JUNE
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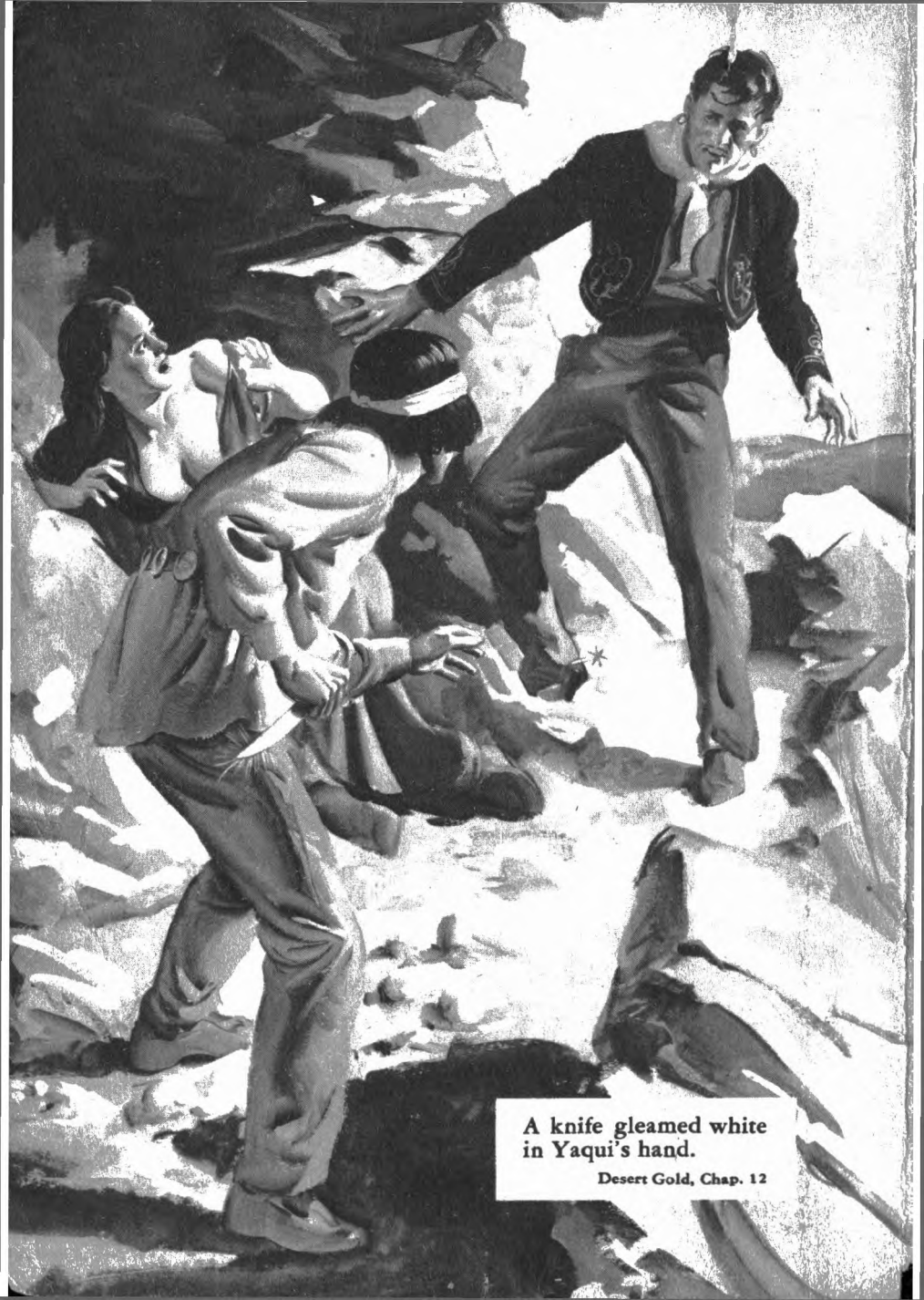
ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

DELL

DESERT GOLD BY ZANE GREY (MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)



A knife gleamed white in Yaqui's hand.

Desert Gold, Chap. 12

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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THIS MONTH'S MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT

ACROSS *burning desert sands, through clumps of dreaded* choya *cactus, over jagged fields of lava, five men and a beautiful girl are fleeing. Pursuing them is the bandit leader, Rojas, driven by his passionate obsession for this girl. At last the little group of fugitives seek final sanctuary in the grim and awe-inspiring basin of a dead volcano. There, trapped in the "Crater of Hell," they make their last, desperate stand in a merciless gun battle, and there the fierce revenge of a Yaqui chief is meted out.*

This tremendous climax is the inevitable outcome of a chain of events set in motion by the quixotic action of young Dick Gale, spoiled scion of a wealthy family, who has recently arrived in the West. Having started a row with the notorious Rojas in order to get an old friend out of a jam, Dick then finds it easy to become a ranger in the service of Tom Belding, immigration inspector. With Ladd and Lash, two cowboys-turned-rangers, Dick picks up his hand in a game where Fate deals the cards. For, whatever these men may do in their perilous and never-ending struggle with the bandits who operate in the guise of rebels along the border, their moves conform to a pattern set many years before by two men who died in the desert, leaving behind them the secret of a girl's identity—and the secret of desert gold.

There is scarcely a page of this border-country story, "Desert Gold," which Zane Grey has not charged with action that fairly crackles or suspense that intrigues and lures its readers on. Dick saves the Yaqui from a brutal death; Rojas lays siege to Belding's ranch, determined to possess the girl; the rangers skirmish with bandit gangs; the band of fugitives is forced to exist for months in the brooding, malignant desert.

At last the time is ripe for the final piece of Fate's puzzle to fall into place, and the silent Yaqui is the instrument chosen to reveal the long-sought answer to two perplexing questions.

To be featured in the July Issue of

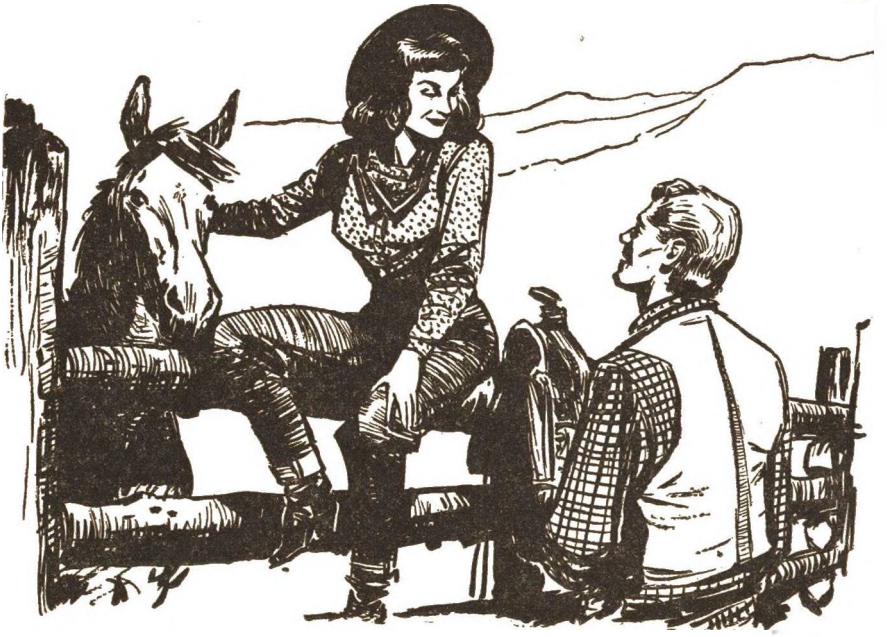
ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

A Magazine Abridgment of

KNIGHTS OF THE RANGE

Zane Grey's thrilling story of a girl's desperate fight to save her ranch, backed by the guns of Cappy Britt and Brazos Keene.

ON SALE ABOUT JUNE 4



Desert Gold

By ZANE GREY

PROLOGUE

Death in the Desert

A FACE haunted Cameron—a woman's face. It was there in the white heart of the dying campfire; it hung in the shadows that hovered over the flickering light; it drifted in the darkness beyond.

This hour, when the day had closed and the lonely desert night set in with its dead silence, was one in which Cameron's mind was thronged with memories of a time long past—of a home back in Peoria, of a woman he had wronged and lost, and loved too late. He was a prospector for gold, a hunter of solitude, a lover of the drear, rock-ribbed infinitude, because he wanted to be alone to remember.

A sound disturbed Cameron's reflections. He bent his head, listening. A soft wind fanned the paling embers, blew sparks and white ashes and thin smoke away into the enshrouding circle of blackness. His burro did not

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appear to be moving about. The quiet split to the cry of a coyote. When it ceased, the terrible desert silence smote Cameron, and the cry echoed in his soul. He and that wandering wolf were brothers.

Then a sharp clink of metal on stone and soft pads of hoofs in sand prompted Cameron to reach for his gun, and to move out of the light of waning campfire. He was somewhere along the wild border line between Sonora and Arizona; and the prospector who dared the heat and barrenness of that region risked other dangers sometimes as menacing.

Figures darker than the gloom approached and took shape, and in the light turned out to be those of a white man and a heavily packed burro.

"Hello there," the man called, as he came to a halt and gazed about him. "I saw your fire. May I make camp here?"

Cameron came forth out of the shadow and greeted his visitor. The stranger thanked him, and slipped the pack from his burro. Then he rolled out his pack and began preparations for a meal. His movements were slow and methodical.

Cameron watched him with a curious and growing interest. The campfire burst into a bright blaze, and by its light Cameron saw a man whose gray hair somehow did not seem to make him old, and whose stooped shoulders did not detract from an impression of rugged strength.

"Find any mineral?" asked Cameron presently.

His visitor looked up quickly, as if startled by the sound of a human voice. He replied, and then the two men talked a little. But the stranger evidently preferred silence. Cameron understood that. He felt that between this man and himself there was a subtle affinity, vague and undefined, perhaps born of the divination that here was a desert wanderer like himself, perhaps born of a deeper, an unintelligible relation having its roots back in the past.

When he awakened he found, to his surprise, that his companion had departed. A trail in the sand led off to the north. There was no water in that direction. Cameron shrugged his shoulders and straightway he forgot his strange visitor.

Cameron began his day. He traveled southwest, never straying far from the dry stream bed; and in a desultory way, without eagerness, he hunted for signs of gold.

The work was toilsome, yet the periods of rest in which he indulged were not taken because of fatigue. He rested to look, to listen, to feel.

That day, while it was yet light, and he was digging in a moist white-bordered wash for water, he was brought sharply up by hearing the crack of hard hoofs on stone. There down the canyon came a man and a burro. Cameron recognized them.

"Hello, friend," called the man, halting. "Our trails crossed again. That's good."

"Hello," replied Cameron slowly. "Any mineral sign today?"

"No."

They made camp together, ate their frugal meal, smoked a pipe, and rolled in their blankets without exchanging many words. In the morning the same reticence, the same aloofness characterized the manner of both. But Cameron's companion, when he had packed his burro and

was ready to start, faced about and said:

"We might stay together, if it's all right with you."

"I never take a partner," replied Cameron.

"You're alone; I'm alone," said the other, mildly. "It's a big place. If we find gold there'll be enough for two."

"I don't go down into the desert for gold alone," rejoined Cameron, with a chill note in his swift reply. "I may strike through the Sonora Desert. I may head for Pinacate or north for the Colorado Basin. You are an old man."

"I don't know the country, but to me one place is the same as another," replied his companion. Then with gentle slaps he drove his burro in behind Cameron. "Yes, I'm old. I'm lonely, too. It's come to me just lately. But, friend, I can still travel, and for a few days my company won't hurt you."

"Have it your way," said Cameron.

They began a slow march down into the desert. At sunset they camped under the lee of a low mesa. Cameron was glad his comrade had the Indian habit of silence.

Another day's travel found the prospectors deep in the wilderness. Then there came a breaking of reserve, noticeable in the elder man, almost imperceptibly gradual in Cameron. Beside the meager mesquite campfire this gray-faced, thoughtful old prospector would remove his black pipe from his mouth to talk a little; and Cameron would listen, and sometimes unlock his lips to speak a word.

Cameron's awakened interest brought home to him the realization that for years he had shunned companionship. In those years only three men had wandered into the desert with him, and these had left their bones to bleach in the shifting sands. Cameron had not cared to know their secrets. But the more he studied this latest comrade the more he began to suspect that he might have missed something in the others.

One afternoon late, after they had toiled up a white, winding wash of sand and gravel, they came upon a dry water hole. Cameron dug deep into the sand, but without avail. He was turning to retrace weary steps back to the last water when his comrade asked him to wait. Cameron watched him search in his pack and bring forth what appeared to be a small, forked branch of a peach tree. He grasped the prongs of the fork and held them before him with the end standing straight out, and then he began to walk along the stream bed. Cameron, at first amused, then amazed, then pitying and at last curious, kept pace with the prospector. He saw a strong tension of his comrade's wrists, as if he was holding hard against a considerable force. The end of the peach branch began to quiver and turn. Cameron reached out a hand to touch it, and was astounded at feeling a powerful vibrant force pulling the branch downward. He felt it as a magnetic shock. The branch kept turning, and at length pointed to the ground.

"Dig here," said the prospector.

Then Cameron stood by while his comrade dug in the sand. Three feet he dug—four—five, and the sand grew dark, then moist. At six feet water began to seep through.

"Get the little basket in my pack," he said.

Cameron complied and saw his comrade drop the basket into the deep hole, where it kept the sides from caving in and allowed the water to seep through. While Cameron watched, the basket filled. Of all the strange incidents of his desert career this was the strangest. Curiously he picked up the peach branch and held it as he had seen it held. The thing, however, was dead in his hands.

"I see you haven't got it," remarked his comrade. "Few men have."

