld Rip Weatherbee's broad back. He had not even stirred!

"I call that an iron nerve!" the inspector began. But Regan stopped him.

"Nerve, hell!" he exploded. "That's to prove to you that this cock-an'-bull story of Bullock's is a lie! He lies when he says he heard those two talking in the dark. He lies because Rip Weatherbee can't talk with anybody in the dark. He's got to be in the light where he can see the person he's talkin' to—see 'em close enough to read their lips!" He laughed now. "Ever since Rip Weatherbee came to the river people have been sayin' he was queer. They said you could say things behind his back an' get away with it. Of course you can, but not in front of him, where he can read your lips. See now?

"Exactly," Regan said, crossing happily across the room to touch Rip Weatherbee on the shoulder. Weatherbee saw instantly the relief in his friend's face. But Bullock's mouth was hanging wide open, as Regan grinned:

"Rip Weatherbee's stone-deaf!"

Watch for future stories by Moran Tudury.

By Fred MacIsaac

In Five Parts—Part IV

THE Golden Leaf

Author of "Two Seats on the Aisle," "The Last Atlantide," Etc.

Lincoln Rafter is traveling in the Near East in the interest of the Great Egyptian and Turkish Cigarette Corporation of New York, his guide and companion being Miltiades Darkrino, son of the corporation's Greek agent. Rafter meets secretly and wins the heart of Princess Anelda, American-educated granddaughter of Nicholas Darnyela, impoverished Balkan prince. To gain dowry money, so that he can marry Anelda to King Otto of Westfalisa, Nicholas "raids" tobacco warehouses and carries off tobacco belonging to Rafter's company, intending to turn it over eventually to Sidi Ben Ara, manager of a rival company. Rafter impersonates one of the truck drivers whom Nicholas forces to transport the tobacco to Darnyela Castle. Lincoln hopes to reach Anelda, who is being kept close within the grounds, and run away with her. He is having a look around when he runs squarely into Sidi Ben Ara—fears recognition.

CHAPTER XXI.

BRODIE BUYS A MULE.

PETE BRODIE shut the door of the empty warehouse, after Link had rushed off to join the other drivers, and waited patiently until he heard the caravan rattle and rumble away. Then he opened the door and from the darkness watched the road for another ten minutes, until a band of some twenty horsemen galloped past with a great clatter and jangle of arms and accouterments. This he knew to be the outfit which had feigned an attack upon the town.

Confident then that the coast was clear, he moved into the road and walked rapidly into the village. The streets were dark, for the riders had shot at the street lamps; and the houses were dark, because the inhabitants had quickly extinguished their lights, and were probably lying flat on the floor of their homes to escape flying bullets. When he reached the center of the town

he was stopped by a half dozen policemen who rushed out of a building, presumably the police station, and presented revolvers.

"Who are you and what are you doing abroad?" demanded their chief.

"I am one of the drivers of the tobacco trucks," he said in crude but understandable Greek. "You needn't be afraid, the raiders have gone. I saw them pass the tobacco warehouses ten minutes ago."

"I am not afraid," returned the police chief. "Who were those men and what was their purpose?"

"I don't know who they were, but their purpose was to run off with the tobacco trucks. While part of the band drove you under cover, the others rounded up the truck drivers and forced them to drive the trucks into the hills."

He enjoyed the astonishment this information created.

"Where are you going and how did you happen to escape?" demanded the policeman, as soon as he got his breath.

"I hid in one of the empty warehouses when I saw what was up; and I'm on my way to the inn to make a report to my employers."

"Two of you men go with him to the inn," commanded the chief. "The rest of you accompany me to the warehouses."

"And a lot of good that will do you," observed Brodie in English.

He followed his escort to the inn, and found the dozen guests, some in various stages of undress, assembled in the lobby.

Among them was Vradine and a young man who Brodie guessed to be Miltiades Darkrino.

The chief tobacco agent recognized Brodie as the man he had seen talking to Rafter, and immediately rushed forward to demand information.

Brodie gave it to him curtly and rather humorously. Vradine began to shriek and tear his hair, giving vent to lamentations in Turkish, Syrian and Greek; while the other guests, who had listened eagerly, filled the air with cries of astonishment. The American watched them with a satirical grin. Ten years of familiarity with the emotional Levantines had not completely dulled the amusement they furnished him.

"Did you see anything of an American named Rafter? You are the man whose truck he was driving yesterday, are you not?" asked Darkrino.

"Yeh, and I got a message for you, if you're Darkrino—a private message."

"Where is he?"

"Waal, I guess he's quite a ways from here by now, headed north and west."

"Did you say Rafter?" demanded Vradine. "The fellow knew about this raid. I believe he was a spy."

Brodie stepped close to him and lifted a suggestive fist.

"You start knocking my pal, mister, and I'll knock you for a home run," he snarled.

"Don't be a fool, Vradine!" commanded Darkrino. "This comes of your leaving the trucks unguarded. Come upstairs, Mr. Brodie, and deliver your message."

He led the truckman to his room and motioned to him to be seated. "Now, what is the message?" he demanded.

"My friend Rafter sent word that the raid was conducted by Prince Nicholas something or other——"

"By heavens! Darnyela of Adrianska?"

"That's the baby!"

Miltiades made a gesture of stupefaction. "But that's not possible. Nicholas is no thief."

"Rafter seemed to know what he was talking about, mister."

"Where is he?" demanded Miltiades impatiently.

"I guess him and Nick is halfway to this Darnyela place by now. Last I

seen of him he was driving my truck, wearing my overalls."

"You mean he went off with the raiders? The imbecile! The complete fool!"

"Yeh, that's what I told him. But he said his girl's grandfather was running the show, and it was the best way for him to pay her a call."

"Yes," said Miltiades. "He is madly in love, and he might do such an idiotic thing; but he will be discovered and slain. And I'm responsible for him to the company. Why didn't he tell me what he suspected? I remember, now that he asked some queer questions at dinner."

"Well," drawled Brodie, "now you know who swiped the smokes, all you got to do is to have him pinched and get it back."

"That's all you know about it," snapped the Greek. "If these were ordinary bandits, we could run them down. But we can't accuse Prince Nicholas Darnyela without convincing evidence; and the only person who identifies him as the bandit goes off with the band."

"You go right to his place and make a search," suggested Brodie. "If you find the stuff, you got the thief; and if he can hide twenty-four loaded ten-ton trucks, he's the wonder of the world."

"There isn't much sense in explaining to you," replied Darkrino. "Prince Nicholas was the reigning Prince of Molvania, which is now a part of Jugoslavia. But he lives in a huge fortress on top of a hill, and the whole country round is inhabited by his ex-subjects, who are just as devoted as ever. The only way to get into his castle would be with a strong force of troops; and if Greece crossed the frontier, it would mean war with Jugoslavia.

"I doubt if the King of Jugoslavia would dare send an army against him, except upon the most positive evidence. And even then he would hesitate, because conditions are very delicate in that artificial kingdom.

"We would have to prove to Jugoslavia that Nicholas had the trucks inside his walls. And even then that government would probably accept a denial from Nicholas, and do nothing. The only atom of proof is Rafter's message to me; and that's not evidence. If he had recognized Nicholas and brought charges against him, it would be something. But he had to go off with the raiders!"

"Yeh, and he wore my overalls. I ain't used to going round without my overalls. It's lucky I wore pants under them. Sometimes I don't."

"Well, I'm much obliged for your information. Will you remain in town a few days? I'll pay your expenses."

"Oh, sure. The kid seemed to think you'd go after him."

"He won't live more than a few hours after he gets inside that castle. He's sure to be recognized as not a regular truck driver."

"That so? Then I guess I can't hang round here. He's a nice kid; and I'm going to drift up that way to see what I can do."

"You can't cross the frontier without a passport, man."

"Say, leave that to me! I ain't been living in these funny countries ten or twelve years for nothing. I don't care nothing about your tobacco, but I'm kind of fond of that young feller. He's got nerve."

Miltiades inspected the man with new interest.

"You are rather a remarkable person," he said warmly. "I warn you that Nicholas is an old soldier, and, having made up his mind to do this thing, he is not likely to be off his guard. If you are caught in the vicinity of his stronghold, you won't live long."

"Maybe I won't get caught."

"Then pay attention to me. The tobacco is worthless to Nicholas so long

as it is inside his walls," exclaimed the Greek. "He did not make this raid without knowing how he would dispose of the leaf, so the trucks will come out very shortly and move on to a place of delivery. There is a million dollars' worth of tobacco in Darnyela, and I can promise on behalf of the company a very large reward for information leading to its recovery; ten thousand dollars at least. You lay low and try to find out where Nicholas is sending it. And help Rafter, of course, if you can."

"You don't say! Ten thousand dollars! Well, I could use it. I'm starting to-night. Could you advance me, on the chance of that reward, some money. I'm broke. I need to buy a horse or a mule. How far is this Adrianska place?"

"Thirty or forty miles. I'll give you two thousand drachmas; that's a hundred dollars in your money."

"You don't have to tell me. You're a gent, Mr. Darkrino."

The tattered Greek bills were passed and pocketed. Then the men shook hands and Brodie took his leave. After he had gone, Miltiades rang the bell and sent a servant to find Vradine.

Vradine burst in within two or three minutes, his face very pale, his manner hysterical.

"Compose yourself," commanded Miltiades. "I have important information." He went on to say what he had learned from Brodie; and the news did not prove consoling to the agent.

"But this is terrible!" Vradine declared. "I supposed it was an insane bandit raid. How can we proceed against Prince Nicholas!"

"We can't," Miltiades replied. "After all, the losers are Americans; relations between Greece and Jugoslavia are not too friendly; and the Greek government won't dare make very strong representations, even if we lay absolute proofs of Nicholas' guilt before it. As for Jugoslavia, they won't do a thing. If we were not working for the companies we would think it a good joke on America, and that will be the attitude of both governments, unofficially. Nicholas is a shrewd old devil and he understood perfectly that, once across the frontier with the trucks, he was absolutely safe."

Vradine nodded. "True. But how can he dispose of the tobacco?"

"I thought of that, too. Be sure he knew where there was a market before he made the raid."

"He can't parade twenty-four trucks of stolen tobacco into Fiume or Constantinople; and of course he wouldn't dare bring it into Greece again. Where can he find a market?"

"I know something that you do not," Miltiades told him. "I happen to know that Sidi Ben Ara was a guest of Nicholas for a few days not long ago."