"Got what?" demanded Cameron.

"A power to find water that way. Back in Illinois an old German used to do that to locate wells. He showed me I had the same power. I can't explain. But you needn't look so dumfounded. There's nothing supernatural about it."

"You mean it's a simple fact—that some men have a magnetism, a force of power to find water as you did?"

"Yes. It's not unusual on the farms back in Illinois. The old German I spoke of made money traveling round with his peach fork."

"What a gift for a man in the desert!"

Cameron's comrade smiled—the second time in all those days.

They entered a region where mineral abounded, and their march became slower. Generally they took the course of a wash, one on each side, and let the burros travel leisurely along nipping at the bleached blades of scant grass, or at sage or cactus, while they searched in the canyons and under the ledges for signs of gold. When they found any rock that hinted of gold they picked off a piece and gave it a chemical test. The search was fascinating. They interspersed the work with long, restful moments when they looked afar down the vast reaches and smoky shingles to the line of dim mountains.

Each succeeding day and night Cameron felt himself more and more drawn to this strange man. He found that after hours of burning toil he had insensibly grown nearer to his comrade.

His companion was one who thought of himself last. It humiliated Cameron that in spite of growing keenness he could not hinder him from doing more than an equal share of the day's work. The man was mild, gentle, quiet, mostly silent, yet under all his softness he seemed to be made of the fiber of steel.

One night they were encamped at the head of a canyon. The day had been exceedingly hot, and long after sundown the radiation of heat from the rocks persisted. A desert bird whistled a wild, melancholy note from a dark cliff, and a distant coyote wailed mournfully. The stars shone white until the huge moon rose to burn out all their whiteness. And on this night Cameron watched his comrade, and yielded to interest he had not heretofore voiced.

"Pardner, what drives you into the desert?"

"Do I seem to be a driven man?"

"No. But I feel it. Do you come to forget?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" softly exclaimed Cameron. Always he seemed to have known that. He said no more. He watched the old man rise and begin his nightly pace to and fro, up and down.

Cameron grew acutely conscious of the pangs in his own breast, of the fire in his heart, the strife and torment of his passion-driven soul. He

had come into the desert to remember a woman. She appeared to him then as she had looked when first she entered his life—a golden-haired girl, blue-eyed, white-skinned, red-lipped, tall and slender and beautiful. He had never forgotten, an old, sickening remorse knocked at his heart.

"I reckon we're two of a kind," Cameron said. "It was a woman who drove me into the desert. But I come to remember. The desert's the only place I can do that."

"Was she your wife?" asked the elder man.

"No."

"I had a daughter," said Cameron's comrade. "She lost her mother at birth. And I—I didn't know how to bring up a girl. She was pretty and gay. It was the—the old story."

"Well, tell me more?" asked Cameron earnestly.

"It was the old, old story. My girl was pretty and free. The young bucks ran after her. I guess she did not run away from them. And I was away a good deal—working in another town. She was in love with a wild fellow. I knew nothing of it till too late. He was engaged to marry her. But he didn't come back. And when the disgrace became plain to all, my girl left home. She went West. After a while I heard from her. She was well—working—living for her baby. A long time passed. I had no ties. I drifted West. Her lover had also gone West. I trailed him, intending to kill him. But I lost his trail. Neither could I find any trace of her. She had moved on, driven, no doubt, by the hound of her past. Since then I have taken to the wilds, hunting gold on the desert."

"Yes, it's the old, old story, only sadder, I think," said Cameron, his voice strained and unnatural. "Pardner, what Illinois town was it you hailed from?"

"Peoria."

"And your—your name?" went on Cameron huskily.

"Warren—Jonas Warren."

That name might as well have been a bullet. Cameron stood erect, mumbled something hoarsely and backed into the shadow. Warren sat brooding over the campfire, oblivious of his comrade, absorbed in the past.

Cameron swiftly walked away in the gloom, with the blood thrumming thick in his ears, whispering over and over, "Merciful God! Nell was *his* daughter!"

Cameron was overwhelmed. It was incomprehensible; it was terrible. It was the one thing of all possible happenings in the world of chance that both father and lover would have found unendurable.

Cameron's pain reached to despair when he felt this relation between Warren and himself. Something within him cried out to him to reveal his identity, but Cameron dreaded the thought of adding torture to this long-suffering man. All at once Cameron swore that he would tell the truth of Nell's sad story and his own, and make what amends he could.

Then Cameron's thought shifted from father to daughter. She was somewhere beyond the dim horizon line. In those past lonely hours by the campfire his fancy had tortured him with pictures of Nell. But his remorseful fancy had lied to him. She had reconstructed a broken life. And now she was fighting for the name and happiness of her child.

As Cameron gazed out over the blood-red, darkening desert suddenly

the strife in his soul ceased. In a flash of revelation he felt that it had been given him to help Warren with his burden.

All night Cameron lay awake thinking. In the morning, when Warren brought the burros to camp and began preparations for the usual packing, Cameron broke silence.

"Pardner, your story last night made me think. I want to tell you something about myself. It's hard enough to be driven by sorrow for someone you've loved, as you've been driven; but to suffer sleepless and eternal remorse for the *ruin* of one you've loved as I have suffered—that is hell. Listen: in my younger days—it seems long now, yet it's not so many years—I was wild. I wronged the sweetest and loveliest girl I ever knew. I went away not dreaming that any disgrace might come to her. Along about that time I fell into terrible moods—I changed—I learned I really loved her. Then came a letter I should have gotten months before. It told of her trouble—importuned me to hurry to save her. Half frantic with shame and fear, I got a marriage certificate and rushed back to her town. She was gone—had been gone for weeks, and her disgrace was known. Friends warned me to keep out of reach of her father. I trailed her—found her. I married her. But too late! . . . She would not live with me. She left me—I followed her West, but never found her."

Warren leaned forward a little and looked into Cameron's eyes. Cameron met the gaze unflinchingly, and again began to speak:

"You know, of course, how men out here somehow lose old names, old identities. It won't surprise you much to learn my name really isn't Cameron, as I once told you."

Cameron felt his heart bulge and contract in his breast; all his body grew cold; it took tremendous effort for him to make his lips form words.

"Warren, I'm the man you're hunting. I'm Burton. I was Nell's lover!"

The old man rose and towered over Cameron, and then plunged down upon him, and clutched at his throat with terrible stifling hands. The harsh contact, the pain awakened Cameron to his peril before it was too late. Desperate fighting saved him from being hurled to the ground and stamped and crushed. Warren seemed a maddened giant. There was a reeling, swaying, wrestling struggle before the elder man began to weaken. Then Cameron, buffeted, bloody, half-stunned, panted for speech.

"Warren—hold on! Give me—a minute. I married Nell. Didn't you know that?"

Cameron felt the shock that vibrated through Warren. He repeated the words again and again. As if compelled by some resistless power, Warren released Cameron.

"Warren! Wait—listen!" panted Cameron. "I've got that marriage certificate—I've had it by me all these years. I kept it—to prove to myself I did right."

The old man uttered a broken cry.

Cameron stole off among the rocks. How long he absented himself or what he did he had no idea. When he returned Warren was sitting before the campfire, and once more he appeared composed. He spoke and his voice had a deeper note; but otherwise he seemed as usual.

They packed the burros and faced the north together.

There came a morning when the sun shone angry and red through a dull, smoky haze.

"We're in for sandstorms," said Cameron.

They had scarcely covered a mile when a moaning yellow wall of flying sand swooped down upon them. Seeking shelter in the lee of a rock, they waited. The moan increased to a roar, and the dull red slowly dimmed, to disappear in the yellow pall, and the air grew thick and dark. Warren slipped the packs from the burros.

The men covered their heads and patiently waited. The long hours dragged, and the storm increased in fury. Cameron and Warren wetted scarfs with water from their canteens, and bound them round their faces, and then covered their heads. The steady, hollow bellow of flying sand went on. The floor of their shelter gradually rose higher and higher. They tried to eat, and seemed to be grinding only sand between their teeth. They dared not sleep, for that would have meant being buried alive. They could only crouch close to the leaning rock, shake off the sand, blindly dig out their packs, and every moment gasp and cough and choke to fight suffocation.

The storm finally blew itself out. It left the prospectors heavy and stupid for want of sleep. Their burros had wandered away, or had been buried in the sand. Far as eye could reach, the desert had marvelously changed; it was now a rippling sea of sand dunes. Away to the north rose the peak that was their only guiding mark. They headed toward it, carrying a shovel and part of their packs.

At noon the peak vanished in the shimmering glare of the desert. The prospectors pushed on, guided by the sun. In every wash they tried for water. With the forked peach branch in his hands Warren always succeeded in locating water. They dug, but it lay too deep. At length, spent and sore, they fell and slept through that night and part of the next day. Then they succeeded in getting water, and quenched their thirst, and filled the canteens, and cooked a meal.

The burning day found them in an interminably wide plain, where there was no shelter from the sun. The men were exceedingly careful with their water, though there was absolute necessity of drinking a little every hour. Late in the afternoon they came to a canyon that they believed was the lower end of the one in which they had last found water. For hours they traveled toward its head, and, long after night had set, found what they sought. Yielding to exhaustion, they slept, and next day were loath to leave the water hole. Cool night spurred them on with canteens full and renewed strength.

Morning told Cameron that they had turned back miles into the desert, and it was desert new to him. The red sun, the increasing heat, and especially the variety and large size of the cactus plants warned Cameron that he had descended to a lower level. Mountain peaks loomed on all sides, some near, others distant; and one, a blue spur, splitting the glaring sky far to the north, Cameron thought he recognized as a landmark. The ascent toward it was heartbreaking, not in steepness, but in its league-and-league-long monotonous rise.

Cameron knew there was only one hope—to make the water hold out and never stop to rest. Warren began

to weaken. Often he had to halt. The burning white day passed, and likewise the night, with its white stars shining so pitilessly cold and bright.

Cameron measured the water in his canteen by its weight. Evaporation by heat consumed as much as he drank. During one of the rests, when he had wetted his parched mouth and throat, he found opportunity to pour a little water from his canteen into Warren's.

When next they rested he pretended to be in a kind of stupor, but he covertly watched Warren. The man appeared far gone, yet he had cunning. He cautiously took up Cameron's canteen and poured water into it from his own.

Then, as his comrade dropped into weary rest, Cameron lifted both canteens. If there were any water in Warren's, it was only very little. Both men had been enduring the terrible desert thirst, concealing it, each giving his water to the other, and the sacrifice had been useless.

Instead of ministering to the parched throats of one or both, the water had evaporated. When Cameron made sure of this, he took one more drink, the last, and poured the little water left into Warren's canteen. He threw his own away.

Soon afterward Warren discovered the loss. "Where's your canteen?" he asked.

"The heat was getting my water, so I drank what was left."

"My son!" said Warren.

The day opened for them in a red and green hell of rock and cactus. Like a flame the sun scorched and peeled their faces. Warren went blind from the glare, and Cameron had to lead him. At last Warren plunged down, exhausted, in the shade of a ledge.

Cameron rested and waited, hopeless, with hot, weary eyes gazing down from the height where he sat. The ledge was the top step of a ragged gigantic stairway. Below stretched a sad, austere, and lonely valley.

Movement on the part of Warren attracted Cameron's attention. Evidently the old prospector had recovered his sight and some of his strength. For he had arisen, and now began to walk along the arroyo bed with his forked peach branch held before him. He had clung to that precious bit of wood.

Warren stopped in a deep pit, and, cutting his canteen in half, began to use one side of it as a scoop. He scooped out a wide hollow, so wide that Cameron was certain he had gone crazy. Warren worked with slow, ceaseless, methodical movement. He toiled for what seemed hours. Cameron, seeing the darkening, dampening sand, plunged into the pit with the other half of the canteen.

Then both men toiled, round and round the wide hole, down deeper and deeper. The sand grew moist, then wet. At the bottom of the deep pit the sand coarsened, gave place to gravel. Finally water welled in, a stronger volume than Cameron ever remembered finding on the desert. It would soon fill the hole and run over. He marveled. Perhaps an underground stream flowed from the range behind down to the valley floor, and at this point came near to the surface.

The finding of water revived Cameron's flagging hopes. But they were short-lived. Warren had spent himself utterly.

"I'm done. Don't linger," he whis-

pered. "My son, go—go!"

Then he fell. Cameron dragged him out of the sand pit to a sheltered place under the ledge. While sitting beside the failing man, Cameron discovered painted images on the wall. Often in the desert he had found these evidences of a prehistoric people. Then, from long habit, he picked up a piece of rock and examined it. Its weight made him closely scrutinize it. The color was a peculiar black. He scraped through the black rust to find a piece of gold. Around him lay scattered heaps of black pebbles and bits of black, weathered rock and pieces of broken ledge, and they showed gold.

"Warren! Look! See it! Feel it! Gold!"

But Warren had never cared, and now he was too blind to see. "Go—go!" he whispered.

Cameron built up stone monuments to mark his gold strike. That done, he tarried beside the unconscious Warren. He watched the white sun turn to gold, and then to red, and sink behind mountains in the west. Twilight stole into the arroyo. It lingered slowly turning to gloom. The vault of blue-black lightened to the blinking of stars. Then fell the serene, silent, luminous desert night.

Cameron kept his vigil. As the long hours wore on he felt creep over him the comforting sense that he need not forever fight sleep. Absolute silence claimed the desert. Then something breathed told him when he was alone. He need not have looked at the dark, still face beside him.

Cameron prayed for mercy to a woman—for happiness to her child. Both mother and daughter were close to him then. Time and distance were annihilated. He had faith—he saw into the future. The fateful threads of the past, so inextricably woven with his error, wound out their tragic length here in this forlorn desert.

Cameron then took a little tin box from his pocket, and, opening it, removed a folded certificate. He wrote something upon the paper. The moon afforded him enough light to see; and, having replaced the paper, he laid the little box upon a shelf of rock.

Cameron covered the dark, still face of his comrade from the light of the waning moon. That action was the severing of his hold on realities. They fell away from him in final separation. Vaguely, dreamily he seemed to behold his soul. Night merged into gray day; and night came again, weird and dark.

CHAPTER ONE

Old Friends

RICHARD GALE reflected that his sojourn in the West had been what his disgusted father had predicted—idling here and dreaming there, with no objective point or purpose in mind.

It was reflection such as this, only more serious and perhaps somewhat desperate, that had brought Gale down to the border. For some time the newspapers had been printing news of Mexican revolution, guerrilla warfare, United States cavalry patrolling the international line, American cowboys fighting with the rebels, and wild stories of bold raiders and bandits. As opportunity, and adventure, too, had apparently given him

a wide berth in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, he had struck southwest for the Arizona border, where he hoped to see some stirring life.

It was after dark one evening in early October when Richard arrived in Casita. He was surprised to find that it was evidently a town of importance. There was a jostling, jabbering, sombreroed crowd of Mexicans around the railroad station. He felt as if he were in a foreign country. After a while he saw several men of his nationality, one of whom he engaged to carry his luggage to a hotel. They walked up a wide, well-lighted street lined with buildings in which were bright windows. Of the many people encountered by Gale most were Mexicans. His guide explained that the smaller half of Casita lay in Arizona, the other half in Mexico, and of several thousand inhabitants the majority belonged on the southern side of the street, which was the boundary line. He also said that rebels had entered the town that day, causing a good deal of excitement.

Gale was almost at the end of his financial resources, which fact occasioned him to turn away from a pretentious hotel and ask his guide for a cheaper lodging-house. When this was found, a sight of the loungers in the office, and also a desire for comfort, persuaded Gale to change his traveling-clothes for rough outing-garb and boots.

He went out into a wide, white-washed, high-ceiled corridor, and from that into an immense room which, but for pool tables, bar, and benches, would have been like a courtyard. The floor was cobble-stoned, the walls were of adobe, and the large windows opened like doors. A blue cloud of smoke filled the place. Gale heard the click of pool balls and the clink of glasses along the crowded bar.

Barelegged, sandal-footed Mexicans in white rubbed shoulders with Mexicans mantled in black and red. There were others in tight-fitting blue uniforms with gold fringe or tassels at the shoulders. These men wore belts with heavy, bone-handled guns, and evidently were the native policemen. There were black-bearded, coarse-visaged Americans, some gambling round the little tables, others drinking. The pool tables were the center of a noisy crowd of younger men, several of whom were unsteady on their feet. There were khaki-clad cavalrymen strutting in and out.

At one end of the room was a group of six men round a little table, four of whom were seated, the other two standing. These last two drew a second glance from Gale. The sharp-featured, bronzed faces and piercing eyes, the tall, slender, loosely jointed bodies, the quiet, easy, reckless air that seemed to be a part of the men—these things would plainly have stamped them as cowboys without the buckled sombreros, the colored scarfs, the high-topped, high-heeled boots with great silver-roweled spurs.

He satisfied his hunger in a restaurant adjoining, and as he stepped back into the saloon a man wearing a military cape jostled him.

"Dick Gale?"

"You've got me," replied Gale in surprise. "But I don't know you." He could not see the stranger's face, because it was wholly shaded by a wide-brimmed hat pulled well down.

"By Jove! It's Dick! If this isn't great! Don't you know me?"

"I've heard your voice somewhere," replied Gale.

The man drew Gale into the restaurant, where he thrust back his hat to disclose a handsome, sunburned face.

"George Thorne! So help me—"

"'S-s-ssh. You needn't yell," interrupted the other as he met Gale's outstretched hand. There was a close, hard, straining grip. "I must not be recognized here. There are reasons. I'll explain in a minute. Say, but it's fine to see you!"

"George," replied Dick, laughing, "I'll bet you I'm gladder to see you than you are to see me. It seems so long. You went into the army, didn't you?"

"I did. I'm here now with the Ninth Cavalry. But—never mind me. What're you doing way down here?"

"On the square, George, I don't know any more why I'm here than—than you know."

"Well, that beats me!" ejaculated Thorne. "What the devil's wrong?"

"George, how I ever drifted down here I don't know. I didn't exactly quarrel with the governor. But—damn it, Dad hurt me—shamed me, and I dug out for the West. I tried to please him by tackling one thing after another that he set me to do. I had no head for business. I made a mess of everything. The governor got sore. He kept ramming the harpoon into me till I just couldn't stand it.

"When I quit—when I told him straight out that I was going West to fare for myself, why, it wouldn't have been so tough if he hadn't laughed at me. He called me a rich man's son—said I didn't even have character enough to be out-and-out bad. He said I couldn't earn a dollar—that I'd starve out West, and couldn't get back home unless I sent to him for money. He said he didn't believe I could really make a fight for anything under the sun. Oh—he—he shot it into me, all right."

"Fight!" cried Thorne hotly. "What's ailing him? Didn't they call you Biff Gale in college? Dick, you were the fastest one-hundred-and-seventy-five-pound man ever."

"The governor didn't mean that kind of a fight. When I left home I don't think I had an idea what was wrong with me. But George, I think I know now. I was a rich man's son—spoiled, dependent, absolutely ignorant of the value of money. That's the trouble. I'm at the end of my tether now. And I'm going to punch cattle or be a miner, or do some real stunt—like joining the rebels."

"Aha! I thought you'd spring that last one on me," declared Thorne, wagging his head. "Well, you just forget it. Mexico is like some of her volcanoes—ready to erupt fire and hell! Don't make the awful mistake of joining the rebel forces. If you didn't starve or get shot in ambush, or die of thirst, someone would knife you in the back for your belt buckle or boots. There are a good many Americans with the rebels eastward toward Agua Prieta and Juarez. Orozco is operating in Chihuahua, and I guess he has some idea of warfare. But here in Sonora there's unorganized revolt everywhere. The

American miners and ranchers, those who could get away, have fled across into the States, leaving property. Those who couldn't or wouldn't come must fight for their lives, are fighting now."

"That's bad," said Gale. "It's news to me. Why doesn't the government take action, do something?"

"Afraid of international complications. Don't want to offend the Maderists, or be criticized by jealous foreign nations. It's a delicate situation, Dick. The Washington officials know the gravity of it, you can bet. We're patrolling the boundary line. We're making a grand bluff. I could tell you of a dozen instances where cavalry should have pursued raiders on the other side of the line. But we won't do it. There would simply be hell. We're all sore. We can't keep the rebels and raiders from crossing the line. Yet we don't fight. My commission expires soon. I'll be discharged in three months. You can bet I'm glad for more reasons than I've mentioned."

"George, it strikes me that you're upset," said Dick. "I seem to remember you as a cool-headed fellow whom nothing could disturb. Has the army changed you?"

Thorne laughed. "I'm away from camp without leave," he said.

"Isn't that a serious offense?" asked Dick.

"Serious? For me, if I'm discovered, it means ruin. There are rebels in town. Any moment we might have trouble. I ought to be ready for duty—within call. If I'm discovered it means arrest. That means delay—the failure of my plans—ruin." Thorne bent over closer with his dark eyes searchingly bright. "We were old pals once—weren't we?"

"Surely," replied Dick.

"What would you say, Dick Gale, if I told you that you're the one man I'd rather have had come along than any other at this crisis of my life?"

"Thorne, I should say I was glad to be the fellow," replied Dick.

"Listen," began Thorne in low, swift whisper, "a few days, a week ago—it seems like a year!—I was of some assistance to refugees fleeing from Mexico into the States. They were all women, and one of them was dressed as a nun. Quite by accident I saw her face. It was that of a beautiful girl. I observed she kept aloof from the others. I suspected a disguise, and, when opportunity afforded, spoke to her, offered my services. She replied to my poor efforts at Spanish in fluent English. She had fled in terror from her home, some place down in Sinaloa. Rebels are active there. Her father was captured and held for ransom. When the ransom was paid the rebels killed him. The leader of these rebels was a bandit named Rojas.

Rojas saw the daughter, made off with her. But she contrived to bribe her guards, and escaped almost immediately before any harm befell her. She hid among friends. Rojas nearly tore down the town in his efforts to find her. Then she disguised herself, and traveled by horseback, stage, and train to Casita.

"Her story fascinated me, and that one fleeting glimpse I had of her face I couldn't forget. She had no friends here, no money. She knew Rojas was trailing her. This talk I had with her was at the railroad station, where all was bustle and confusion. No one noticed us, so I thought. I advised her

to remove the disguise of a nun before she left the waiting-room. And I got a boy to guide her. But he fetched her to this house. I had promised to come in the evening to talk over the situation with her.

"I found her, Dick, and when I saw her—I went stark, staring, raving mad over her. She is the most beautiful, wonderful girl I ever saw. Her name is Mercedes Castañeda, and she belongs to one of the old wealthy Spanish families.

"Dick, think, think! With Mercedes also it was love at first sight. My plan is to marry her and get her farther to the interior, away from the border. It may not be easy. She's watched. So am I. It was impossible to see her without the women of this house knowing. At first, perhaps, they had only curiosity—an itch to gossip. But the last two days there has been a change. Since last night there's some powerful influence at work.

"Rojas must have got word to his friends here; yesterday his gang of cutthroat rebels arrived, and today he came. When I learned that, I took my chance and left camp; I hunted up a priest. He promised to come here. It's time he's due. But I'm afraid he'll be stopped."

"Thorne, why don't you take the girl and get married without waiting, without running these risks?" said Dick.

"I fear it's too late now. I should have done that last night. You see, we're over the line—"

"Are we in Mexican territory now?"

"I guess yes, old boy. If Mercedes is really watched—if her identity is known, which I am sure is the case—we couldn't get far from this house before I'd be knifed and she seized."

"Good heavens! Thorne, can that sort of thing happen less than a stone's throw from the United States line?" asked Gale incredulously.

"It *can* happen, and don't you forget it. You don't seem to realize the power these guerrilla leaders, these rebel captains, and particularly these bandits, exercise over the mass of Mexicans. A bandit is a man of honor in Mexico. He is feared, envied, loved.

"I've seen Rojas. He's a handsome, bold, sneering devil, vainer than any peacock. He spends gold like he spills blood. But he is chiefly famous for abducting women. The peon girls consider it an honor to be ridden off with. Rojas has shown a penchant for girls of the better class."

Thorne wiped the perspiration from his pale face and bent a dark gaze out of the window before he resumed his talk.

"Consider what the position of Mercedes really is. I can't get any help from our side of the line. If so, I don't know where. The population on that side is mostly Mexican, absolutely in sympathy with whatever actuates those on this side. This is the situation, old friend. I've little time to spare. I face arrest for desertion. Rojas is in town. I think I was followed to this hotel. The priest has betrayed me or has been stopped. Mercedes is here alone, waiting, absolutely dependent upon me. In a few moments —sooner or later there'll be hell here! Dick, are you with me?"

Dick Gale drew a long, deep breath. Then Dick's gaze, attracted by some slight sound, shot over his friend's shoulder to see a face at the window —a handsome, bold, sneering face, with glittering dark eyes that flashed

in sinister intentness.

Dick stiffened in his seat. Thorne, with a sudden clenching of hands, wheeled toward the window.

"Rojas!" he whispered.

Chapter Two

Mercedes Castañeda

THE dark face vanished. Dick Gale heard footsteps and the tinkle of spurs. He strode to the window, and was in time to see a Mexican swagger into the front door of the saloon. There were men passing in the street, also several Mexicans lounging against the hitching-rail at the curb.

"Did you see him? Where did he go?" whispered Thorne as he joined Gale.

"He went into the saloon," replied Dick.

"Look, Dick! That fellow's a guard, though he seems so unconcerned. See, he has a short carbine, almost concealed— There's another, farther down the path. I'm afraid Rojas has the house spotted."

"If we could only be sure."

"I'm sure, Dick. Let's cross the hall; I want to see how it looks from the other side of the house."

Gale followed Thorne out of the restaurant into the high-ceiled corridor which evidently divided the hotel, opening into the street and running back to a patio. A few dim, yellow lamps flickered. A Mexican with a blanket round his shoulders stood in the front entrance. Back toward the patio there were sounds of boots on the stone floor. Shadows flitted across that end of the corridor. Thorne entered a huge chamber which was even more poorly lighted than the hall.

"Mercedes has been meeting me here," said Thorne. "We go out into the plaza. It faces the dark side of the house, and that's the place I must slip out with her if there's any chance at all to get away."

They peered out of the open window. In a moment Gale made out a slow-pacing dark form on the path. Farther down there was another.

Gripping Gale's arm, Thorne pulled back from the window.

"You saw them," he whispered. "It's just as I feared—Rojas has the place surrounded. There's Mercedes now! Dick, think—think if there's a way to get her out of this trap!"

Gale turned as his friend went down the room. In the dim light at the head of the stairs stood the slim, muffled figure of a woman. When she saw Thorne she flew noiselessly down the stairway to him. He caught her in his arms. Then she spoke softly, brokenly, in a low, swift voice.

Thorne led the girl to the center of the room, under the light where Gale stood. She had raised a white hand, holding a black-lace mantilla half aside. Dick saw a small, dark head, proudly held, an oval face white as a flower, and magnificent black eyes.

Then Thorne spoke. "Mercedes—Dick Gale, an old friend—the best friend I ever had."

She swept the mantilla back over her head. "Señor Gale—ah! I cannot speak my happiness. His friend!"