"Ah, the scoundrel! I had not thought of him."

"Depend upon it, he conceived the plot. Nicholas made the raid at his instigation. The old man is in great need of cash. If Ben Ara can get the leaf to Cairo he can sell it and make half a million American dollars profit.

"But Adrianska in the Balkans is a long way from Cairo; and all ports will be watched, of course."

Darkrino nodded. "Except for certain private affairs of my friend Lincoln Rafter that awakened his suspicions of Prince Nicholas, we would naturally suppose that this was the work of bandits—Bulgarians, Turks, or Servians; and we would have wasted many weeks scouring the mountains for a trace of them. Nobody would dream of connecting the Darnyelas with a piece of brigandage of this sort; and Nicholas would have all the time in the world to deliver the goods to Sidi Ben Ara."

"Where?"

"That's the question."

Miltiades produced a map, which he spread out on the table.

"There is Adrianska," he said, pointing to a dot upon the map. "Since we believe that Sidi Ben Ara is at the bottom of this, and because we know where his market is, we may assume he has a ship to convey the leaf across the Mediterranean. Look. What is the nearest sea coast from this spot?"

"Albania."

"Exactly. And Albania is not more than seventy-five miles wide; and there are several villages off which a vessel could anchor and take a cargo with lighters. From Adrianska to the Albanian frontier is only fifty miles. In three days the truck could make the journey to the sea, traveling only at night. We must catch them on the road in Albania."

"But Greece cannot invade Albania with troops," protested the agent.

"No; but money can go anywhere. There is only one road possible across Albania for trucks. I shall wire for money to-night. To-morrow you and I go to Albania. We can hire one of those mountain chiefs to lay an ambuscade upon the road with three or four hundred men, and we can do it for a few thousand American dollars. I have a man going to Adrianska to spy out the lay of the land and to try to let us know when the start is made. Vradine, we are going to get that tobacco back; and we owe it to poor Rafter."

"I suppose there is nothing we can do for the young fool?"

Miltiades shook his head. "He is in the lion's den, or will be by morning. If there were only a few hundred soldiers here, we might have pursued and captured the convoy before it reached the frontier. But as it is, we must use our wits to get back the tobacco, and let Rafter shift for himself. I warned the poor chap."

"Why has he behaved so absurdly?"

Miltiades smiled sadly. "He is in love with the Princess Anelda, daughter of Nicholas. I presume he thinks he will be allowed to sing a serenade under her window."

"The idiot!"

"I liked him," sighed Miltiades. "I'm sending this telegram, and then going to bed. In the morning be prepared to start for Albania."

Miltiades had not exaggerated in the slightest degree the delicacy of the international situation in the Balkans. War had several times blazed out in those mountains for less cause than an indiscretion in pursuing a stolen tobacco convoy.

The former possessions of Turkey in Europe are divided between Greece, Bulgaria, Jugoslavia and Albania; and the hatred and jealousy of those four nations passes the bounds of good sense. Alleged spies are always being executed on all sides; and the situation is further scrambled by the fact that there are large numbers of the subjects of all of these nations under the rule of each; not to mention a million or so of downtrodden Turks who are paying in this generation for the outrages committed against the Christians by their ancestors.

Only a few months before this story opened, a squabble between frontier guards resulted in a Greek force crossing into Bulgaria and a Bulgarian army hastening to exchange shots with it. Had it not been for quick action by the League of Nations, the whole powder magazine would have exploded then and there.

Albania, alleged to be a kingdom, existed only because of the mutual jealousies of the other powers and the knowledge that Italy would not tolerate its absorption by either Greece or Jugoslavia. It possessed a king who hugged his palace and whose mandates carried for a radius of only a few miles around it. It was actually a collection of small fiefs ruled by feudal chieftains from inaccessible mountain fastnesses. These men were more independent than the

French nobles in the reign of Louis the Eleventh.

Besides, some of these chiefs could muster a thousand men, some only a hundred or so; but it was to nobody's interest to subdue them; and they exist as they have existed for many centuries, as independent of their king as they were of their sultan. Though this strange country was only seventy-five miles wide at the spot where Miltiades assumed that Nicholas would attempt to cross it, the crossing would be attended with extraordinary difficulties, most of which neither the Greek nor Nicholas anticipated.

CHAPTER XXII.

NICHOLAS RAISES THE ANTE.

LINCOLN RAFTER stood tense as the black eyes of Sidi Ben Ara roamed over him, waiting for the cry of recognition and without the slightest hope of escaping the crafty Egyptian. But Link was not aware what a different figure he presented to the plotter from the well-groomed and sleek young man of the inn at Yastib.

He had a growth of stubble upon his chin, which was incrusted with dust and grease; he wore overalls much too big for him; and if his hair was blond and his eyes blue, so were those of half the Molvanians, Serbs and Bulgarians around him. Furthermore, the presence of Lincoln Rafter in Darnyela Castle was the last thing that the Egyptian was likely to suspect; he supposed that young man was safe in Yastib bewailing with the other employees of the American companies the loss of the tobacco hoard.

So he walked on with Prince Nicholas, thought nothing of the uncouth truck driver he had inspected, and discussed with the prince the business at hand, while they stood before a laden truck and congratulated each other upon their successful raid.

Nicholas, as Miltiades had declared, was an old soldier and a good one. He had timed his attack perfectly, attained his object, and brought off the convoy without the loss of a member of his band or the killing of an opponent. Now he had shut his gates, placed himself in a state to resist siege, and had no anticipation of being disturbed.

He did not believe that his identity as chief of the raiders was known; but if it did happen to leak out, he would not be alarmed, for he, as well as Darkrino, knew that the Greeks dared not cross the frontier. An exchange of shots and Jugoslavia would spring to arms. And he was confident that the king, in Belgrade, would shut his eyes to evidence implicating his good cousin of Adrianska. Let Molvania declare her independence and a dozen other unwilling units of the Versailles Treaty kingdom might be up in arms.

"Here is your tobacco, Egyptian," he declared. "Now where are my thirty thousand English pounds?"

"I shall deliver them when the trucks are at the water's edge," replied Sidi.

"Then you will never get them," replied the prince. "I shall hold the stuff here and sell it, a few bags at a time, for my own advantage."

"Suppose I pay you half now and half when you deliver to the ship."

"You pay all now and five thousand pounds more when we reach the Albanian port."

The Egyptian protested. "But that was not in the bargain. You demanded thirty thousand instead of twenty thousand, and I acceeded to your demand."

"You told me the tobacco was worth a hundred thousand pounds; but I know now it is worth two hundred thousand to you, landed in Cairo. I shall need at least a hundred and fifty men to convey the trucks to the sea. We shall encounter hostile Albanian clans. The raid into Greece was child's play compared to the next adventure."

"You are taking an unfair advantage," the Egyptian pleaded.

The old warrior gave him a wicked smile. "I was a poor but honest prince," he said, "despoiled of my lands, unable to raise the dowry of my beloved granddaughter; and through your machinations I have reverted to the habits of my ancestors. I am now a predatory buzzard, Sidi Ben Ara, and my principles I have thrust into the fire. I might go through your baggage and take possession of the money which I know you brought with you, and I might hang you from the watchtower and keep the tobacco for myself. After all, having taken the first step, why should I hesitate? Yet, for thirty thousand pounds delivered here, and five thousand in the port of Albania, I will keep my word and escort the trucks to the sea."

Sidi Ben Ara's eyes were venomous; but he knew he was helpless. He made a gesture of despair. "Very well. Since I must, I agree."

"Good!" cried Nicholas, who then thumped the frail yellow man on the back with a huge hand. "After all, you will make hundreds of thousands, where I make thousands; but I have no heart to haggle, nor am I a tradesman to buy and sell. Give me my price and take your loot."

"You will not abandon me; you will escort the trucks?"

"How dare you question my promise?" thundered the old man. "What is your port?"

"Polina."

"Good! It is small; the roadstead is calm; and it is nearest to the castle. Let us return to the house, and you will give me my money."

When they reëntered the house, Lincoln was no longer near the portal. He had no desire to tempt fate a second time.

Rafter had followed a lane which opened between the end of the barracks upon the right-hand side of the plaza and the castle. He found himself approaching a long row of sheds—the stables of the Darnyelas. These extended for a couple of hundred feet. Most of them were in an extremely dilapidated condition; and Link estimated that there must have been room, in the past, for a thousand horses.

A number of saddled animals were hitched to posts in the space in front of the stables; and he saw signs that several of the sheds were still in use. He continued on past the stables and found himself gradually circling toward the rear of the castle, following the contour of the outer wall. He passed several tobacco trucks during his progress, and continued to marvel that so many of the huge vehicles could be tucked away in this ancient place.

If there was no evidence of their presence to anybody outside the walls, it was impossible to conceal them from the inmates of the place; and he wondered whether Anelda knew what her grandfather had done. No girl brought up in the Balkans could fail to recognize bales of tobacco when she saw them; and she must know that Prince Nicholas, of whose poverty she had told her lover, could not be the owner of these gigantic and expensive motor lorries. In some way she must have had an inkling of the projected raid when she had sent him the warning; yet she was too loyal to betray her grandfather.

He saw that there was a large garden at the rear of the castle, surrounded by a six-foot wall. Beyond the wall the ground sloped sharply, and on this incline scores of small houses filled the space between it and the outer wall. In olden times hundreds, perhaps thousands, of retainers must have lived here; at present this part of the village seemed quite uninhabited.

In the course of an hour he had made a complete circuit of the stronghold and was back at the spot from which he had

started. He had learned that the ancient princes of Darnyela, rulers of Molvania, had been powerful chiefs; but he would not have exchanged their castle for a bungalow in New Jersey. Except in the garden behind the castle proper, there was not a blade of grass, not a tree or a flower. It was a moldering mass of ruins—dusty, dirty, depressing.

He knew that the presence of a hundred armed men within the walls was due to the tobacco raid; and wild and unpleasant as these men were they gave life to the castle. How dismal it must be under ordinary circumstances, when a few servants and Nicholas and his granddaughter were the only inhabitants of the old roost of dead-and-gone robbers.

Noticing a group of the truck drivers at the entrance to their quarters, he avoided them; for he had no wish to be challenged. Finding the door of an empty hut ajar, he pushed it wide open and entered. The place was thick with dust and looked as though it had not been lived in for fifty years; but it contained an ancient wooden chair into which he dropped.