"Yes, Mercedes; my friend and yours," said Thorne, speaking rapidly. "We'll have need of him. Dear, there's bad news and no time to break

it gently. The priest did not come. He must have been detained. And listen —be brave, Mercedes—Rojas is here!"

She uttered an inarticulate cry, the poignant terror of which shook Gale's nerve, and swayed as if she would faint. Thorne caught her, and in husky voice importuned her to bear up.

"Señor, my lover, I will be strong—I will fight—I will obey."

"Mercedes," Thorne said hoarsely, "Dick, here, will think of something. We'll slip away. Then he'll take you somewhere."

She wheeled to face Gale with proud dark eyes. "Señor, help Señor Thorne to save me. He is a soldier. He is bound. He must not betray his honor, his duty, for me."

She came close to Gale, holding out her white hands, a woman all fire and soul and passion. To Gale she was wonderful. His heart leaped. As he bent over her hands and kissed them he seemed to feel himself renewed, remade.

"Señorita," he said, "I am happy to be your servant. I can conceive of no greater pleasure than giving the service you require."

"Dick, what will you do?" asked Thorne.

"I'll make a row in that saloon," returned Dick bluntly. "I'll start something. I'll rush Rojas and his crowd. I'll—"

"Lord, no; you mustn't, Dick—you'll be knifed!" cried Thorne. He was in distress, yet his eyes were shining.

"I'll take a chance. You be ready watching at the window. When the row starts those fellows out there in the plaza will run into the saloon. Then you slip out, go straight through the plaza down the street. It's a dark street, I remember. I'll catch up with you before you get far."

Thorne gasped, but did not say a word. Mercedes leaned against him, her white hands now at her breast, her great eyes watching Gale as he went out.

In the corridor Gale stopped long enough to pull on a pair of heavy gloves, to muss his hair, and disarrange his collar. Then he stepped into the restaurant, went through, and halted in the door leading into the saloon. No one appeared to notice him. The pool-players were noisily intent on their game, the same crowd of motley-robed Mexicans hung over the reeking bar.

Gale's roving glance soon fixed upon the man he took to be Rojas. The Mexican's face was turned aside. He was in earnest, excited colloquy with a dozen or more comrades, most of whom were sitting round a table. They were listening, talking, drinking. The fact that they wore cartridge belts crossed over their breasts satisfied Gale that these were the rebels.

A waiter brought more drinks to this group at the table, and this caused the leader to turn so Gale could see his face. It was indeed the sinister, sneering face of the bandit Rojas. Gale gazed at the man with curiosity. He was under medium height, and striking in appearance only because of his dandified dress and evil visage. He wore a lace scarf, a tight, bright-buttoned jacket, a buckskin vest embroidered in red, a sash and belt joined by an enormous silver clasp. Gale saw again the pearl-handled gun swinging at the bandit's hip.

Gale stepped out of the doorway,

down the couple of steps to the floor of the saloon, and he staggered a little, simulating drunkenness. He fell over the pool tables, jostled Mexicans at the bar, laughed like a maudlin fool, and, with his hat slouched down, crowded here and there. Presently his eye caught sight of the group of cowboys whom he had before noticed with such interest.

Gale lurched over to them. Planting himself squarely before the two tall cowboys who were standing, he looked straight into their lean, bronzed faces.

"I'm not drunk. I'm throwing a bluff, and I mean to start a roughhouse. I'm going to rush that damned bandit Rojas. It's to save a girl—to give her lover, who is my friend, a chance to escape with her. She's in the house. Rojas is here to get her. When I start a row my friend will try to slip out with her. Every door and window is watched. I've got to raise hell to draw the guards in. Now, gentlemen, watch me!"

One cowboy's eyes narrowed, blinking a little, and his lean jaw dropped; the other's hard face rippled with a fleeting smile.

Gale backed away, and his pulse leaped when he saw the two cowboys, as if with one purpose, slowly stride after him. Then Gale swerved, staggering along, brushed against the tables, kicked over the empty chairs. He passed Rojas and his gang, and out of the tail of his eye saw that the bandit was watching him, waving his hands and talking fiercely. The hum of the many voices grew louder, and when Dick lurched against a table, overturning it and spilling glasses into the laps of several Mexicans, there arose a shrill cry.

One of the men, a little tawny fellow, leaped up to confront Gale, and in a frenzy screamed a volley of Spanish, of which Gale distinguished *"Gringo!"* The Mexican stamped and made a threatening move with his right hand. Dick swung his leg and with a swift side kick knocked the fellow's feet from under him, whirling him down with a thud.

Wheeling, Gale rushed at Rojas. It was his old line-breaking plunge. Neither Rojas nor his men had time to move. The bandit's face turned a dirty white; his jaw dropped; he would have shrieked if Gale had not hit him. The blow swept him backward against his men. Then Gale's heavy body, swiftly following with the momentum of that rush, struck the little group of rebels. They went down with table and chairs in a sliding crash.

Gale landed on top. He jerked the little bandit off the tangled pile of struggling, yelling men, and, swinging him with terrific force, let go his hold. Rojas slid along the floor, knocking over tables and chairs. Gale bounded back, dragged Rojas up, handling him as if he were a limp sack.

A shot rang out above the yells. Gale heard the jingle of breaking glass. The room darkened perceptibly. He flashed a glance backward. The two cowboys were between him and the crowd of frantic rebels. One cowboy held two guns low down, level in front of him. The other had his gun raised and aimed. On the instant it spouted red and white. With the crack came the crashing of glass, another darkening shade over the room. Gale slung the bleeding Rojas from him. The bandit struck a table, top-

pled over it, fell, and lay prone.

Another shot made the room full of moving shadows, with light only back of the bar. A white-clad figure rushed at Gale. He tripped the man, but had to kick hard to disengage himself from grasping hands. Another figure closed in on Gale. This one was dark, swift. A blade glinted. Simultaneously with a close, red flash the knife wavered; the man wielding it stumbled backward.

Then pandemonium broke loose. Gale heard shots that sounded like dull spats in the distance. The big lamp behind the bar seemingly split, then sputtered and went out, leaving the room in darkness.

Gale leaped toward the restaurant door. He vaulted a pool table, sent tables and chairs flying, and gained the door, to be the first of a wedging mob to squeeze through. One sweep of his arm knocked the restaurant lamp from its stand; and he ran out, leaving darkness behind him. A few bounds took him into the parlor. It was deserted. Thorne had gotten away with Mercedes!

Gale ran out, keeping to the shade, and did not go into the path till he was halfway through the plaza. Under a street lamp at the far end of the path he thought he saw two dark figures. He ran faster, and soon reached the street.

The few people he saw close at hand were all coming his way, and only the foremost showed any excitement. Gale walked swiftly, peering ahead for two figures. Presently he saw them—one tall, wearing a cape; the other slight, mantled. Gale drew a sharp breath of relief.

From time to time Thorne looked back. Gale began to overhaul them; and soon, when the last lamp had been passed and the street was dark, he ventured a whistle. Thorne heard it, for he turned, whistled a low reply, and went on. Not for some distance beyond, where the street ended in open country, did they halt to wait. The desert began here. Gale felt the soft sand under his feet and saw the grotesque forms of cactus. Then he came up with the fugitives.

"Dick! Are you—all right?" panted Thorne.

"I'm—out of breath—but—O. K.," replied Gale.

"Good! Good!" choked Thorne. "Dick, it worked splendidly. What happened? Those guards of Rojas ran round in front at the first shot. Tell me what happened."

"While I was rushing Rojas a couple of cowboys shot out the lamplights. A Mexican who pulled a knife on me got hurt, I guess. Then I think there was some shooting from the rebels after the room was dark."

"Rushing Rojas?" queried Thorne. "What did you do to him?"

Mercedes pressed close to Gale, touched his hands, looked up into his face with wonderful eyes.

"Dear lady," said Gale, with voice not wholly steady, "Rojas himself will hound you no more tonight, nor for many nights."

"Señor! Señor Dick!" she cried. Then her voice failed. But her hands flew up; quick as a flash she raised her face—kissed him. Then she turned and with a sob fell into Thorne's arms.

There ensued a silence broken only by Mercedes's sobbing. Gale walked some paces away.

"Dick, Dick, come here!" called Thorne softly. "Let's pull ourselves

together now. We've got a problem yet. We don't dare risk the station—the corrals where Mexicans hire out horses. We're on good old U.S. ground this minute, but we're not out of danger."

As he paused, evidently hoping for a suggestion from Gale, the silence was broken by the clear ringing peal of a bugle. Thorne gave a violent start.

"It's a call, Dick! It's a call!" he cried.

Gale had no answer to make. Mercedes stood as if stricken. The bugle call ended. From a distance another faintly pealed. There were other sounds too remote to recognize. Then scattering shots rattled out.

"Dick, the rebels are fighting somebody," burst out Thorne excitedly. "The little federal garrison still holds its stand. Perhaps it is attacked again. And here I am, away without leave—practically a deserter!"

"Go back! Go back, before you're too late!" cried Mercedes.

"Better make tracks, Thorne," added Gale. "It can't help our predicament for you to be arrested. I'll take care of Mercedes."

Mercedes embraced her lover, begged him to go. Thorne wavered. "Keep out of Casita, Dick. The U. S. side might be safe, but I'm afraid to trust it at night. Go out in the desert, up in the mountains, in some safe place. Then come to me in camp. We'll plan. I'll have to confide in Colonel Weede. Maybe he'll help us. Hide her from the rebels—that's all."

He wrung Dick's hand, clasped Mercedes tightly in his arms, kissed her, and murmured low over her, then released her to rush off into the darkness.

For a moment the desert silence oppressed Gale. He was unaccustomed to such strange stillness. He felt a slight touch on his arm, felt it move down, felt Mercedes slip a trembling cold little hand into his.

"Señor, señor! Listen! I hear horses coming!"

CHAPTER THREE

A Flight into the Desert

UNEASY and startled, Gale turned his ear to the soft wind. Presently he heard low beats. In a moment he was certain the sounds were the padlike steps of hoofs in yielding sand coming toward him.

Gale drew Mercedes deeper into the gloom of the shrubbery. Sharp pricks from thorns warned him that he was pressing into a cactus growth, and he protected Mercedes as best he could.

The sounds of hoofbeats grew louder. Gale made out a dark moving mass against a background of dull gray. There was a line of horses. The murmur of a voice struck his ear—then a low laugh. It made him tingle, for it sounded American. Eagerly he listened.

"It shore was, Laddy, it shore was," came a voice out of the darkness. "Roughhouse! Laddy, since wire fences drove us out of Texas we ain't seen the like of that."

"It was a burnin' roast," replied another voice. "I felt lowdown. He vamoosed some sudden, an' I hope he an' his friends shook the dust of Casita."

Gale jumped up in joy. "Hold on, fellows," he called out, and strode in-

to the road.

The horses snorted and stamped. Then followed swift rustling sounds—a clinking of spurs, then silence. The figures loomed clearer in the gloom. Gale saw five or six horses, two with riders, and one other, at least, carrying a pack. When Gale got within fifteen feet of the group the foremost horseman said:

"I reckon that's close enough, stranger."

"You'd recognize me, if it wasn't so dark," replied Gale, halting. "I spoke to you a little while ago—in the saloon back there."

"Come over an' let's see you," said the cowboy.

Gale advanced till he was close to the horse. The cowboy leaned over the saddle and peered into Gale's face. Then he sheathed the gun and held out his hand. The other cowboy got off his horse and threw the bridle. He, too, peered closely into Gale's face.

"My name's Ladd," he said. "Reckon I'm some glad to meet you again."

Gale felt another grip as hard and strong as the other had been. Then he told them his story, swiftly.

"The girl ain't no peon, no common greaser?" interrupted Ladd.

"No. Her name is Castañeda. She belongs to an old Spanish family, once rich and influential."

"Reckoned as much," replied the cowboy. "Lash, what do you say?"

"It's been gettin' hotter round this greaser corral for some weeks," replied the other cowboy. "If that two-bit of a garrison surrenders, there's no tellin' what'll happen. My advice is, don't let Miss Castañeda ever set foot in Casita again."

"Looks like you've shore spoke sense," said Ladd. "I reckon, Gale, you an' the girl ought to come with us. We know people who'll take care of the señorita till your friend can come for her."

Dick warmly spoke his gratefulness, and, inexpressibly relieved and happy for Mercedes, he went toward the clump of cactus where he had left her. She stood erect, waiting, and, dark as it was, he could tell she had lost the terror that had so shaken her.

He led her into the road up to the cowboys, who now stood bareheaded in the starlight. They seemed shy, and Lash was silent while Ladd made embarrassed, unintelligible reply to Mercedes's thanks.

There were five horses—two saddled, two packed and the remaining one carried only a blanket. Ladd shortened the stirrups on his mount, and helped Mercedes up into the saddle. Lash urged Gale to take his horse. But this Gale refused to do.

"I'll walk," he said. "I'm used to walking. I know cowboys are not."

They tried again to persuade him, without avail. Then Ladd started off, riding bareback. Mercedes fell in behind, with Gale walking beside her. The two pack animals came next, and Lash brought up the rear.

The desert began to lighten. Gray openings in the border of shrubby growths changed to paler hue. The road could be seen some rods ahead, and it had become a stony descent down, steadily down. Dark, ridged backs of mountains bounded the horizon, and all seemed near at hand, hemming in the plain. In the east a white glow grew brighter and brighter, reaching up to a line of cloud, defined sharply below by a rugged

notched range. Presently a silver circle rose behind the black mountain, and the gloom of the desert underwent a transformation. The moon was rising.

"Señor, I am cold," said Mercedes.

Dick had been carrying his coat upon his arm. He stopped the horse and raised the coat up, and helped Mercedes put it on.

"I should have thought of you," he said. "But I seemed to feel warm. That coat's a little large; we might wrap it around you twice."