Like all well-groomed men accustomed to regular bathing and shaving, he was extremely uncomfortable with bristles on his face and the sense of being dirtier than ever before in his life. Since traveling in Macedonia he had been compelled to get along without bathing in a porcelain tub with clean hot water; but he had managed to sponge himself at the wash basins in the various apologies for hotels. Apparently these people never bathed and rarely shaved; nor did any except himself seem to miss water in their barracks.

He shuddered at the thought that Anelda might see him looking like this; for how could he, yet, be sure of Anelda, who had only seen him twice, and the second interview had been in darkness. Of course that far-off glimpse she had of him in Omega years ago did not count.

On the other hand, if he were able to clean himself and shave, peel off the greasy overalls, and present himself before her, he would be in dire danger from her grandfather, whom Sidi Ben Ara would hasten to acquaint with his identity. He leaned his elbows upon his knees, his chin in his hands; and in that cramped position fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THOUSAND-POUND BANK NOTES.

PRINCESS ANELDA that afternoon was reclining upon her chaise longue beside her window that gave such a magnificent view of the hills. She was wearing her picturesque Persian costume, and wishing that Lincoln Rafter might catch a glimpse of her in her magnificent apparel. If he were already madly in love with her, and she had reason to believe that he was, how much more infatuated he would become if he could see her in a really becoming costume. Well, after they were married she would always wear such robes in the privacy of their apartments. She sighed; of course the prospects of such a happy condition were exceedingly remote. Lincoln Rafter had given her a taste of romance for which she was very grateful; but her fate would be to be the frau of a fat, discontented, exiled monarch. Her grandfather had arranged that.

She was not speaking to her grandfather since, without rhyme or reason, he had shipped off her American maid. All she had got from him as an explanation was that events were about to take place which it would not be well for an American to witness. That, as it happened, actually was his only reason.

Sidi Ben Ara, familiar from boyhood with love intriuges, had seen Mary hand a letter to Lincoln Rafter. In the Orient maidservants are always inter-

mediaries between lovers, and Sidi had instantly jumped to the conclusion that Rafter and the princess had been acquaintances, perhaps sweethearts, in America.

Mary Shane's homeliness caused him to take no stock in Rafter's explanation. Besides, if they had met for personal motives, why should she deliver to him a letter? And if she were acting as messenger, whom could she be representing except her mistress?

However, he was too subtle to offer this theory to Prince Nicholas, lest the prince take his anger out upon the tale bearer. And he had no wish to make his highness suspicious of Anelda; he wished her to be able to go and come as usual, because he was considering a plan of his own regarding her.

He had called attention to the fact that the maid was an American, and had informed Nicholas that he had seen her in friendly conversation with an American employee of the tobacco company which they were planning to despoil. And he needed to say no more; Nicholas sent her immediately about her business.

Anelda missed Mary Shane keenly. The Slav peasant girl who had taken her place was incompetent, unable to dress her mistress' hair, mend a gown, or give an intelligent opinion of how it looked on her. And Anelda had used Mary as a confidant, and enjoyed the active sympathy of the American woman. She loved to have Mary tell her what a wonderful-looking man Lincoln Rafter was, and what a splendid husband he would make.

She had argued furiously with her grandfather in vain. Unable to learn from him why it was no longer safe to employ the New York girl, she had asked deft questions of the menservants and learned that there was to be a raid and that its object was Yastib. What he expected to gain by such an outrageous swoop across the border of an officially friendly country, she could not discover. But she had learned enough to send her warning to Lincoln Rafter.

She had been awakened in the early hours of the morning by the roaring of truck engines at the gate. Terrified at first, she had crossed to an unoccupied room at the front of the castle and looked down upon the extraordinary scene in the court. Great motor lorries were moving in, heavily laden; and by the glare of gasoline torches she had seen her grandfather superintending the work, while his followers were bent beneath bales which she recognized readily enough as tobacco leaf.

So that was the redoubtable exploit which was to win her dowry, the capture of a defenseless village for the sake of stealing tobacco.

Anelda was a Darnyela, and she had never felt any reason to be ashamed of her ancestors. Their raids into hostile territory, their sharp fights with alert enemies, and their returns driving before them herds of cattle and sheep, bleeding from wounds but victorious, were part of a savage but heroic past. *This* was degrading. Her grandfather had attacked a peaceful village and carried off tobacco. It was plain theft; there was no other name for it. She raged at the disgrace the foolish old man had brought upon the unstained name he bore.

Educated in a law-abiding land, she expected retribution to follow fast, her grandfather to be laid by the heels and taken off to stand trial as a common thief. In his eagerness to procure money, the old man had lost his senses. Even King Otto would not accept funds obtained in such manner, nor would he mate with the daughter of a dishonored family.

Of course Anelda was not aware how shrewdly Nicholas had sized up the situation. She would have been astonished to learn that he could steal all the motor trucks in the world and tobacco worth

in foreign markets a million dollars and escape unquestioned. And if she had known it, her sense of the wrong committed would have been as keen.

She went back to her bed and cried herself to sleep. When she met her grandfather at breakfast she did not exchange a word with him. But as this had been her attitude before, he ignored it; for he had more important things on his mind.

During the afternoon Anelda attained a more peaceful state of mind. She concentrated upon Lincoln Rafter, who loved her so ardently and whose love she returned. Perhaps King Otto would refuse the dowry, in view of the manner in which it was obtained, and she would escape her fate. But she did not know King Otto, who at that moment was being dunned for his house rent.

Presently there came a tap on her door; and her grandfather entered, radiating benevolence.

"Ha, little dove!" he exclaimed. "Dreaming of your future husband?"

She was, in truth; but not of the husband he had in mind.

"All is well," declared the prince, sitting heavily down at her feet upon the chaise longue. "I have something to show you, Anelda."

He drew out of his breast pocket a huge bundle of oblong sheets of paper which he proceeded to display before her astonished eyes.

"Bank of England notes for quite a few thousand pounds," he exclaimed. "Look, sweet one—wealth, happiness, and a crown is what they mean for you."

Anelda could not help looking, and her eyes widened. But she frowned.

"Where did you get that money?" she demanded.

"I achieved it with my good sword."

"As a matter of fact, grandfather, you stole it," she retorted. "You have disgraced us, and you will be punished."

"What? My granddaughter has the temerity—— Be careful, Anelda! I shall lose my temper. Is this your gratitude?"

"I don't want to marry that old King Otto. I was awake this morning, and I saw you come in with those truck loads of tobacco. You know you stole that money, grandfather."

"Ahem! I carried out a military expedition into Greek territory and captured a convoy of tobacco. It is spoil of conquest, Anelda. You must not use the word 'stole.'"

"Others will use it when you are brought to trial."

He roared with laughter. "So that is what is worrying my little hen. No one dares question Nicholas of Adrianska. No one knows who captured the tobacco; it will be attributed to hill bandits. Every truck is safely inside our walls. As for Otto, he will never know where your dowry came from."

"Yes, he will; because I shall tell him. It is dishonest money, grandfather. Besides, I don't think I shall marry King Otto, so you might as well give it back."

"So! Well, let me tell you that your years in America spoiled you, young woman. You have imbibed pernicious doctrines. You will marry King Otto just as soon as the wedding may be arranged; and that will be very soon, because he needs money. You will do what I command, because you are my granddaughter."

"I am twenty-three years old and a free agent."

"Bah!" he snorted. "I am the head of the house and I give your hand in marriage to whom I please, no matter what your age may be. I shall talk with you again when you have come to your senses."

He gathered up his British bank notes and moved out of the room with great dignity, leaving Anelda in tears.

Presently the girl rose, bathed her face and studied her reddened eyes.

She did her best for them, and powdered her nose. Then she doffed her pretty Persian costume and put on a Western dress, after which she descended to the street floor and passed out into the garden. It was rather a sad garden. For years the place had lacked intelligent attention. It was a tangle of weeds, briers, thick bushes, overgrown hedges, and fruit trees that were past their prime. There were still a number of healthy rose bushes, and these Anelda had been tending herself since she had returned to the castle. It was a labor of love.

It was growing dusk, as she worked; but she kept on, because it took her mind off her troubles. Finally she turned and saw a movement in a group of bushes. A dog, perhaps, had got in and must be turned out. She parted the bushes and gazed into the ferocious face of a man, who instantly clapped big hands about her throat.

"Help!" she gurgled. And the tongue which she knew better than her own came first to her lips; she spoke in English. Instantly the hands were removed.

" 'Scuse me, lady," said her assailant. "I didn't know you was one of us."

CHAPTER XXIV.

CUPID'S MESSENGER.

ANELDA attempted to scamper away, but the man's grasp changed to her arm and gently detained her.

"Wait a minute. You're American or English," he said.

"How dare you touch me! Who are you?" she exclaimed.

"Say, are you Link Rafter's girl?"

Anelda's terror vanished and eagerness took its place. "Yes," she declared. "I am the Princess Anelda Darnyela. Do you come from Mr. Rafter?"

"This is a piece of luck!" exclaimed Pete Brodie.

"Did Lincoln send you with a message for me?" she demanded.

The truck driver inspected her with admiration. "I'll say that kid is some picker," he observed. "Stoop down here. Somebody might see us, standing up."

Anelda immediately flopped upon the grass, being partially hidden from observation by the bushes, while Brodie concealed himself entirely.

"No, marm, he didn't send me. I came after him."

"You mean he is here?" she cried.

"Well, I don't exactly know where he is. It's this way, miss. Link and me was hiding when your old man—excuse me, the prince, swiped our tobacco. Your father——"

"Grandfather," she corrected.

"The old gent rounded up the truck drivers. But I wasn't there; and first thing I know, Link takes my place. He says it's the only way he can break into this joint."

"Then Lincoln is in the castle," exclaimed Anelda. "Find him and tell him to go. He is in danger here."

"Say, he eats danger! He don't think nothing of it. Trouble is I can't find him. You see, I got a mule and followed the convoy. I caught up to them easy, because they had to go slow; but I hung back till they reached the gate. Then they had to take part of the load off each truck to get it through, and the prince's men began to carry in the bales that was dropped on the ground. It was pretty dark; so I turned the mule loose, slipped among them, and carried in a bale. Then I sneaked into an old house and lay low. They let the truck drivers loose inside the walls, and I been wandering round looking for Link, but I can't find him."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her hands at her heart. "Has something happened to him?"

"I don't think so, because I talked to some of the boys, and they said the whole train came through without an accident. I thought he might have got

into this garden, looking for you, so I sneaked over the wall up at the far end and I been layin' low there, waiting till it gets dark, so I can get out."

"Lincoln Rafter in the castle!" she exclaimed. "I'm so frightened, and yet I'm so glad. You must be a wonderful friend to come to his aid, Mr.——"

"Brodie, marm. Pete Brodie. Say, now that I seen you, I know why he took a chance. Can you get out here at night?"

"Certainly. I'm not a prisoner."

"If I find him, I'll bring him around in a couple of hours."

"I'll be so grateful to you, Mr. Brodie."

"Oh, that ain't anything. Think of you being a princess in a place like this and talking American."

"I lived thirteen years in America. I love it."

"I do too; though it ain't so good, they say, since prohibition. I been out here for thirteen years."

"You tell Lincoln that I shall be on this spot at nine o'clock and shall remain here until he comes, unless I am summoned into the house."

Darnyela Castle, that dreary and tiresome old mass of stone and mortar, had suddenly become the most interesting place in the world to Anelda. She entered gayly and smiled delightfully upon her grandfather, whom she encountered in the great hall, before she remembered that she was angry with him.

"Ahem!" he began. "Come to your senses, dove of mine?"

"I never lost them, sir. Have you come to yours?" she retorted impudently.

His propitiatory smile gave place to a scowl, and he banged upon the stone floor with his heavy cane. But Anelda was flying up the stairs, sending back a derisive laugh.

"Your husband will tame you," he shouted after her, just as Sidi Ben Ara entered from the small refectory where he had been consuming the eternal Turkish coffee.

Sidi cast a sly glance of admiration at the figure at the head of the stairs. But he knew better than make any comment upon the remark of Prince Nicholas.

"There you are," exclaimed Nicholas. "When do you depart?"

"I shall be ready at midnight," the Egyptian replied. "Can you give me a dozen men as an escort—men who can be depended upon not to rob me?"

"I'll answer for them," the old man declared. "And remember to grease the ways; and do not spare the grease. Our noisy caravan will draw all the vultures in Albania."

"Part of the work is already done," said Sidi, "and you may be sure I shall make everything as smooth as possible, since the stake is mine. In three days I shall be back; in six days the ship will appear off the port, and on the seventh we should arrive there."

"You need not dress for dinner," the prince informed him. "My granddaughter will dine in her room."

"Ah, indisposed."

The old man smiled grimly. "She resents my manner of winning her dowry. She needs discipline."

CHAPTER XXV.

OVER THE GARDEN WALL.

MEANTIME, Pete Brodie, under cover of darkness, escaped from the garden and continued his search for Lincoln Rafter, in vain. Finally, hunger driving him, he walked boldly into the old barracks, where the truck drivers were quartered, and espied his quarry sitting apart from the others, with half a loaf of black Servian bread in one hand and a wedge of cheese in the other, regarding both with considerable distaste.

"Don't say a word, kid," Pete mut-

tered, as he dropped upon the floor beside Link and laid a warning hand on his arm. A dozen candles gave very imperfect illumination, and the difference between twenty-four men and twenty-five can only be discovered by counting noses, so Brodie had no fear of discovery, unless Link, in his surprise, betrayed him.

"How on earth——" began the astounded American.

"Trailed you. Slipped in with a bale of leaf on my back. Been looking for you all day. Where in the deuce were you?"

"I'm glad to see you," declared Link grasping his horny hand. "But after what you said, what made you take the risk?"

"Not for the tobacco, young feller. I couldn't see a pal stick his head into a trap without trying to get him out."

"Did you deliver my message to Darkrino?" asked Link eagerly.

"Yeh, I saw him. Told him what you said."

"What's he going to do?"

"Not a darn thing. Seems there isn't anything they can do. They got no proof that this guy swiped the stuff, and he's so important they can't accuse him of it unless they got witnesses. We're the witnesses, but look where we are."

"Then we can expect nothing from him," Link said, greatly disappointed.

"Not unless he thought of something after we left."

"What a fool I was!" sighed Link. "I've been here all day and I haven't had a glimpse of the young lady I want to see."

"Lucky I came along. I seen her."

Rafter gazed at him, dumfounded.

"Sure," said Pete. "And chinned with her. She's the best-looking gal I ever seen in this neck of woods—and a nice one, too."

"How in——"

"Luck. I doped it out you'd make for that garden. Girls are always in gardens, and I thought I might light on you two there. I got in when nobody was looking and I had to lay low till dark. And then comes along this swell chicken—no disrespect. She almost steps on me, says something in English, and I introduce myself."

"Did you tell her about me?"

"Sure. She's cuckoo 'bout you, and I made a date for you. She'll be there in the garden to-night waiting for you, you lucky stiff!"

Link choked in his gratitude. "I suppose you're the finest fellow—— Just think of doing all this for a man you never knew a few days ago."

"Aw, stuff! We're a couple of Yanks and we got to stick together. What you going to do with that grub? Keep it for souvenirs?"

"I can't eat the awful stuff," Link groaned. "This cheese smells terrible."

"The worse cheese smells the better it tastes," said Pete. "Give me some of it. I don't want to attract attention, yelling for grub."

"Take it all. I don't want it."

"Hold yer nose and eat some. You need your strength."

Link managed to swallow a few crumbs of the soggy bread, but gagged on the cheese. Brodie ate heartily; in his campaigning he had fared much worse. And while they ate, the same Molvanian who had taken their oath in the morning entered and announced in Greek that the door was about to be closed and no one would be allowed out until daylight. To emphasize his remarks he closed the door and bolted it on the outside.

Rafter started to his feet, but Pete pulled him down again.

"I must get out," Link exclaimed. "What will Anelda think?"

"Leave it to me, will yuh? We'll get out."

"How?"

"Plenty of time. Wait till I finish this chuck."

He finished leisurely. Then he went over and snatched a bottle of red wine from the hand of one of the Greek drivers, and proceeded to swallow its contents. The Greek naturally resented the liberty, and a wordy argument started. Others were drawn in, until there was a snarling group. Link could not follow the controversy, but he judged that Pete had managed to transfer the debate from himself to others by pitting the different nationalities against one another. And many tribes were represented in that gathering.

The talk grew more and more hot, and Link saw Pete knock over several candles, apparently by accident. The place grew darker. Very soon the entire mob of drivers were yelling insults, and blows quickly followed. As Link watched, more candles went out, and suddenly Brodie was beside him.

"Slide up along the wall and get behind the door when it opens," Pete commanded. "This riot will bring the guards."

He was a true prophet. A rattling of bolts was heard, and then the big door swung back, concealing the Americans. Half a dozen armed men entered, one of them carrying a lantern, and made for the struggling mob. Whereupon Brodie, with Link at his heels, slipped out of the place and ran around the corner of the building.

Pete was laughing heartily but silently.

"How on earth did you do it?" demanded his admiring friend.

"The feller with the bottle was a Greek, and I called him a damned Bulgarian. He comes back, saying he's a Greek and the Bulgarians are a lot of so-and-so's. Up come a couple of Bulgarians and tell him to take it back. The other Greeks butt into the fight. I punched a Serb from behind, and he thought it was a Greek and took a crack at him. We used to start fights like that in barroons in New York in the old days. These ginks hate each other so they spring at their throats for less excuse than I gave 'em."

"Won't we be missed?"

"Naw. They'll never think to count 'em. And they'll be gentle, because if they croaked one of those drivers, it's one truck that they won't be able to move. Let's sneak along now, and try to get over in that deserted village near the garden."

Rafter followed his friend, marveling at the ingenuity and courage of the fellow.

The temporary army of Nicholas was quartered in one of the barrack buildings near the main gate, where all not on duty were assembled. Half a dozen sentries had been posted on the walls, another half dozen assigned to ride herd upon the truck drivers; but there was no attempt to patrol the alleys and lanes within the walls. After all, Nicholas was not at war with anybody, and his dispositions were only those of a prudent commander.

Thus the two Americans slipped unquestioned through the ancient hamlet, avoiding the inhabited plaza and working around to the rear of the castle until they came to the wall of the garden. It seemed to Lincoln Rafter that he was always scaling walls to reach Anelda; but this one was much higher than that which inclosed the Mismos garden in Yastib. The grounds were not much more than an acre in extent but they were enshrouded in darkness; and Link might have missed the rose-tree trysting place had his guide not possessed a sense of direction which led him directly to it.

"Here's the spot," Brodie whispered, "but where's the girl? Bet something happened to keep her from coming."

They waited, Pete philosophically, Link feverishly. In five minutes they heard a crunching of gravel and a moment later a small, dark form appeared a few feet away.

"Anelda!" called Link, his voice pitched low.

"Lincoln!" replied Anelda.

She ran to him, and he found himself closing his arms about her and kissing her.

"Here's where I blow," chuckled Brodie. But they did not hear him.

"Please, no more," she gasped at last. "Oh, Lincoln, it was so brave of you to come here, but terribly rash. You must go immediately."

"Not without you," he retorted. "Do you think, after taking you in my arms, I could leave you?"

Anelda put up her lips for another kiss.

"This is exquisite but hopeless," she said. "It is impossible for me to escape from this castle, even if I dared take such a step, and there is nowhere we could go."

"Athens! Mary Shane, your maid, will wait for us at the Hotel Bristol to exchange passports."

"But we could never reach Athens. My grandfather would pursue us, and you would surely be killed. He is terrible when he is angry."

"We can try. Do you really love me, Anelda?"

They were standing close together, their arms entwined, talking in whispers.

"In Yastib," she answered, "I thought I loved you; but it may have been that I was just enthralled by romance entering my life. I had seen you only twice, and for only a few minutes each time. But since I came back here I have been thinking about you and being more sure all the time. Now that I know how audacious you are, how you have risked so much just to reach my side, Lincoln, I adore you."

There was only one answer to this—a kiss. It ended astonishingly, for they were bathed in light, and Anelda tore herself loose and uttered a slight scream. Lincoln found himself gazing into a small bull's-eye, an electric flash in unknown hands, for the wielder was invisible. But he made himself known.

"So the Princess Anelda has a lover," said a mocking voice, which Rafter recognized with a spasm of fury.

"Put out that flash light, Sidi Ben Ara," he commanded. "How dare you follow the princess?"