Mercedes smiled and lightly thanked him in Spanish. He was about to start when he observed that Ladd had halted and was peering ahead in evident caution. Lash came noiselessly forward to join his companion. The two then listened and watched.

Presently Lash went to the rear and Ladd started ahead. The progress now, however, was considerably slower, not owing to a bad road—for that became better—but probably owing to caution exercised by the cowboy guide. At the end of a half hour this marked deliberation changed, and the horses followed Ladd's at a gait that put Gale to his best walking-paces.

Gale gazed abroad, aware of an encroaching presence of physical things —the immensity of the star-studded sky, the soaring moon, the bleak, mysterious mountains, and limitless slope, and plain, and ridge, and valley.

Once more his thoughts, like his steps, were halted by Ladd's actions. The cowboy reined in his horse, listened a moment, then swung down out of the saddle. He raised a cautioning hand to the others, then slipped into the gloom and disappeared. Gale marked that the halt had been made in a ridged and cut-up pass between low mesas. To the right, up under the ledges some distance away, stood two square black objects, too uniform, he thought, to be rocks. While he was peering at them, uncertain what to think, the shrill whistle of a horse pealed out, to be followed by the rattling of hoofs on hard stone. Then a dog barked. At the same moment that Ladd hurriedly appeared in the road a light shone out and danced before one of the square black objects.

"Keep close an' don't make no noise," he whispered, and led his horse at right angles off the road.

Gale followed, leading Mercedes's horse. As he turned he observed that Lash also had dismounted.

To keep close at Ladd's heels without brushing the cactus or stumbling over rocks and depressions was a task Gale found impossible. It was no easy matter to lead a spirited horse through the dark, winding lanes walled by thorns. Mercedes's horse often balked and had to be coaxed and carefully guided. Dick concluded that Ladd was making a wide detour. The travel was fast, but by no means noiseless. The pack animals at times crashed and ripped through the narrow places.

Presently Ladd led out into a wider lane that appeared to run straight. The cowboy mounted his horse, and this fact convinced Gale that they had circled back to the road. The march proceeded then once more at a good, steady, silent walk. The wind blew stronger, the stars shone whiter, the sky grew darker, and the moon climbed toward the zenith. The road stretched level for miles, then crossed arroyos and ridges, wound between mounds of broken ruined rock, found a level again, and began to ascend.

Dick asked Mercedes if she was cold, and she answered that she was, speaking especially of her feet, which were growing numb. Then she asked to be helped down to walk awhile. At first she was cold and lame, and accepted the helping hand Dick proffered. After a little, however, she recovered and went on without assistance.

A low-spoken word from Ladd recalled Gale to the question of surroundings and of possible dangers. Ladd had halted a few yards ahead. They had reached the summit of what was evidently a high ridge which sloped with much greater steepness on the far side. It was only after a few more forward steps, however, that Dick could see down the slope. Then full in view flashed a bright campfire around which clustered a group of dark figures. They were encamped in a wide arroyo, where horses could be seen grazing in black patches of grass between clusters of trees. A second look at the campers told Gale they were Mexicans. At this moment Lash came forward to join Ladd, and the two spent a long, uninterrupted moment studying the arroyo. A hoarse laugh, faint yet distinct, floated up on the cool wind.

"Well, Laddy, what you makin' of that outfit?" inquired Lash, speaking softly.

"Same as any of them raider outfits," replied Ladd. "They're across the line for beef. But they'll run off any good stock. As hoss thieves these rebels have got 'em all beat. That outfit is waitin' till it's late. There's a ranch up the arroyo."

"Nothin' to it but head south for the Rio Forlorn."

"You're talkin' sense now, Jim. I wish we'd headed that way long ago. But it ain't strange I'd want to travel away from the border, thinkin' of the girl. Jim, we can't go round this greaser outfit an' strike the road again. Too rough. So we'll have to give up gettin' to San Felipe."

"Perhaps it's just as well, Laddy. Rio Forlorn is on the border, but it's country where these rebels ain't been yet."

"Wait till they learn of the oasis an' Beldin's hosses!" exclaimed Laddy. "I'm not anticipatin' peace anywhere along the border, Jim. But we can't go ahead; we can't go back."

"What'll we do, Laddy?"

"Shore we won't ride into Rio Forlorn in the daytime. Let's slip the packs, Jim. We can hide them off in the cactus an' come back after them. With the young man ridin' we—"

The whispering was interrupted by a loud ringing neigh that whistled up from the arroyo. One of the horses had scented the travelers on the ridge top. The indifference of the Mexicans changed to attention.

Ladd and Lash turned back and led the horses into the first opening on the south side of the road. There was nothing more said at the moment, and manifestly the cowboys were in a hurry. Gale had to run in the open

places to keep up. When they did stop it was welcome to Gale, for he had begun to fall behind.

The packs were slipped, securely tied, and hidden in a mesquite clump. Ladd strapped a blanket around one of the horses. His next move was to take off his chaps.

"Gale, you're wearin' boots, an' by liftin' your feet you can beat the cactus," he whispered. "But the—the—Miss Castañeda, she'll be torn to pieces unless she puts these on. Please tell her—an' hurry."

Dick took the chaps, and, going up to Mercedes, he explained the situation. She laughed, evidently at his embarrassed earnestness, and slipped out of the saddle.

"Señor, chaparejos and I are not strangers," she said.

Deftly and promptly she equipped herself, and then Gale helped her into the saddle, called to her horse, and started off. Ladd directed Gale to mount the other saddled horse and go next.

Dick had not ridden a hundred yards behind the trotting leaders before he had sundry painful encounters with reaching cactus arms. The horse missed these by a narrow margin. Dick's knees appeared to be in line, and in became necessary for him to lift them high and let his boots take the onslaught of the spikes. He was at home in the saddle, and the accomplishment was about the only one he possessed that had been of any advantage during his sojourn in the West.

Ladd pursued a zigzag course southward across the desert, trotting down the aisles, cantering in wide, bare patches, walking through the clumps of cacti. The desert seemed all of a sameness to Dick—a wilderness of rocks and jagged growths hemmed in by lowering ranges, always looking close, yet never growing any nearer. By and by Ladd entered an arroyo, and here the travelers turned and twisted with the meanderings of a dry stream bed. At the head of the canyon they had to take once more to the rougher ground. Always it led down, always it grew rougher, more rolling, with wider bare spaces, always the black ranges loomed close.

Gale became chilled to the bone, and his clothes were damp and cold. Mercedes must be made of steel, he thought, to stand all that she had been subjected to and yet, when the stars were paling and dawn perhaps not far away, stay in the saddle.

So Dick Gale rode on, drowsier for each mile, and more and more giving the horse a choice of ground. Once when he raised his head, he saw that one of the horses in the lead was riderless. Ladd was carrying Mercedes. Dick marveled that her collapse had not come sooner. Another time, rousing himself again, he imagined they were now on a good hard road.

It seemed that hours passed, though he knew only little time had elapsed, when once more he threw off the spell of weariness. He heard a dog bark. Tall trees lined the open lane down which he was riding. Presently in the gray gloom he saw low, square houses with flat roofs. Ladd turned off to the left down another lane, gloomy between trees. Every few rods there was one of the squat houses.

Ladd rode on for perhaps a quarter of a mile, though it seemed interminably long to Dick. A grove of trees loomed dark in the gray of morning. Ladd entered it and was lost in the

shade. Dick rode on among the trees. Presently he heard voices, and soon another house, low and flat like the others, but so long he could not see the farther end, stood up blacker than the trees. As he dismounted, cramped and sore, he could scarcely stand. Lash came alongside. He spoke, and someone with a big, hearty voice replied to him. Then it seemed to Dick that he was led into blackness like pitch, where, presently, he felt blankets thrown on him, and then his drowsy faculties faded.

Chapter Four

Forlorn River

WHEN Dick opened his eyes a flood of golden sunshine streamed in at the open window under which he lay. His first thought was one of blank wonder as to where in the world he happened to be. The room was large, square, adobe-walled. It was littered with saddles, harness, blankets. Upon the floor was a bed spread out upon a tarpaulin. Probably this was where someone had slept. The sight of huge dusty spurs, a gun belt with sheath and gun, and a pair of leather chaps bristling with broken cactus thorns recalled to Dick the cowboys, the ride, Mercedes, and the whole strange adventure that had brought him there.

A sudden pain in his hand caused him to hold it up. It was black and blue, swollen to almost twice its normal size, and stiff as a board. The knuckles were skinned and crusted with dry blood.

A warm, dry, fragrant breeze came through the window. Dick heard the fluttering of leaves, the murmur of running water, the twittering of birds, then the sound of approaching footsteps and voices. The door at the far end of the room was open. Through it he saw poles of peeled wood upholding a porch roof, a bench, rose bushes in bloom, grass, and beyond these bright-green foliage of trees.

"He shore was sleepin' when I looked in an hour ago," said a voice that Dick recognized as Ladd's.

"Let him sleep," came the reply in deep, good-natured tones. "Mrs. B. says the girl's never moved. Must have been a tough ride for them both. Forty miles through cactus!"

"Young Gale hoofed darn near half the way," replied Ladd.

"Well, Laddy, I'm down right glad to see you boys, and I'll do all I can for the young couple," said the other. "But I'm doing some worry here; don't mistake me."

"About your stock?"

"I've got only a few head of cattle at the oasis now. What I'm afraid of most is losing that bunch of horses. If any rebels come this far, or if they hear of my horses, they're going to raid me. You know what those guerrilla Mexicans will do for horses. They're crazy on horseflesh. They know fine horses. They breed the finest in the world. So I don't sleep nights any more."

"Reckon me an' Jim might as well tie up with you for a spell, Beldin'. We've been ridin' up an' down Arizona tryin' to keep out of sight of wire fences."

"Laddy, it's open enough around Forlorn River to satisfy even an old-time cowpuncher like you," laughed

Belding. "I'd take your staying on as some favor, don't mistake me. Perhaps I can persuade the young man Gale to take a job with me."

"That's shore likely. He said he had no money, no friends. An' if a scrapper's all you're lookin' for he'll do," replied Ladd with a dry chuckle.

"Mrs. B. will throw some bronco capers round this ranch when she hears I'm going to hire a stranger."

"Why?"

"Well, there's Nell— He's a fine-spoken, good-looking chap you said?"

"Shore he is," said Ladd warmly. "What do you say, Jim?"

"Husky young fellow, nice voice, steady, clear eyes, kinda proud, I thought, an' some handsome, he was," replied Jim Lash.

"Maybe I ought to think twice before taking a stranger into my family," said Belding, seriously. "Well, I guess he's all right, Laddy, being the cavalryman's friend. No bum or lunger? He must be all right?"

"Bum? Lunger? Say, didn't I tell you I shook hands with this boy an' was plumb glad to meet him?" demanded Laddy, with considerable heat. Manifestly he had been affronted. "Tom Beldin', he's a gentleman, an' he could lick you in—in half a second. How about that, Jim?"

"Less time," replied Lash. "Tom, here's my stand. Young Gale can have my hoss, my gun, anythin' of mine."

"Aw, I didn't mean to insult you, boys, don't mistake me," said Belding. "Course he's all right."

"How's the young man?" called a woman's voice. It was kind and mellow and earnest.

Gale heard footsteps on flagstones.

"He's asleep yet, wife," replied Belding. "Guess he was pretty much knocked out. I'll close the door there so we won't wake him."

There were slow, soft steps, then the door softly closed. But the fact scarcely made a perceptible difference in the sound of the voices outside.

"Laddy and Jim are going to stay," went on Belding. "It'll be like the old Panhandle days a little. I'm powerful glad to have the boys, Nellie. You know I meant to send to Casita to ask them. We'll see some trouble before the revolution is ended. I think I'll make this young man Gale an offer."

"He isn't a cowboy?" asked Mrs. Belding quickly.

"No."

"Shore he'd make a darn good one," put in Laddy.

"What is he? Who is he? Where did he come from? Surely you must be—"

"Laddy swears he's all right," interrupted her husband. "That's enough reference for me. Isn't it enough for you?"

"But, Tom—he'll fall in love with Nell!" protested Mrs. Belding.

"Well, wouldn't that be regular? Doesn't every man who comes along fall in love with Nell? Hasn't it always happened?"

"But, Tom, Nell might fall in love with this young man!" exclaimed the wife, in distress.

"Laddy, Jim, didn't I tell you?" cried Belding. "I knew she'd say that. My dear wife, I would be simply overcome with joy if Nell did fall in love once. Real good and hard! She's wilder than any antelope out there on the desert. Nell's nearly twenty now, and so far as we know she's never cared a rap for any fellow. I've done my best for Nell—loved her as if she were my own daughter. I've changed

many business plans to suit your whims. There are rough times ahead, maybe. I need men. I'll hire this chap Gale if he'll stay. Let Nell take her chance with him, just as she'll have to take chances with men when we get out of the desert. She'll be all the better for it."

"I hope Laddy's not mistaken in his opinion of this newcomer," replied Mrs. Belding, with a sigh of resignation.

"Shore I never made a mistake in my life figger'n' people," said Laddy stoutly.

"Yes, you have, Laddy," replied Mrs. Belding. "You're wrong about Tom. Well, supper is to be got. That young man and the girl will be starved. I'll go in now. If Nell happens around don't—don't flatter her, Laddy, like you did at dinner. Don't make her think of her looks."

Dick heard Mrs. Belding walk away.

"Shore she's powerful particular about that girl," observed Laddy. "I'll be darned if I believe any girl can be hurt by a little sweet talk. It pleases 'em. But say, Beldin', speaking of looks, have you got a peek yet at the Spanish girl?"

"Not in the light."