"I thought so. Mr. Lincoln Rafter, the spy of the American tobacco company, I am sure Prince Nicholas will be pleased to know that you have crept into his castle and are captured embracing his granddaughter."

"The Egyptian!" exclaimed Anelda. "How dare you spy upon my movements, sir?"

"Your pardon, princess. I merely stepped into the garden to enjoy the evening, and hearing voices, I naturally investigated. Stand back, Mr. Rafter. My left hand holds this flash, my right hand a loaded revolver, and you are a perfect mark."

"What do you propose to do?" demanded Link.

"Excuse the princess and conduct you into the presence of her grandfather. I think he is old-fashioned enough to hang spies, though he may prefer to shoot them."

Anelda stepped boldly in front of her lover. "I shall buy your silence, sir," she said. "What is your price?"

The man behind the flash light, his face still invisible to them, laughed again, and unpleasantly. "I am a rich man, princess. I cannot be bribed. But you are worried unnecessarily about this man. He is only interested in recovering the tobacco trucks and he makes love to you to further the interests of his employers."

"You lie!" cried Rafter furiously.

"Of course, dear. I don't believe the beast," said Anelda. "But there must be some way to satisfy him. Promise not to interfere in this tobacco matter."

"My interference would be of no as-

sistance, I assure you," Link replied, moving the girl to one side.

He had decided to dive at the legs of the Egyptian. Most likely he would be shot, but he was sure that Nicholas would make an end of him anyway.

"Lead the way to the entrance, princess," commanded Ben Ara. "Mr. Rafter will follow you, and I shall bring up the rear, keeping the flash light upon you both."

With a quick, silent prayer, Link plunged headfirst, arms outstretched, at the Egyptian, who was standing less than eight feet distant. Anelda stifled a scream. But before a shot rang out, the light vanished and a choked curse escaped from the lips of Ben Ara. A strong hand had grasped his throat, another had twisted the revolver from his right hand. Lincoln's arms closed around Sidi's legs, bringing the Egyptian to the ground on top of him, with Pete Brodie above the Egyptian.

The princess rushed into the fray, but was driven back by a whirling mass of arms and legs. She heard heavy blows and then a loud chortle.

"Got him!" remarked Pete Brodie. "Lucky I hung around. Now what do we do with him?"

Rafter got upon his feet and reached for the hand of his rescuer. "Brodie, you're always on the job," he declared. "We've fixed him, Anelda."

She was again in his arms. "Is he dead?" she demanded.

"I cracked him over the skull with his own gun, but I guess he ain't dead," replied Brodie regretfully.

"Question is, what are we going to do with him?" stated Link. "When he recovers, he will blab."

"Kill him," said the Eastern girl calmly. "The vile beast deserves death."

"Anelda!" reproached Link.

She hid her face on his chest. "I can't help it," she protested. "He would have brought about your death."

"We can't kill a man in cold blood," Link explained.

"I know you can't, dear," she said. "I just went mad for a moment."

"Guess we better take him with us," Brodie advised. "And we ought to get out of here. We've been making noise, you know."

"He was leaving at midnight," Anelda said. "Perhaps they will think he set off without saying good-by."

"Get hold of his legs," Brodie commanded. "We'll drop him over the wall. If it kills him, that's an accident."

"To-morrow night, Anelda?" Link demanded.

"I shall be here," she asserted. "Go quickly."

"Hurry up," commanded Pete. "He might come to and let out a yell."

Fortunately Sidi was not a heavy man, and the pair carried him to the wall without too much difficulty, while Anelda slipped unnoticed into the castle. They laid his body upon the top of the wall; then they scrambled over and then lifted him none too tenderly down to the ground.

"We'll break into one of these vacant huts," Link declared, "and truss him up somehow. It's our best chance. We can't carry him very far without being seen."

"Get hold of him," Pete said curtly. "That's the ticket."

They made their way in the darkness along a lane lined with tumble-down cottages, and entered the first which had an unlocked door.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN THE DARK.

BRODIE had recovered the flash light and illumined the interior. It was a single-room hut, about twenty-five feet square, musty and unfurnished save for a three-legged stool and an old iron pot sitting upon the hearth. The boards of the floor were broken and covered with

an inch of dust. As there was no other place to deposit their prisoner they laid him upon the floor. Sidi Ben Ara was still unconscious, but soon he would return to life and a capacity for making trouble.

"We ought to tie him up, but there is nothing to use for bonds," Link said. "What are we going to do when he comes to?"

"You watch him," Brodie proposed. "If you see him waking up, crack him over the head again. Got a gun?"

Link displayed his automatic.

"Good! Threaten him with it, if you don't want to hit him. I'm going down to the stables and steal some rope."

"But suppose you get caught?"

"Don't worry. Be back in ten minutes. You've got to stay in the dark, because I need the flash light."

Alone in the dark with their victim, Link seated himself upon the stool and drew it close to the unconscious man, so that he could hear the slightest move. The moments dragged on until a groan escaped the lips of the Egyptian. Then the man moved, and Link bent over and laid his hands on the fellow's shoulder.

"Lie still," he said harshly.

"Who are you?" asked Ben Ara in English. "Oh, I remember. I was attacked from behind. A cowardly blow."

Link did not answer.

"Is that you, Mr. Rafter?" asked the Egyptian. He stirred, and again his captor's hands forced him upon his back.

"In the name of Allah, answer." The fellow's voice was shaking with fright, and Link grinned in the darkness. Evidently silence was more effective in cowing him than speech.

"I know it is you, Mr. Rafter," whined Ben Ara. "Release me. I promise to be silent."

Again he attempted to rise and the pressure forced him back. It was too much for Sidi Ben Ara, whose courage was probably nothing remarkable, for he began to mutter prayers in his own language, and to sob. There was danger of his being overheard, so Link broke the silence.

"Be quiet or you'll get a bullet instead of a blow," he said roughly.

"Ah!" exclaimed Ben Ara. "It is Mr. Rafter. What do you expect to gain by holding me? I shall be missed at the castle. There will be a search and you will be captured. Let me go and I agree to be silent. I shall aid you in your love affair. I shall be your go-between."

Link held his peace.

"I shall show you how to leave the castle with the princess. Listen to me. At midnight I am due to depart on a mission. I shall smuggle you and Princess Anelda out with me and conduct you wherever you wish to take her. She is nothing to me. I am interested only in the tobacco, as you should know."

Rafter smiled at this; for he knew how unlikely it was that the Egyptian would keep his promises, once he was set free. And if the American were fool enough to trust the princess and himself to Ben Ara's escort, he would deserve the fate that the Egyptian would mete out to him.

But the darkness and the silent captor were getting upon the nerves of the Egyptian, who began to whine again. Link felt for the man's forehead and pressed against it the muzzle of his weapon.

"Shut up!" he commanded. There were no more words from Sidi Ben Ara.

The strain of waiting was telling on Link almost as much as upon his prisoner. It seemed to him that Brodie had been gone an hour, although it was not more than fifteen minutes before the truck driver pushed open the door and threw his flash light upon the tableau.

"I got a pair of reins—good, stout

leather," said Pete. "You play the flash on him, while I truss him up."

Sidi glared at the big man as Brodie bent over him and bound him skillfully and rapidly.

"Tear off the tail of your shirt," Brodie said to Link. "No, I'll use his own. We got to stop his mouth."

So, with part of the Egyptian's own shirt they made a gag and prevented further speech from Sidi Ben Ara. Then Brodie led Rafter out of the hut and closed the door behind him, so that their conversation should not be overheard.

"What's the game now?" he demanded.

Rafter shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted. "This fellow will be missed, and they will certainly search the place. If they search long enough, they'll find him, and they'll probably question the truck drivers and discover we are Americans. If they find him, he'll identify us."

"Yeh. This is no place for us any more," declared Brodie. "We ought to make our get-away to-night, and if we was wise, we'd finish that fellow, so he couldn't give them your name and address. He don't know mine, but he got a good look at me while I was tying him up, so I'm a gone goose, too, if he gets loose, and I'm still inside the walls."

"You go, Pete. I can't leave Anelda."

"Why not? She's safe here. After all, the old prince is her grandfather. You had your visit and she knows you're on the job. Now let's save our skins."

"I have a feeling that, if I leave her now, I'll never see her again. When I leave this cursed castle I want to take her with me."

Brodie made a gesture of exasperation. "S'pose we stick? We've got to hide out here and watch this yellow man. We've got no grub, and we can't always slip in and out of the truck drivers' quarters. If the old prince starts to search all the houses, he's going to find the Egyptian sure; and that search is going to happen first thing in the morning, you bet your boots. Forget about being in love and use yer common sense."

"I ought to be able to think of a plan," groaned Link Rafter. "Anelda expects me to do something. It's up to me. I can't run away at the first sign of danger. What will she think of me?"

"That girl will think you've got sense. If we ain't out of this place by dawn, the prince will nail our hides to his barn door. I been living in this country for a long time, Link, and you haven't got any idea how little these people think of human life. I say let's go."

"No," said Link stubbornly. "I stay. I'm scared to death, but I don't run away. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'd rather have old Nicholas murder me than have Anelda think I left her."

"Aw, hell!" grumbled Pete Brodie. "All right. We stay."

"There is no need of your remaining. You've risked enough for me, old man."

"If this was home, I'd go, all right, but it's different over here. Let's go in and see how that guy is getting along."

He pushed open the door, closed it, and threw his flash light on his victim. Sidi Ben Ara was not there. Instead, the beam of light rested upon the leather thongs with which Brodie had so painstakingly bound him.

"Well, I'm a sailor," gasped the astonished and crestfallen ex-soldier.

"Where is he? Where did he go?" Rafter demanded in panic.

Brodie flashed his light about and pointed it at a small unglassed window at the rear of the room.

"X marks the spot where Houdini vanished," he observed. "I got to hand it to the feller. I know how to tie

knots. Look, he didn't untie the knots. How did he get away?"

Link picked the thongs up in his hands and displayed them.

"It's an Oriental fakir's trick. He learned it in Egypt. What fools we were to leave him alone."

"I'll say we were," said Brodie ruefully. "Say, let's get out of here. He'll have the whole Molvanian army down on us in a minute."

They fled. In the street they paused.

"Which way?" demanded Link.

"It don't matter. They'll get us wherever we go. This village is going to get cleaned up looking for us. It needs a going over, too."