"Well, neither have I in daytime. I had enough by moonlight. Nell is some on looks, but I'm regretful passin' the ribbon to the lady from Mex. Jim, where are you?"

"My money's on Nell," replied Lash. "Gimme a girl with flesh an' color, an' blue eyes a-laughin'. Miss Castañeda is some peach, I'll not gainsay. But—"

"Chop it," interrupted Belding. "Here comes Nell now."

"Here you are," cried a sweet, happy voice. "Dad, the Señorita is perfectly lovely. I've been peeping at her. She sleeps like—like death. She's so white. Oh, I hope she won't be ill."

"Shore she's only played out," said Laddy. "But she had spunk while it lasted."

"I never saw any one so beautiful. Tell me more, Laddy. You promised. I'm dying to know. I never hear anything in this awful place. Didn't you say the Señorita had a sweetheart?"

"Shore I did."

"And he's a cavalryman?"

"Yes."

"Is he the young man who came with you?"

"Nope. That fellow's the one who saved the girl from Rojas."

"Ah! Where is he, Laddy?"

"He's in there asleep."

"Is he—nice, Laddy?"

"Well, I'm not long acquainted, never saw him by day, but I was some tolerable took with him. An' Jim here, Jim says the young man can have his gun an' his hoss."

"Wonderful! Laddy, what on earth did this stranger do to win you cowboys in just one night?"

"I'll shore have to tell you. Me an' Jim was watchin' a game of cards in the Del Sol saloon in Casita. That's across the line. We had acquaintances —four fellows from the Cross Bar outfit, where we worked a while back. Some of Campo's rebels were there drinkin' an' playin' games. Then pretty soon in come Rojas with some of his outfit. Jim said he reckoned there was somethin' in the wind. Then, careless-like, I began to peek at Rojas. He kept his men in a tight bunch round a table. He talked an' waved his hands. He was actually

shakin'. His eyes had a wild glare.

"A little while afterward I seen a fellow standin' in the restaurant door. He was a young American dressed in corduroy an' boots, like a prospector. You know it's no onusual fact to see prospectors in these parts. What made me think twice about this one was how big he seemed, how he filled up that door. He looked round the saloon, an' when he spotted Rojas he sorta jerked up.

"He reeled around the room like a fellow who was drunker'n a lord. Nobody but me seemed to notice him. Then he began to get his feet tangled up in chairs an' bump against tables. He got some pretty hard looks. He came round our way, an' all of a sudden he seen us cowboys.

"When he got close he straightened up, put back his slouch hat, an' looked at us. His face was white, with veins standin' out an' eyes flamin'. Then this queer young man shot some cool, polite words at me an' Jim.

"He was only bluffin' at bein' drunk —he meant to rush Rojas, to start a roughhouse. The bandit was after a girl. This girl was in the hotel, an' she was the sweetheart of a soldier, the young fellow's friend. The hotel was watched by Rojas's guards, an' the plan was to make a fuss an' get the girl away in the excitement.

"Before I could catch my breath he had knocked over a table an' crowded some greaser half off the map. One little man leaped up like a wild monkey an' began to screech. An' in another second he was in the air upside down. When he lit, he laid there. Then, quicker'n I can tell you, the young man charged Rojas an' his men. The whole outfit went down—smash! The young fellow came up out of the pile with Rojas, an' just like I'd sling an empty sack along the floor he sent the bandit.

"I woke up then, an' made for the center of the room, Jim with me. I began to shoot out the lamps. Jim throwed his guns on the crazy rebels, an' I was afraid there'd be blood spilled before I could get the room dark. Bein' shore busy, I lost sight of the young fellow for a second or so, an' when I got an eye free for him I seen a greaser about to knife him. Think I was some considerate of the greaser by only shootin' his arm off. Then I cracked the last lamp, an' in the hullabaloo me an' Jim vamoosed.

"We made tracks for our hosses an' packs, an' was hittin' the San Felipe road when we run right plumb into the young man. Well, he said his name was Gale—Dick Gale. The girl was with him safe an' well; but her sweetheart, the soldier, bein' away without leave, had to go back sudden. There shore was some trouble, for Jim an' me heard shootin'. Gale said he had no money, no friends, was a stranger in a desert country; an' he was distracted to know how to help the girl. So me an' Jim started off with them for San Felipe, got switched, an' then we headed for the Rio Forlorn."

"Oh, I think he was perfectly splendid!" exclaimed the girl. "But, Laddy, you haven't told me what he looks like."

At this juncture Dick Gale felt it absolutely impossible for him to play the eavesdropper any longer. Quietly he rolled out of bed. The voices still sounded close outside, and it was only by effort that he kept from further listening.

Gale imagined he made noise

enough as he clumsily pulled on his boots; yet the voices, split by a merry laugh, kept on murmuring outside the door. It was awkward for him, having only one hand available to lace up his boots. He looked out of the window. Evidently this was at the end of the house. There was a flagstone walk, beside which ran a ditch full of swift, muddy water. It made a pleasant sound. Then he saw, close to the wall, a tub full of water, and a bench upon which lay basin, soap, towel, comb, and brush. The window was also a door, for under it there was a step.

Gale hesitated a moment, then went out. He stepped naturally, hoping and expecting that the cowboys would hear him. But nobody came. Awkwardly, with left hand, he washed his face. Upon a nail in the wall hung a little mirror, by the aid of which Dick combed and brushed his hair. He imagined he looked a most haggard wretch. With that he faced forward, meaning to go around the corner of the house to greet the cowboys and these new-found friends.

From close around the corner pealed out that sweet voice. "Dad, you'll have your wish, and Mama will be wild!"

Dick saw a little foot sweep into view, a white dress, then the swiftly moving form of a girl. She was looking backward.

"Dad, I shall fall in love with your new ranger. I will—I have—" Then she plumped squarely into Dick's arms. She started back violently.

Dick saw a fair face and dark-blue, audaciously flashing eyes. For an instant they were level with Dick's. Suddenly she blushed.

"Oh-h!" she faltered. Then the blush turned to a scarlet fire. She whirled past him, and like a white gleam was gone.

Dick became conscious of the quickened beating of his heart. With a couple of strides he turned the corner. Laddy and Lash were there talking to a man of burly form. Seen by day, both cowboys were gray-haired, red-skinned, and weather-beaten, with lean, sharp features, and gray eyes so much alike that they might have been brothers.

"Hello, there's the young fellow," spoke up the burly man. "Mr. Gale, I'm glad to meet you. My name's Belding."

His greeting was as warm as his handclasp was long and hard. Gale saw a heavy man of medium height. His head was large and covered with grizzled locks. He wore a short-cropped mustache and chin beard. His skin was brown, and his dark eyes beamed with a genial light.

"Young man, did you run into anything as you came out?" asked Belding, with twinkling eyes.

"Why, yes; but she didn't wait for me to introduce myself."

"That was Nell Burton, my girl—step-daughter, I should say," said Belding. "She's sure some whirlwind, as Laddy calls her. Come, let's go in and meet the wife."

The house was long, like a barracks, with porch extending all the way, and doors every dozen paces. When Dick was ushered into a sitting-room, he was amazed at the light and comfort. This room had two big windows and a door opening into a patio.

In Mrs. Belding, Gale found a woman of noble proportions and striking appearance. Her hair was white. She

had a strong, serious, well-lined face that bore haunting evidences of past beauty. Her greeting, which seemed to Dick rather slow in coming, was kind though not cordial.

Gale's first thought, after he had thanked these good people for their hospitality, was to inquire about Mercedes. Mrs. Belding said the girl had suffered no great hardship, other than mental, and would very soon be rested and well.

"Now, Gale," said Belding, when his wife had excused herself to get supper, "the boys, Jim and Laddy, told me about you and the mix-up at Casita. I'll be glad to take care of the girl till it's safe for your soldier friend to get her out of the country. That won't be very soon, don't mistake me. I don't want to seem overcurious about you—Laddy has interested me in you—and straight out I'd like to know what you propose to do now."

"I haven't any plans," replied Dick. "I just drifted down here. My home is in Chicago. When I left school some years ago—I'm twenty-five now—I went to work for my father. He's—he has business interests there. I tried all kinds of inside jobs. I couldn't please my father. He hurt my feelings, and I quit. Six months or more ago I came West, and have knocked about from Wyoming southwest to the border."

"What do you want to do?" interposed Belding.

"I want a man's job. I want to do things with my hands. I want action. I want to be outdoors."

"Gale—you could go home again—to the old man—it'd be all right?"

"Mr. Belding, there's nothing shady in my past. The governor would be glad to have me home. That's the only consolation I've got. But I'm not going. I'm broke. I won't be a tramp. And it's up to me to do something."

"How'd you like to be a border ranger?" asked Belding, laying a hand on Dick's knee. "Part of my job here is United States Inspector of Immigration. I've got that boundary line to patrol—to keep out Chinks and Japs. This revolution has added complications, and I'm looking for smugglers and raiders here any day. You'll not be hired by the U. S. You'll simply be my ranger, same as Laddy and Jim, who have promised to work for me. I'll pay you well, give you a room here, furnish everything down to guns, and the finest horse you ever saw in your life."

"I accept, and I thank you—I can't say how much," replied Gale earnestly.

"Good! That's settled. Let's go out and tell Laddy and Jim."

Both boys expressed satisfaction at the turn of affairs, and then with Belding they set out to take Gale around the ranch. The house and several outbuildings were constructed of adobe, which, according to Belding, retained the summer heat on into winter, and the winter cold on into summer.

Belding explained that the luxuriance of this desert place was owing to a few springs and the dammed-up waters of the Rio Forlorn. Before he had come to the oasis it had been inhabited by a Papago Indian tribe and a few peon families. The oasis lay in an arroyo a mile wide, and sloped southwest for some ten miles or more. The river went dry most of the year; but enough water was stored in flood season to irrigate the gardens

and alfalfa fields.

"I've got one never-failing spring on my place," said Belding. "Fine, sweet water! You know what that means in the desert. I like this oasis. Forlorn and lonely, yes, especially for women like my wife and Nell; but I like it. And between you and me, boys, I've got something up my sleeve. There's gold dust in the arroyos, and there's mineral up in the mountains. If we only had water! This hamlet has steadily grown since I took up a station here. Why, Casita is no place beside Forlorn River. Pretty soon the Southern Pacific will shoot a railroad branch out here. Well, here are the corrals and the fields. Gale, take a look at that bunch of horses!"

Belding's last remark was made as he led his companions out of shady gardens into the open. Gale saw an adobe shed and a huge pen fenced by strangely twisted and contorted branches or trunks of mesquite, and beyond these, wide, flat fields, green —a dark, rich green—and dotted with beautiful horses. There were whites and blacks, and bay and grays.

"Every rancher loves his horses," said Belding. "When I was in the Panhandle I had some fine stock. But these are Mexican. They came from Durango, where they were bred. Mexican horses are the finest in the world, bar none."

"Shore I reckon I savvy why you don't sleep nights," drawled Laddy. "I see a greaser out there—no, it's an Indian."

"That's my Papago herdsman. I keep watch over the horses now day and night. Lord, how I'd hate to have Rojas or Salazar—any of those bandit rebels—find my horses! Gale, can you ride?"

Dick replied that he could, according to the Eastern idea of horsemanship.

"You don't need to be half horse to ride one of that bunch. But over there in the other field I've iron-jawed broncos I wouldn't want you to tackle —except to see the fun. I've an outlaw I'll gamble even Laddy can't ride."

"So. How much'll you gamble?" asked Laddy.

The ringing of a bell which Belding said was a call to supper, turned the men back toward the house. It was not until they reached the house and were about to go in that Belding chanced to discover Gale's crippled hand.

"What an awful hand!" he exclaimed. "Where the devil did you get that?"

"I stove in my knuckles on Rojas," replied Dick.

"You did that in one punch? Say, I'm glad it wasn't me you hit! Why didn't you tell me? That's a bad hand. Those cuts are full of dirt and sand. Inflammation's setting in. It's got to be dressed. Nell!" he called.

There was no answer.

"Nell!" roared Belding.

This brought results. Dick saw a glimpse of golden hair and a white dress in the door. But they were not visible longer than a second.

"Dad, what's the matter?" asked a voice that was still as sweet as formerly, but now rather small and constrained.

"Bring the antiseptics, cotton, bandages—and things out here. Hurry now."

Belding fetched a pail of water and a basin from the kitchen. His wife followed him out, and, upon seeing

Dick's hand, was all solicitude. Then Dick heard light, quick footsteps, but he did not look up.

"Nell, this is Mr. Gale—Dick Gale, who came with the boys last night," said Belding. "He's got an awful hand. Got it punching that greaser Rojas. I want you to dress it. Gale, this is my step-daughter, Nell Burton."

Dick, divining that the situation might be embarrassing to her, refrained from looking up. She began to bathe his injured knuckles. She had beautiful hands, not too large, though certainly not small, and they were strong, brown, supple. He observed next, with stealthy, upward-stealing glance, that she had rolled up her sleeves, exposing fine, round arms graceful in line. Her skin was brown —no, it was more gold than brown. Dick stoically lowered his eyes then.

When, however, she sat down beside him and rested his injured hand in her lap as she cut bandages, she was so thrillingly near that he yielded to an irrepressible desire to look up. She had a sweet, fair face warmly tinted with that same healthy golden-brown sunburn. Her hair was light-gold and abundant, a waving mass. Her eyes were shaded by long, downcast lashes, yet through them he caught a gleam of blue.

"Shore it musta hurt?" inquired Laddy, an interested spectator.

"Yes, I confess it did," replied Dick slowly, with his eyes on Nell's face. "But I didn't mind."

The girl's lashes swept up swiftly in surprise. She had taken his words literally. But the dark-blue eyes met his for only a fleeting second. Then the warm tint in her cheeks turned as red as her lips. Hurriedly she finished tying the bandage and rose to her feet.