Link hesitated. He knew that the Egyptian would give the alarm in a few minutes, if he hadn't given it already, which was the more likely.

"I'll tell you our only chance, Pete," he declared. "They'll not leave a hut unentered; and the walls will be guarded before we can reach them. Where is the least likely place for them to hunt for us?"

"There ain't no place," replied his companion.

"In the castle itself. Nicholas will never dream we are hiding in his own house. I'll bet three quarters of the rooms in the old rookery are empty."

"Yeah, that's an idea. But how do we get in?"

"Through the garden. We'll find some window open."

Brodie led the way toward the garden.

"Quick!" he commanded. "If we get in at all, we'll have to do it now."

It was time they made up their minds, for a group of men with lanterns suddenly appeared at the head of the street, coming from the castle.

"That boy works fast," declared Brodie. "Keep with me."

He started to move rapidly down the road. They were still invisible to the search party. They took the first turn to the right, and turned right again at the next lane.

"Your Egyptian friend is leading them straight to the hut where we dumped him," he declared. "Now's our chance to get over the wall and into the castle."

They were panting when they reached the wall, but they scrambled over it and dropped upon the coarse grass. Light streamed from the lower rooms in the center of the building, but its wings were dark. As Link had said, it was evidently largely uninhabited. They scuttled across the garden and were soon in the deeper shadow of the castle. The windows on the lower floor were about six feet from the ground, and most of them were shuttered or covered with iron bars.

"Guess we're out of luck, kid," Brodie whispered as they crept along. "No, there's one that's open."

Pete stooped and lifted Link into the air. He grasped at the sill and pulled himself in, then turned and extended his hands, which Pete caught.

Screening his light with care, Pete moved its beam around and gave an exclamation of satisfaction at the sight of a stove and a long wooden table.

"The kitchen! What luck!" he exclaimed. The light rested upon a huge pan of boiled potatoes. "Fill yer pockets," he ordered. "These won't be missed."

For the first time Link realized that he was very hungry, for he had been able to consume very little of the food set before him that day. He secured half a dozen of the potatoes, and Brodie took half a score.

"I bet there's lots of good things here," the truckman said regretfully, "but if we swiped anything else, they might get wise. And we can't stay here. Got to find a place to hide."

Cautiously they opened the door of the kitchen. It gave into a corridor. An oil lamp burned dimly toward the

center of the building, but the other end was in darkness, and there was nobody about.

"We go this way," stated Brodie. "Tiptoes, brother."

They moved swiftly but silently to the far end of the corridor, where they found a narrow stone staircase up which they stole with greatest caution and found themselves in another corridor, which was also lighted by a kerosene lamp far away.

"There are only two stories," Link whispered, "and I believe that this end is uninhabited. Look at the dust we are kicking up. Let's try the doors of some of these rooms."

The first two doors were locked, or so rusted were the latches that they would not yield to gentle pressure, but the third opened with a slight creak. Brodie played his light on the floor, being careful not to let it strike the two windows, which were covered with broken shutters. It revealed moth-eaten chairs, but what filled them with joy was the sight of a bed, a huge four-poster upon which canopy and curtains had fallen.

"Oh, boy! Us for the big sleeps!" cried Brodie. "Is there a bolt on the door? Yep. Push it, Link."

"I don't believe this room has been occupied for a hundred years," Rafter declared. "It certainly smells like it. Wonder if it would be safe to open one of the windows?"

"Be yerself!" chided Brodie. "Let's turn in. I didn't get any sleep last night?"

"Hadn't we better set a watch."

"Naw. We'll hear them breaking in the door. Besides, nobody will look for us here."

He yanked the canopy and curtains off the old bed, and saw that it was covered with an ancient silk quilt. He felt the mattress, and a cloud of dust arose. He was not deterred, but threw himself upon it and turned off the flash light.

"Come on and sleep in the duke's bed," he commanded.

"I'm going to eat one of these potatoes," Link replied. "I'm starving."

Rafter had never before eaten a cold potato, but he ate this one, skin and all—and liked it. Then he laid down beside the truckman; and in five minutes both were sleeping as peacefully as though they were not being sought with fell intent by Nicholas and his fierce mountaineers.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A KING GOES COURTING.

ONE of the drawbacks of having been a king is that a man cannot get rid of kingly habits when his throne is withdrawn from him. Thus, Otto of Westfalisa had been living in Lucerne upon a scale not in the least justified by his income. When he had made his hasty change of residence, his pockets were full of jewels and his suit case contained valuable heirlooms—enough for an economical man to live upon in comfort for the rest of his days. But Otto was a king. Within a few days there assembled around him about a score of devoted adherents of the royal family. They brought him undying loyalty and healthy appetites.

Otto had to take a very large château just outside Lucerne, and there he settled down to a comfortable life. He had about as many grooms of the bedchamber as he used to have at home, a master of the hunt, a general or two, with their wives and children, and expenses mounted rapidly. However, for several years he anticipated that his subjects would make such a mess of self-government that they would call him back and settle down to no government at all.

There was just as much reverence and respect for his majesty in his house at Lucerne as there had been in Westfalisa. His courtiers would have died for him, but they wouldn't go to work

for him, and for two or three years past Otto had been living on his debts. A wealthy marriage was absolutely necessary. But the good old days were gone; nearly every prince or king with suitable daughters was also out of a job. In fact, Otto could have thrown a stone from his front window and hit half a dozen exiled kings or princes, all as much up against it as he was.

Obviously, the few kings who still sat on their thrones were not marrying their princesses to discarded monarchs and Otto could not marry a commoner; his pride recoiled from making a match with the daughter of an American millionaire, as a few shameless princelings had done. And there didn't seem to be a royal princess with money left in the world to pull him out of his predicament.

Judge of his satisfaction when word came to him that Nicholas of Molvania had a very beautiful granddaughter who needed a husband, and his joy when Nicholas sent word that he hoped to provide her with a suitable dowry. Otto's lord chamberlain set the figure at twenty thousand English pounds. And for a time it looked as if Nicholas had died of shock; for no answer came. Then, after weeks of delay, arrived the telegram that the girl and the dowry would be forthcoming.

Where Nicholas was able to get twenty thousand English pounds was a puzzle to the court of King Otto, for Nicholas was supposed to be as penniless as they were. But Otto didn't care if Nicholas had drawn all the gold teeth in the Balkans. Money was money, and the princess was beautiful.

Furthermore, if the other exiled kings heard that such a prize was to be found, all single kings would make a mad rush for Molvania and start bidding against Otto. It was impressed on Otto to strike while the iron was hot; not to wait a minute, but to set forth like a young crusader and claim his bride while her grandfather still had the money. So Otto Hooklarger of Westfalisa took train for Belgrade, traveling incognito as the Count Wesburger. He was accompanied by his lord chamberlain, Count Hamish, and by General Count von Melor.

We have not paused to describe Otto. But let us say now that he was every inch a king. That is, he was short, very fat, about thirty-four years old, with a long nose, small, pale-blue eyes, blond hair, bald on top, and wore a small, colorless mustache. His chin receded, and he had two prominent front teeth. In his royal robes he was impressive; but in ordinary traveling costume, he caused a group of American tourists who saw him in a corner of the dining car to explode with mirth.

In the midst of the troubles of Prince Nicholas, the morning after Link Rafter and Pete Brodie invited themselves into his palace, there arrived at the gate three horsemen. Otto had come to claim his bride and what went with her.

Nothing could have been more inopportune than their arrival while twenty-four trucks of stolen Turkish leaf were still within the walls of Castle Darnyela. Nicholas had been disturbed by the tale of Sidi Ben Ara that two American spies of the tobacco companies had managed to get inside the walls and had made him a prisoner. Search parties had been working all night, without result. Ben Ara still refrained from revealing that the Princess Anelda was indulging in a love affair with one of the Americans, for he had no more desire than Link that the girl be closely guarded. He had his own plans. He knew that Nicholas would ask no questions of the Yankees, but would send them out with a firing squad and a couple of gravediggers. That would suit Ben Ara perfectly.

His business plans demanded that he depart upon schedule to grease the ways

of the caravan through Albania, and when he returned, he planned to bring certain Albanians with him to carry out his instructions as regards Anelda. On the whole, he departed in a contented frame of mind. Had he known that King Otto was riding all night from the end of the railroad to reach his blushing fiancée by morning, he would not have been so satisfied. Had General Count von Melor displayed half the energy back in 1918 that he exhibited in making Otto ride all night, he might have won the war, but increasing age had taught him the importance of rapid marching.

The entire garrison, which was now in excess of a hundred strong—for Nicholas had been recruiting for his dash through Albania—directed by the prince, in person, began a house-to-house search for Lincoln Rafter and his unknown companion, as soon as it was light.

As Brodie had predicted, no stone was left unturned, no cellar unentered, no garret unexplored, and all without result. But it never occurred to Prince Nicholas that the spies would have the audacity to take refuge in his own dwelling; so the palace itself was not included in the search.

About nine o'clock Nicholas, who was hot, tired and surly at his lack of success, was found at a far corner of the inclosure by the major-domo of the castle, and informed that King Otto of Westfalisa and his suite had arrived and were awaiting him.

"In person, you say? King Otto of Westfalisa?"

"So he says, sir. And he is accompanied by Count Hamish and General Count von Melor."

Nicholas rent the air with firecracker-like expletives in the Slavic tongue, then recovered his composure and smiled satirically.

"His majesty must be very hungry," he said to himself, "to hasten uninvited to view his bride. I think he will take fifteen thousand pounds instead of twenty thousand. This will leave me twenty thousand pounds with which to rehabilitate Adrianska and reëstablish myself properly in Darnyela. Good! Nothing could be better. I shall receive this king."

During their progress from the main gate to the entrance to the castle, King Otto had observed nothing and Count Hamish had noticed very little. But General Count von Melor, being a military man, and observant, had lifted his bushy eyebrows at the number of the armed attendants of the lord of the place, and when he set eyes upon the loaded lorries which were parked in the little square, his interest gave place to astonishment. He knew that such trucks were worth a thousand pounds each, and he saw four of them. He was not aware of the contents of the goatskin bags which filled the trucks, but he assumed they were full of grain.

"I can understand now how Prince Nicholas is able to provide his granddaughter with a munificent dowry," he exclaimed. "He is a wealthy man. I did not know that any of these Balkan princes were worth a pfennig."

"I am eager to see the princess," said the king.

"I burn to set eyes upon the dowry," declared Count Hamish.

They dismounted before the entrance to the residence. Grooms led away their horses, while the major-domo assured them that Prince Nicholas regretted their delay at the outer gate, would be with them shortly, and would be pleased to offer them some refreshment in the meantime.

A glance at the poverty-stricken great hall, a sight of the shabby livery of the house attendants, caused the general to reconsider his statement that Nicholas was a wealthy man. Now he did not know what to think. But he seated himself in the refectory with his king

and counselor and waited impatiently for the arrival of Prince Nicholas.

Nicholas had gone to his own quarters and donned his best uniform, before presenting himself to the unexpected guests. The motive of Otto in hastening to Adrianska upon receipt of his telegram agreeing to the marriage terms was quite clear to Nicholas. Otto was in straits and was afraid that some other candidate would secure the prize. Nicholas had considered them all and settled upon Otto as the most likely husband for Anelda, because he was still fairly young, had no especial vices, and had the reputation of being kind-hearted and easy-going. It was necessary that Nicholas' granddaughter make a royal marriage, but he did not wish it to be an unhappy one. Therefore Otto was elected, but he did not know it, and his eagerness would cost him five thousand pounds.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ANELDA SAYS "NO."

IF Prince Nicholas was congratulating himself that King Otto had played into his hands, the Princess Anelda was terrified when she heard that the king was in the castle. The news had spread like wildfire through the inhabited portion of the ancient stronghold, and Anelda's maid had entered with excited eyes to inform her mistress. Anelda, who had sat by her window most of the night, had finally lain down upon her bed, but not to sleep. She had heard the commotion below when Sidi Ben Ara had notified Nicholas of the presence of American spies within the walls; and from the head of the stairs had watched a search party set out. Lights were flashing all night through that part of the abandoned settlement visible from her window, and at every moment she expected a signal which would indicate that the fugitives had been discovered—perhaps shot.

When it was daylight, she had seen the followers of her grandfather, armed to the teeth, moving through alleys and lanes and breaking into ancient houses, and she had wrung her hands and wept and prayed and suffered the tortures of the condemned.

Although Lincoln Rafter had no illusions about his own heroism, Anelda judged by appearances. He had ventured alone into a nest of scorpions for love of her. He had plunged headlong at an armed man in her presence in the garden, and she needed no more to consider him the bravest youth alive and her devoted lover, whose devotion she yearned to requite. She told herself that she would kill herself if he was captured and slaughtered by her grandfather. And this was no idle threat, for she was more Oriental than Occidental, despite her long residence in the United States.

And now came a crushing blow. Otto, whom she supposed waiting calmly in Lucerne—Otto, whom she might marry a month or two months hence if Lincoln could not manage to snatch her away—was downstairs, and that meant he wanted an immediate wedding. She knew her grandfather would be delighted, and she understood perfectly well that King Otto's eagerness was not a compliment to her charms; he wanted to get his hands on her dowry.

The maid expected a joyous reception of her news; instead, her mistress glared at her strangely, then burst into wild laughter. She laughed for five minutes, then began to sob hysterically. And the girl ran for assistance. But by the time she had passed the word along until it reached Prince Nicholas, the princess was composed, her face very white, her mouth grim, her eyes reddened with tears which no longer fell.

Nicholas hastily excused himself to his guests, who continued to wolf their

food, and burst into his granddaughter's room trembling with anxiety.

"Dear one, little bird," he cried, "what has happened? Your maid said you had gone crazy."

"I'm all right," she said sullenly.

"I'll have that girl beaten. She interrupted me in an important conference," he said, as he seated himself beside the bed. "And with whom do you suppose I was conferring?" he added archly.

"With King Otto of Westfalisa," she said curtly.

"Oh, you have heard. Think of his majesty making this long journey, just to see his bride."

"Ha-ha!" she laughed, without merriment. "To see his twenty thousand pounds, you mean."

The old gentleman permitted himself to smile slightly. "These are dire days for kings," he admitted, "and your dowry doubtless interests Otto, but your beauty appeals to him more. It is a very fortunate occurrence; for in three or four days I set out upon a very dangerous mission."

"I presume you are going to deliver the tobacco you stole to the receivers of stolen goods," she said.

Nicholas banged his big fist upon the arm of his chair.

"You are disrespectful, Anelda," he shouted. "What I am doing is for you. I wish the wedding to take place before my departure. Then, if anything happens to me, I shall know that you are settled, with a king for a husband."

Anelda's manner softened. After all, the old man loved her and was committing crime for what he believed to be her best interests.

"I'm sorry, grandfather, if I was disrespectful," she said more gently. "But I couldn't possibly marry Otto now."

"Why not?"

"Well, I just couldn't. Tell him to go back to Lucerne and wait for a while."

"Impossible!" he cried. "That would be an affront to his majesty!"

The girl smiled maliciously. "I think you might affront him with impunity. For twenty thousand pounds I suspect he might permit you to kick him."

"You are talking about your future husband," he thundered.

"Not mine," she retorted. "I simply will not marry the brute."

"You'll do as I say!"

"These are not the dark ages, grandfather. You can't force a girl against her will to marry even a discharged king."

"So?" replied Nicholas. "These are the notions that American schools have inculcated in the last of the Darnyelas. You flout your grandsire, the head of your house. I still rule my family, Anelda. Prepare to be married in this castle to-morrow evening."

"No!" she screamed. "No, I will not! I'll kill myself first!"

He gazed at her bewildered. "But why?" he demanded. "When we first discussed this marriage, you were not unwilling. What has changed you?"

"I didn't know anything—then."

"Ah! And you do know something now? Are you in love, Anelda?"

"Yes," she said defiantly.

"Upon my word! With whom? You have been nowhere, seen no one. You have not fallen in love with Sidi Ben Ara, that cursed thief of an Egyptian."

A burst of derisive laughter answered him. "Impossible!" she cried.

"Anelda, you were in the garden last night," reflected Nicholas. "You passed through the hall a few minutes before Ben Ara came in with his tale. These American tobacco company spies! Is it one of them?"

"Did you catch them, grandfather?"

"No. I shall though. Answer me. You met one of these Yankees in the garden. You have met him before. You love him—my enemy."

"He is not your enemy, grandfather," she said. "He loves me. That's why he is here. He doesn't care anything about your stolen tobacco."

"How far has this gone?" he roared.

She smiled impudently. "Not far enough."

"By all the saints, this is too much! You will marry Otto to-morrow night. My granddaughter, a Princess of Darnyela, in love with an impudent tobacco agent—an American. In the meantime, you remain in your room."

"I warn you I shall not marry this King Otto. On that I am determined! I shall not even meet him."

"You shall!" he roared. "If I have to drag you into his presence."

Anelda laughed. "I doubt if he would appreciate such an unwilling bride. I'll bargain with you, grandfather. I'll appear at meals, but I must not be confined to my room."

"Well." he granted, "that is not necessary. You cannot escape from the castle. Anelda, dear child, don't you see the necessity of this marriage? You are innocent as a baby, and you are fascinated by a smooth-tongued Yankee rascal, whom I shall flay alive when I catch him."

"Oh!" cried the girl. "You are a barbarian, a savage! You shall not hurt him, do you hear?"

Nicholas considered her and was shrewd enough to grasp a weapon which she thrust into his hands. "That depends on your behavior. If you marry Otto, I shall not kill your American. I'll just thrust him out of the gates."

"You haven't caught him yet," she jeered.

"Never fear. I shall expect you downstairs to luncheon at one o'clock. Wear your prettiest frock, for Otto will be present."

"What does he look like?" she asked with pardonable curiosity.

Nicholas hesitated. "What does it matter what a king looks like?" he countered.

"Nothing, perhaps; but the appearance of a husband matters a great deal."

"He is all right," he growled. "I'll leave you now, but see that you behave yourself."

As soon as he had gone, Anelda flew around the room, collected an armful of belongings and thrust them into a small traveling bag. She did not know how he would manage, but she knew that Lincoln Rafter would save her. Lincoln Rafter could accomplish anything.

To be concluded next week.

THE NIMROD OF CONGRESS

THE crack Nimrod of the national Congress is Representative George Holden Tinkham of Boston. He showed up in Washington last December fresh from a big-game hunting-trip that lasted seven months and took him to Australia, Java, Sumatra, Ceylon, Tasmania, and Aden. Furthermore, he was loaded down with stuff to show he had knocked 'em cold with gun and hook, having brought home a regular menagerie, ranging from a New Zealand fish to a Bombay tiger.

This is the same Mr. Tinkham who was the first American to fire a shot at the Austrians after the declaration of war by the United States. He pulled the trigger of that historic gun at Capo d'Argine on the Piave River, December 11, 1917.

He Lost Interest

By Sidney R. Kennedy

What do you think of a tightwad whose vigilance not even Death could relax?

JUST two years ago I resigned as second vice-president of the Empire State Fire Insurance Company of New York City. You remember the story of the man who attributed his ability to retire from the insurance business at the age of fifty, with a tidy fortune of two hundred thousand dollars, to the facts that he was always at his desk by nine and never left until after five, that he saved carfare by walking to and from the office except when it rained, that he never spent more than fifty cents for lunch, that he gave every one an absolutely square deal, and that an old aunt died and left him one hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars. My case was much like that except that Uncle Gregory did even a little better by me.

The Empire State was one of the best of the moderate-sized companies. Landon, the president, was a hard-working, sensible sort of man who usually sat in his shirt sleeves with a half-burned cigar hanging out of the corner of his mouth. Harrington, the first vice-president, was the star underwriter. He was a thin, sallow man with an almost uncanny knack of knowing when a risk was going to burn. He came from somewhere down South and was especially good at passing upon Southern business.

Harrington was abnormally nervous. When anything went wrong he would chew the end of his mustache. That always happened when he thought that either he or the company was going to lose a dollar, for when it came to parsimoniousness, an impecunious Scotchman would look in comparison, like a drunken spendthrift millionaire. Harrington would make a nickel go so far

that you'd think it would be worn out before it reached its destination.

I got along all right with Landon and Harrington, but there was no use waiting for them to die, for they were both of them about my age and in good health—except that Harrington suffered a little from nervous indigestion once in a while, when a Southern city had a big fire or when some concern in which he had ten shares of stock reduced its dividend. And there was no particular dignity or distinction in my job; in fact it was said that there were as many vice-presidents of insurance companies below Fourteenth Street in New York as there were chorus girls above it. So I quit—on friendly terms with every one.