"I thank you," said Gale, also rising.

With that Belding appeared in the doorway, and, finding the operation concluded, called them in to supper. Dick had the use of only one arm, and he certainly was keenly aware of the shy, silent girl across the table; but in spite of these considerable handicaps he eclipsed both hungry cowboys in the assault upon Mrs. Belding's bounteous supper. Belding talked, the cowboys talked more or less, Mrs. Belding put in a word now and then, and Dick managed to find brief intervals when it was possible for him to say yes or no. He observed gratefully that no one round the table seemed to be aware of his enormous appetite.

After supper, having a favorable opportunity when for a moment no one was at hand, Dick went out through the yard, past the gardens and fields, and climbed the first knoll. From that vantage point he looked out over the little hamlet, somewhat to his right, and was surprised at its extent, its considerable number of adobe houses.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Desert Rose

BELDING assigned Dick to a little room which had no windows but two doors, one opening into the patio, the other into the yard on the west side of the house. It contained only the barest necessities for comfort. Dick expressed regret that he had come to Forlorn River a beggar.

"Beggar hell!" exploded Belding, with his eyes snapping in the lamplight. "Money's the last thing we think of out here. All the same, Gale, if you stick you'll be rich."

As he viewed his stained and torn shirt, Dick laughed and said, "Belding, while I'm getting rich I'd like to have some respectable clothes."

"We've a little Mex store in town, and what you can't get there the womenfolks will make for you."

When Dick lay down he was dully conscious of pain and headache, that he did not feel well. Despite this, he succumbed to weariness and soon fell asleep.

It was light when he awoke, but a strange brightness seen through what seemed blurred eyes. When he essayed to lift his right arm, an excruciating pain made him desist. He felt hot all over, and a raging headache consumed him.

Belding came stamping into the room. "Hello, Dick. Do you know it's late? How's the busted fist this morning?"

Dick tried to sit up, but his effort was a failure. He got about half up, then felt himself weakly sliding back.

"I guess—I'm pretty sick," he said.

He saw Belding lean over him, feel his face, and speak, and then everything seemed to drift, not into darkness, but into some region where he had dim perceptions of gray moving things, and of voices that were remote. Then there came an interval when all was blank. When he again unclosed his eyes the room was sunny, and cool with a fragrant breeze that blew through the open door. Dick felt better; but he had no particular desire to move or talk or eat. He had, however, a burning thirst.

On the next day he was very much improved.

"We've been afraid of blood poisoning," said Belding. "But my wife thinks the danger's past. You'll have to rest that arm for a while."

Ladd and Jim came peeping in at the door.

"Come in, boys. He can have company—the more the better—if it'll keep him content. He mustn't move, that's all."

The cowboys entered, slow, easy, cool, kind-voiced.

"Shore it's tough," said Ladd, after he had greeted Dick. "You look used up."

"Gale, Laddy tells me one of our neighbors, fellow named Carter, is going to Casita," put in Belding. "Here's a chance to get word to your friend the soldier."

"Oh, that will be fine!" exclaimed Dick. "How is Miss Castañeda?"

"She's all right, Gale. Been up and around the patio for two days. We've been getting acquainted. She and Nell made friends at once. I'll call them in."

Both girls came in, Mercedes leading. Like Nell, she wore white, and she had a red rose in her hand. She was swift, impulsive in her movements to reach his side.

"Señor, I am so sorry you were ill—so happy you are better."

Dick greeted her, then spoke to Nell. Her reply was a murmured, unintelligible one, but her eyes were glad, and the tint in her cheeks threatened to rival the hue of the rose she carried.

Everybody chatted then. Presently Dick remembered to speak of the matter of getting news to Thorne.

"Señor, may I write to him? Will

someone take a letter? I shall hear from him!" Mercedes said.

"Of course. I guess poor Thorne is almost crazy. I'll write to him—no, I can't with this crippled hand."

"That'll be all right, Gale," said Belding. "Nell will write for you. She writes all my letters."

So Belding arranged it; and Mercedes flew away to her room to write, while Nell fetched pen and paper and seated herself beside Gale's bed to take his dictation.

"Shore I'll ride in with the letters," Ladd said.

"No you won't," replied Belding. "That bandit outfit will be laying for you. I'll ride in myself with Carter. There's business I can see to, and I'm curious to know what the rebels are doing. Laddy, keep one eye open while I'm gone. See the horses are locked up. Gale, I'm going to Casita myself. Ought to get back tomorrow some time. I'll be ready to start in an hour. Have your letter ready. And say—if you want to write home it's a chance. Sometimes we don't go to the P. O. in a month."

He tramped out, followed by the tall cowboys, and then Dick was enabled to bring his letter to a close. Mercedes came back and her eyes were shining.

"May I trouble you to write another for me?" asked Dick, as he received the letter from Nell.

"It's no trouble, I'm sure—I'd be pleased," she replied.

When Dick finished dictating, his eyes were upon Mercedes, who sat smilingly curious and sympathetic. How responsive she was! He heard the hasty scratch of Nell's pen. He looked at Nell. Presently she rose, holding out his letter. She gave him one swift gaze, unconscious, searching, then averted it and turned away. She left the room with Mercedes before he could express his thanks.

During the rest of the day Gale was content to lie still on his bed thinking and dreaming, dozing at intervals, and watching the lights change upon the mountain peaks, feeling the warm, fragrant desert wind that blew in upon him. He seemed to have lost the faculty of estimating time.

Next day he believed he was well enough to leave his room; but Mrs. Belding would not permit him to do so. She was kind, soft-handed, motherly, and she was always coming in to minister to his comfort. This attention was sincere, not in the least forced; yet Gale felt that the friendliness so manifest in the others of the household did not extend to her. He was conscious of something that a little thought persuaded him was antagonism. It surprised and hurt him.

Toward evening Gale heard the tramp of horses and Belding's hearty voice. Presently the rancher strode in upon Gale, shaking the gray dust from his broad shoulders and waving a letter.

"Hello, Dick! Good news and bad!" he said, putting the letter in Dick's hand. "Had no trouble finding your friend Thorne. Looked like he'd been drunk for a week! Say, he nearly threw a fit. I never saw a fellow so wild with joy. He made sure you and Mercedes were lost in the desert. He wrote two letters which I brought.

"Well, Casita is one hell of a place these days. I tried to get your baggage, and think I made a mistake. We're going to see travel toward Forlorn River. The federal garrison got reinforcements from somewhere, and

is holding out. There's been fighting for three days. It's reported that Campo, the rebel leader, is on the way up from Sinaloa, and Huerta, a federal general, is coming to relieve the garrison."

"Do you think we'll have trouble out here?" asked Dick excitedly.

"Sure. Some kind of trouble sooner or later," replied Belding gloomily. "Anyway, my boy, as soon as you can hold a bridle and a gun you'll be on the job, don't mistake me."

Dick drew a deep breath, and even after Belding had departed he forgot for a moment about the letter in his hand. Then he unfolded the paper and read:

DEAR DICK,—*You've more than saved my life. To the end of my days you'll be the one man to whom I owe everything. Words fail to express my feelings.*

This must be a brief note. Belding is waiting, and I used up most of the time writing to Mercedes. I like Belding. He was not unknown to me, though I never met or saw him before. Dick, your luck is staggering. The way Belding spoke of you was great. But you deserve it, old man.

I'm leaving Mercedes in your charge, subject, of course, to advice from Belding. Take care of her, Dick, for my life is wrapped up in her. By all means keep her from being seen by Mexicans. We are sitting tight here—nothing doing. If some action doesn't come soon, it'll be darned strange. Things are centering this way. There's scrapping right along, and people have begun to move. We're still patrolling the line eastward of Casita. It'll be impossible to keep any tab on the line west of Casita, for it's too rough. That cactus desert is awful. Cowboys or rangers with desert-bred horses might keep raiders and smugglers from crossing. But if cavalrymen could stand that waterless wilderness, which I doubt much, their horses would drop under them.

If things do quiet down before my commission expires, I'll get leave of absence, run out to Forlorn River, marry my beautiful Spanish princess, and take her to a civilized country. It's my great luck, old pal, that you are a fellow who never seemed to care about pretty girls. So you won't give me the double cross and run off with Mercedes.

That reminds me of Rojas. You didn't do anything to the Dandy Rebel! Not at all! You merely caressed him—gently moved him to one side. Dick, harken to these glad words: Rojas is in the hospital. He had a smashed finger, a dislocated collar bone, three broken ribs, and a fearful gash on his face. He'll be in the hospital for a month.

Send me a line whenever any one comes in from F. R., and enclose Mercedes's letter in yours. Take care of her, Dick, and may the future hold in store for you some of the sweetness I know now!

Faithfully yours, THORNE.

Dick reread the letter, then folded it and placed it under his pillow.

While he was eating his supper, with appetite rapidly returning to normal, Ladd and Jim came in, bowing their tall heads to enter the door. Their friendly advances were singularly welcome to Gale. Jim Lash had heard from Belding the result of the mauling given to Rojas by Dick. And Jim talked about what a grand thing that was. Ladd had a good deal to say about Belding's horses.

"Shore it's a cinch Beldin' is a-goin' to lose some of them hosses," he said. "Half the time when Beldin's stock is out of the alfalfa it's grazin' over the line. He thinks he's careful about them hosses, but he ain't."

"Look a-here, Laddy; you cain't believe all you hear," replied Jim seriously. "I reckon we mightn't have any trouble."

"Back up, Jim. Shore you're standin' on your bridle. There are miners fightin' for life down in Sonora, you can gamble on that. Shore, Jim, there's more doin' than the raidin' of a few hosses. An' Forlorn River is goin' to get hers!"

Another dawn found Gale so much recovered that he arose and looked after himself, not, however, without considerable difficulty and rather disheartening twinges of pain.

Some time during the morning he heard the girls in the patio and called to ask if he might join them. He rereceived one response, a mellow, *"Si,* señor." It was not as much as he wanted, but considering that it was enough, he went out. He found himself lost in a labyrinth of green and rose-bordered walks.

He strolled around, discovering that the patio was a courtyard, open at an end. After stooping to get under shrubs and wading through bushes he entered an open sandy circle, full of magnificent and murderous cactus plants, strange to him. On the other side, in the shade of a beautiful tree, he found the girls, Mercedes sitting in a hammock, Nell upon a blanket.

"What a beautiful tree!" he exclaimed.

"Palo verde," replied Nell.

"Señor, *palo verde* means 'green tree,' " added Mercedes.

Right then and there began Dick's education in desert growths; and he felt that even if he had not had such charming teachers he would still have been absorbed. For the patio was full of desert wonders: mesquite, *saguaro, ocatillo, bisnaga, choya.*

Dick's enthusiasm was contagious, and his earnest desire to learn was flattering to his teachers. When it came to assimilating Spanish, however, he did not appear to be so apt a pupil. He managed, after many trials, to acquire *"buenos dias"* and *"buenos tardes,"* and "señorita" and *"gracias,"* and a few other short terms. Dick was indeed eager to get a little smattering of Spanish, and perhaps he was not really quite so stupid as he pretended to be.

So that was the beginning of many afternoons in which he learned desert lore and Spanish verbs, and something else that he dared not name.

Nell Burton had never shown to Gale that daring side of her character which had been so suggestively defined in Belding's terse description and Ladd's encomiums. When the ice had been somewhat broken between them, he was always trying to surprise her into her real self. There were moments that fairly made him tingle with expectation. Yet he saw little more than a ghost of her vivacity.

On the few occasions that Dick had been left alone with her in the patio Nell had grown suddenly unresponsive and restrained, or she had left him on some transparent pretext. On the last occasion Mercedes returned to find Dick staring disconsolately at the rose-bordered path, where Nell had evidently vanished. The Spanish girl was wonderful in her divination.

"Señor Dick!" she cried.

Dick looked at her, soberly nodded his head, and then he laughed. Mercedes had seen through him in one swift glance. Her white hand touched his in wordless sympathy and thrilled him.

Little by little he learned details of Nell's varied life. She had lived in many places. As a child she remembered moving from town to town, of going to school among schoolmates whom she never had time to know. Lawrence, Kansas, where she studied for several years, was the later exception to this changeful nature of her schooling. Then she moved on to Stillwater, Oklahoma, from there to Austin, Texas, and on to Waco, where her mother met and married Belding. They lived in New Mexico awhile, in Tucson, Arizona, in Douglas, and finally had come to lonely Forlorn River.

"Mother could never live in one place any length of time," said Nell. "And since we've been in the Southwest she has never ceased trying to find some trace of her father. He was last heard of in Nogales fourteen years ago. She thinks grandfather was lost in the Sonora Desert. And every place we go is worse. But, I love the desert."

Dick was haunted by the strange expression he had once caught on Mrs. Belding's face, especially the look in her eyes. It had been one of repressed pain liberated in a flash of certainty. The mother had seen just as quickly as Mercedes how far he had gone on the road of love. Perhaps she had seen more—even more than he dared hope. The incident roused Gale. He could not understand Mrs. Belding. He wanted to go to her and tell her how he felt about Nell, but fear of absolute destruction of his hopes held him back. He would wait.

Neverthless, an instinct that was perhaps akin to self-preservation prompted him to want to let Nell know the state of his mind. Words crowded his brain seeking utterance. Who and what he was, how he loved her, the work he expected to take up soon, his longings, hopes, and plans—there was all this and more. But something checked him. And the repression made him so thoughtful and quiet, even melancholy, that he went outdoors to try to throw off the mood.

When he returned to the house, some hours later, his room had been put in order. In the middle of the white coverlet on his table lay a fresh red rose. Dick picked it up, feeling a throb in his breast. It was a bud just beginning to open, to show between its petals a dark-red, unfolding heart.