I'd never been outside the United States and I'd never seen some of the most interesting parts of our own country. The Empire State did business in California and Florida, but, on account of attractive climatic conditions, our interests in those parts were closely supervised by Landon and Harrington in person. However, if anything went wrong during February in Fargo, North Dakota, or Skowhegan, Maine, I was supposed to burrow through the snowdrifts and clean it up. So I decided I'd quit, and travel a bit.

I went first to England. The Empire State had done some business with a London company, and I called at their office to see their manager, whom I had met in New York. I got around a large and dignified doorman but was blocked by the secondary defense in the person of a private secretary who wore spats and looked as if he might be a member of the British cabinet. He said the manager was engaged for three days, but that he would make an appointment for me on the following Tuesday. I thought at first that this was discourteous, but I found out afterward that this refusing to be interrupted was how English business men of importance got through their mail more smoothly than our executives, who swap the latest stories with other executives in the same lines of business, and often permit themselves to be turned into a clearing house for anecdotes, while their work gets into a jam.

France was next, and I decided there was something to the story that French cooking was so good that nature had shortened up by several feet the intestinal tract of the average Frenchman, as his food was more easily digested than that of an American and didn't need so much digestive area to do the work.

In the winter I went to the Riviera. The hard-boiled croupiers at Monte Carlo raked in a few of my gold pieces, but an insurance officer who has spent a good many years gambling with his company's money in large amounts doesn't get much thrill in gambling with comparatively insignificant sums of his own money, especially when he knows it is almost impossible for him to win.

Next spring I got off the beaten track. It was beaten so hard that it hurt my feet, and it was beaten by a lot of cheap skates that throw discredit on the United States. I went down the lower Danube, which was neither beautiful nor blue. And once, near the Black Sea, I was on a steamboat where the menu was printed in seven different languages—and English wasn't one of them! The only article which was identical in all of them was rum. It was spelled in several different ways, but it was the same word. Wandering all over the map, nearly two years passed before I got back to New York.

The morning after I landed I went down into the insurance district to see my old friends. William Street looked natural. I headed for the building in which the Empire State had its home offices, took the elevator, and got out at the sixteenth floor.

As I walked down the hall a group of three clerks passed me, and directly behind them was a man whom I did not recognize until I was abreast of him. It was Harrington, the first vice-president, looking thinner and sallower than ever. I stopped; but Harrington, with a quick sidelong glance at me, made no sign of recognition, but went on. I looked after him in surprise as he went down the hall, not understanding this rebuff. We had parted as friends; surely I could have done nothing to offend him. His manner in evading me was so strange that it gave me a queer feeling—very uncanny and hard to describe.

Once inside the office of the Empire State, the atmosphere was altered. Nothing could have been more cordial than the welcome of my other old associates. Landon, rather unusually, was not in his shirt sleeves, having just presided at the monthly meeting of the directorate.

After the first salutations I asked him: "What was the matter with Harrington?"

"Pneumonia," he said.

"I thought he looked pretty thin. But I mean just now."

He looked puzzled.

"Just now?" he repeated.

"Yes. I met him as I was coming up the hall, and although I'm sure he saw me, he went by without stopping or speaking to me."

"It couldn't have been Harrington," Landon asserted.

"The devil it couldn't," I replied. "I couldn't possibly have been mistaken. Don't you suppose I know him when I see him? And besides, he was chewing the end of his mustache just as he always did when anything happened that he didn't like."

The half-burned cigar dropped out of the corner of Landon's mouth and his face turned almost green. I looked at him in amazement.

"Don't you know about Harrington?" he asked.

"Know what?"

Landon leaned across the flat-top table toward me.

"Harrington is dead—he died of pneumonia last month," he said in a low voice.

It was my turn to register incredulity.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "Impossible! I tell you I saw him five minutes ago. He went down in the elevator."

"In the grave, you mean," Landon retorted. "A month ago I was a pall-bearer."

We regarded each other in silence.

"Evidently he didn't like it there," I said. "I never believed in ghosts and that sort of thing, but I give you my word, Landon, I saw—well, if it wasn't Harringtin, it certainly wasn't any one else."

The president of the Empire State unlocked a drawer in his desk, and from it took a bottle and two glasses. He poured out a couple of rather stiff drinks, and we felt a little better.

"You're absolutely sure it wasn't a case of mistaken identity?" Landon went on.

"Absolutely. He looked exactly as usual—except, perhaps, for a little less color, which was natural enough. Then there was that mustache-biting trick. I wonder what had got his goat?"

My old chief thought this over.

"Do you know, Bill, I had a very queer feeling all during that director's meeting. I felt that there was something strange—in the atmosphere."

"It must have been Harrington."

"Sure. And I have a theory about why he was grouchy as he went down the hall."

"What's your theory?"

"A man probably takes his strongest characteristics with him into the future life. If it was Harrington you saw, he was sore because he was unable to get

his twenty-dollar gold piece out of that directors' meeting."

We laughed at this sally, but our laughter was a little hollow.

"I wonder how I could see him and you couldn't," I said.

"I guess there's no explanation for some of these things, Bill," Landon answered.

During the next month I was elected to the directorate of the Empire State —I had hung onto my stock—and I attended the next monthly meeting. The agenda contained mostly routine matters, except that we intended to declare an extra dividend, and there was a proposal to take over a small Southern insurance company whose business was mostly in Houston, Texas.

The roll was called; then the secretary read the report of the previous month's business. I glanced to my right—and there was the thin figure and sallow face of Harrington! He was standing at the end of the room, and I noticed that he didn't seem to cut off any of the light that came through the window.

The meeting went on, and I kept looking at him—out of the corner of my eye, so that he wouldn't know I was watching.

When we declared the extra dividend, his face lit up. You see, he had several hundred shares of stock which he had left to his daughter. But when the proposal to take over the Texas company came before the meeting, I looked at him and saw that he was scowling and biting his mustache. I had an idea.

"Gentlemen," I said, "the Empire State lost its ablest Southern underwriter when Mr. Harrington died." I could see him grin. "Now we ought to go into a rather important matter like this pretty carefully. I'm a sort of free agent, and if Mr. Landon would like me to, I'll go down to Houston next week and look over the proposition on the ground." I gave Landon a wink, frowned, and pretended to bite my mustache. He caught the point instantly; and it was so agreed.

But I never started South. Within three days Houston had a young conflagration which cost that local company some two hundred thousand dollars—which the Empire State would have paid had it voted to assume the liability at that directors' meeting. I went down to see Landon the day after the fire.

"How do you account for it?" I said.

"I don't." he replied. "But I can see where you are going to be an enormously valuable director for us. You must never miss a meeting. I only regret that we can't get that twenty-dollar fee across to our silent adviser."

But at the next meeting there was no sign of Harrington.

"I wonder what happened," I said. "Do you suppose I've just lost my power to see him?"

That wasn't the answer, as we found out the next day. Landon telephoned me.

"The reason he didn't come to the meeting yesterday was because his daughter sold her stock day before yesterday. The certificates came in for transfer this morning."

"I see; the old skinflint has just lost interest in the Empire State."

"Exactly."

That was the last I saw of Harrington.

I heard that his daughter bought New York City bonds with the money she got from selling our stock, and I wonder whether Harrington is keeping an eye on her investment by attending the sessions of the Board of Aldermen

A Chat With You

WHAT is the first duty of a good story? We say that it is to be interesting. But like many other answers that seem to answer, this does not *quite* answer. What do you mean by 'interesting?' Every one who is awake is interested in something all the time. He may be interested in his next year's income tax or in the aspects of the weather. Practically every one reads a newspaper of some sort. Part of the newspaper is made up of stock and market reports, a part of sporting news about prize fights and horse races, part is the editorial page and the rest is general news.

* * * *

NOW if a man has a bet on a horse at Tia Juana, it is quite conceivable that he should be keenly interested in the sporting page. If he is strong for politics, a stanch Republican, a Jeffersonian Democrat, a Socialist, or what not, he might take an almost rabid interest in the editorial columns. It is a curious thing about people of strong religious or political opinions. They buy the papers that agree with them in the editorials. They read the stuff that goes smoothly with them. They never hear the words of their opponents.

* * * *

SHIFT to the ordinary news columns of the paper. Outside of an occasional astonishing murder there is little there that would seem to command interest. For instance, take an item like this:

Patrick O'Reilly, returning home from work, stepped inadvertently into a manhole which had been left open. He suffered contusions of the left leg and right shoulder and was removed to St. Vincent's Hospital. The ambulance surgeon said that he would make a speedy recovery owing to his fine physical condition.

* * * *

IS that interesting? We suppose it is. But most of that sort of news is read by people who are reading to kill time. "Kill time!" What a horrible and murderous thought that is! Time is the one thing that is given to every one. It is the one thing that can never be replaced. Does your house burn down? Then perhaps you may build another? Have you lost a fortune? There are other fortunes to be won. Are you sick and out of luck? Then maybe some time again you will be well and lucky. All these losses may be recovered. But Father Time! He is an old gentleman who gives back no change. The hour of yesterday will never return in this world. When you pass the time, or kill the time, you are handing out shekels that will never come back. They may bring you interest but they will never come back.

* * * *

MOST diversions are not a waste of time if engaged in whole-heartedly. Poker and bridge certainly enable a man to know his fellow man a little better and also to get a little insight into the deep and mysterious laws of chance. Bowling, tennis, golf—all the games in which one uses his eye and strength are good, not only for the health but for the soul.

* * * *

READING is one of the best ways to use up the time not needed otherwise. A man might read a mail-order catalogue for a day or so when storm-

bound in a country tavern. He might learn the prices of various agricultural tools, of boys' overcoats and of Ford accessories. But his interest would be a mild one. He wants to buy none of these things. He reads about them idly. He is reading to kill time. Half the stuff printed is this time-killing stuff, to be read on long train journeys, when one is alone and has nothing else to do.

Reading is a good habit—it is the best of all the time-killing devices, for it leads one on from the poor to the mediocre and from that to the best. We are trying to give you the best in fiction. Not the sort of reading that kills time but that makes it well spent, that gives the drama and stir of glorious life to hours that might otherwise have been dull ones.

THE POPULAR

In the Next Issue, March 17, 1928

Missing Page

Inside back cover

Missing Page

Back cover