Chapter Six

The Yaqui

TOWARD evening of a lowering December day, some fifty miles west of Forlorn River, a horseman rode along an old, dimly defined trail. From time to time he halted to study the lay of the land ahead. It was bare, somber, ridgy desert, covered with dun-colored greasewood and stunted prickly pear. Distant mountains hemmed in the valley, raising black spurs above the round lomas and the square-walled mesas.

This lonely horseman bestrode a steed of magnificent build, perfectly white except for a dark bar of color running down the noble head from ears to nose. Sweat-caked dust stained the long flanks. The horse had been running. His mane and tail were laced and knotted to keep their length out of reach of grasping cactus and brush. Clumsy homemade leather shields covered the front of his forelegs and ran up well to his wide breast. What otherwise would have been muscular symmetry of limb was marred by many a scar and many a lump. He was lean, gaunt, worn, a huge machine of muscle and bone, beautiful only in head and mane, a weight-carrier, a horse strong and fierce like the desert that had bred him.

The rider fitted the horse as he fitted the saddle. He was a young man of powerful physique, wide-shouldered, long-armed, big-legged. His lean face, where it was not red, blistered, and peeling, was the hue of bronze. He had a dark eye, roving and keen. His jaw was prominent and set, mastifflike; his lips were stern. It was youth with its softness not yet quite burned and hardened away that kept the whole cast of his face from being ruthless.

This young man was Dick Gale, but not the listless wanderer who, two months before, had by chance dropped into Casita. The desert had multiplied weeks into years. Heat, thirst, hunger, loneliness, toil, fear, ferocity, pain—he knew them all, he had felt them all.

Beyond any dream of adventure he had ever had, beyond any wild story he had ever read, had been his experience with those hard-riding rangers, Ladd and Lash. He had traveled alone the hundred miles of desert between Forlorn River and Sonoyta Oasis. Ladd's prophecy of trouble on the border had been mild compared to what had become the actuality. With rebel occupancy of the garrison at Casita, outlaws, bandits, raiders in rioting bands had spread westward. If murder and worse were confined to the Mexican side, pillage and raiding were perpetrated across the border. Many a dark-skinned raider bestrode one of Belding's fast horses; all except his selected white thoroughbreds had been stolen. Belding kept close at home to protect his family and to hold his property. But the three rangers, in fulfilling their duty, had incurred risks both on their own side of the line, and on the other—some of the few water holes that had to be reached lay far across the border in Mexican territory.

On this December afternoon the three rangers, as often, were separated. Lash was far to the westward of Sonoyta, somewhere along Camino

del Diablo, that terrible Devil's Road, where many desert wayfarers had perished. Ladd had long been overdue in a prearranged meeting with Gale. The fact that Ladd had not shown up miles west of the Papago Well was significant.

The sun had hidden behind clouds all the latter part of that day, an unusual occurrence for that region even in winter. And now, as the light waned suddenly, telling of the hidden sunset, a cold, dry, penetrating wind sprang up and blew in Gale's face. He untied his coat from the back of the saddle and put it on. A few cold drops of rain touched his cheek.

He halted upon the edge of a low escarpment. Below him the narrowing valley showed moving objects, diminutive in size, gray and white in color. They were antelope, and they had seen his horse. When he rode on they started once more, keeping to the lowest level. These wary animals were often desert watchdogs for the ranger; they would betray the proximity of horse or man. With them trotting forward, he made better time for some miles across the valley. When he lost them, caution once more slowed his advance.

The valley sloped up and narrowed, to head into an arroyo where grass began to show gray between the clumps of mesquite. Gale dismounted to lead his horse, to go forward more slowly. He had ridden sixty miles since morning, and he was tired, and a not entirely healed wound in his hip made one leg drag a little. A mile up the arroyo, near its head, lay the Papago Well, on Mexican soil.

Gale distinguished a faint light flickering through the thin, sharp foliage. Campers were at the well, and, whoever they were, no doubt they had prevented Ladd from meeting Gale. Ladd had gone back to the next water hole, or maybe he was hiding in an arroyo to the eastward, awaiting developments.

Gale turned his horse and plodded back to the edge of the arroyo, where in a secluded circle of mesquite he halted. The horse snorted his relief at the removal of the heavy saddle and accouterments, and sagging, bent his knees, lowered himself with slow heave, and plunged down to roll in the sand. Gale poured the contents of his larger canteen into his hat and held it to the horse's nose.

"Drink, Sol," he said.

It was but a drop for a thirsty horse. However, Blanco Sol rubbed a wet muzzle against Gale's hand in appreciation.

The spot of secluded ground was covered with bunches of galleta grass upon which Sol began to graze. Gale made a long halter of his lariat to keep the horse from wandering in search of water. Next Gale kicked off the cumbersome chaparejos, with their flapping, tripping folds of leather over his feet, and drawing a long rifle from its saddle sheath, he slipped away into the shadows.

Gale proceeded slowly, halting every few steps, careful not to brush against the stiff greasewood. In the soft sand his steps made no sound. The twinkling light vanished occasionally, and when it did show it seemed still a long way off.

A rabbit rustled out of brush at Gale's feet and thumped away over the sand. Gale moved forward up the pale, zigzag aisles between the mesquite. Presently the light danced

through the black branches, and soon grew into a flame. Gale heard the tramping, stamping thumps of many hoofs. The sound worried him. Foot by foot he advanced, and finally began to crawl. The wind favored his position, so that neither coyotes nor horses could scent him.

The nearer he approached the head of the arroyo, where the well was located, the thicker grew the desert vegetation. At length a dead *palo verde,* with huge, black clumps of its parasite mistletoe thick in the branches, marked a distance from the well that Gale considered close enough. Noiselessly he crawled here and there until he secured a favorable position, and then rose to peep from behind his covert.

He saw a bright fire, not a cooking-fire, for that would have been low and red, but a crackling blaze of mesquite. Three men were in sight, all close to the burning sticks. They were Mexicans and of the type of raiders, rebels, bandits that Gale had expected to see. One stood up, his back to the fire; another sat with shoulders enveloped in a blanket, and the third lounged in the sand, his feet almost in the blaze. They had cast off belts and weapons.

A glint of steel caught Gale's eye. Three short, shiny carbines leaned against a rock. A little to the left, within the circle of light, stood a square house made of adobe bricks. This house was a Papago Indian habitation, and a month before had been occupied by a family that had been murdered or driven off by a roving band of outlaws. A rude corral showed dimly in the edge of firelight, and from within came the snort and stamp and whinny of horses.

Gale took in the scene in one quick glance, then sank down at the foot of the mesquite. He had naturally expected to see more men. But the situation was by no means new. This was one, or part of one, of the raider bands harrying the border. They were stealing horses, or driving a herd already stolen.

These Mexicans had evidently been at the well some time. Their horses being in the corral meant that grazing had been done by day. Were they waiting for more members of their gang? That was very probable. With Gale, however, the most important consideration was how to get his horse to water. Sol must have a drink if it cost a fight.

With the same noiseless care he had exercised in the advance, Gale retreated until it was safe for him to rise and walk on down the arroyo. He found Blanco Sol contentedly grazing. Gale carried his saddle, blankets, and bag into the lee of a little greasewood-covered mound, from around which the wind had cut the soil; and here, in a wash, he risked building a small fire. Then he made coffee in a cup, cooked some slices of bacon on the end of a stick, and took a couple of hard biscuits from a saddlebag. After that he removed the halter from Blanco Sol, intending to leave him free to graze for a while.

Then Gale returned to his little fire, replenished it with short sticks of dead greasewood and mesquite, and wrapping his blanket round his shoulders, he sat down to warm himself and to wait till it was time to bring in the horse and tie him up.

The fire was inadequate, and Gale was cold and wet with dew. Hunger and thirst were with him. His bones

ached, and there was a dull, deep-seated pain throbbing in his unhealed wound. For days unshaven, his beard seemed like a million pricking needles in his blistered skin. He was so tired that, once having settled himself, he did not move hand or foot. The night was dark, dismal, cloudy, windy, growing colder.

Tonight, as usual, with a keen ear to the wind, Gale listened as one on guard; yet he watched the changing phantom of a sweet face in the embers, and as he watched he thought. Something, when he was alone this way in the wilderness, told him Nell was near him, she thought of him, she loved him.

By and by Gale remembered what he was waiting for; and, getting up, he took the halter and went out to find Blanco Sol. It was pitch-dark now, and Gale could not see a rod ahead. He felt his way, and presently as he rounded a mesquite he saw Sol's white shape outlined against the blackness. The horse jumped and wheeled, ready to run. Gale haltered him in the likeliest patch of grass and returned to his camp. There he lifted his saddle into a protected spot under a low wall of the mound, and, laying one blanket on the sand he covered himself with the other and stretched himself for the night.

The morning was clear and nipping-cold. He threw off the wet blanket and got up cramped and half-frozen. A little brisk action was all that was necessary to warm his blood and loosen his muscles, and then he was fresh, tingling, eager. The sun rose in a golden blaze, and the valley took on wondrous changing hues. Then he fetched up Blanco Sol, saddled him, and tied him to the thickest clump of mesquite.

Taking his rifle in hand, he faced up the arroyo. Gale walked swiftly for a goodly part of the distance, and then, when he saw blue smoke curling up above the trees, he proceeded slowly, with alert eye and ear. From the lay of the land and position of trees seen by daylight, he found an easier and safer course than the one he had taken in the dark. By careful work he was able to get closer to the well, and somewhat above it.

The Mexicans were leisurely cooking their morning meal. They had two fires, one for warmth, the other to cook over. They showed not the slightest indication of breaking camp. One fellow, evidently the leader, packed a gun at his hip, the only weapon in sight.

Next Gale swept his gaze to the corral, in which he saw more than a dozen horses, some of them fine animals. They were stamping and whistling, fighting one another, and pawing the dirt.

Suddenly one of the blacks, a big, shaggy fellow, shot up his ears and pointed his nose over the top of the fence. He whistled. Other horses looked in the same direction, and their ears went up, and they, too, whistled. Gale knew that other horses or men, very likely both, were approaching. But the Mexicans did not hear the alarm, or show any interest if they did.

Gale saw two Indians on burros come riding up the other side of the knoll upon which the adobe house stood; apparently they were not aware of the presence of the Mexicans for they came on up the path. One Indian was a Papago. The other,

who seemed to be about to fall from the burro, Gale took to be a Yaqui. They came over the knoll and down the path toward the well, turned a corner of the house, and completely surprised the raiders.

Gale heard a short, shrill cry, strangely high and wild, come from one of the Indians. It was answered by hoarse shouts. Then the leader of the trio, the Mexican who packed a gun, pulled it and fired point-blank. He missed once—and again. At the third shot, the Papago shrieked and tumbled off his burro to fall in a heap. The other Indian swayed, as if the taking away of the support lent by his comrade had brought collapse, and with the fourth shot he, too, slipped to the ground.

The reports had frightened the horses in the corral; and the vicious black, crowding the rickety bars, broke them down. He came plunging out. Two of the Mexicans ran for him, catching him by nose and mane, and the third ran to block the gateway.

Then, with a splendid vaulting mount, the Mexican with the gun leaped to the back of the horse. He yelled and waved his gun, and urged the black forward. The two on the ground began to dance and jabber. The mounted leader shot again, and then stuck like a leech upon the bare back of the rearing black. Then, by some strange grip, he brought the horse down, plunging almost upon the body of the Indian that had fallen last.

Gale stood aghast with his rifle clutched tight. The horse answered to that cruel, guiding hand, yet he swerved and bucked. He reared aloft, pawing the air, wildly snorting, then he plunged down upon the prostrate Indian.

The Mexican made no move to trample the body of the Papago. He turned the black to ride again over the other Indian. Suddenly Gale was horrified to see the Yaqui writhe and raise a feeble hand. The action brought renewed savage cries from the Mexicans. The horse snorted in terror.

Gale could bear no more. He took a quick shot at the rider. He missed the moving figure, but hit the horse. There was a bound, a horrid scream, a mighty plunge, then the horse went down, giving the Mexican a stunning fall. Both beast and man lay still.

Gale rushed from his cover to intercept the other raiders before they could reach the house and their weapons. One fellow yelled and ran wildly in the opposite direction; the other stood stricken in his tracks. Gale ran in close and picked up the gun that had dropped from the raider leader's hand. This fellow had begun to stir, to come out of his stunned condition. Then the frightened horses burst the corral bars, and in a thundering, dust-mantled stream fled up the arroyo.

The fallen raider sat up, mumbling to his saints in one breath, cursing in his next. The other Mexican kept his stand, intimidated by the threatening rifle.

"Go, greasers! Run!" yelled Gale. Then he yelled it in Spanish. At the point of his rifle he drove the two raiders out of the camp. His next move was to run into the house and fetch out the carbines. With a heavy stone he dismantled each weapon. That done, he set out on a run for his horse.

Blanco Sol heard him coming and whistled a welcome, and when Gale

ran up the horse was snorting. Mounting, Gale rode rapidly back to the scene of the action, and his first thought, when he arrived at the well, was to give Sol a drink and to fill his canteens.

Then Gale led his horse up out of the water hole, and decided before remounting to have a look at the Indians. The Papago had been shot through the heart, but the Yaqui was still alive. Moreover, he was conscious and staring up at Gale with great, strange, somber eyes, black as volcanic slag.

"Gringo good—no kill," he said, in husky whisper.

"Yaqui, you're done for," said Gale.

"Yaqui—no hurt—much," replied the Indian, and then he spoke a strange word—repeated it again and again.

Gale lifted the Indian and gave him a drink, and if ever in all his life he saw gratitude in human eyes he saw it then. Then he examined the injured Yaqui. The Indian had three wounds —a bullet hole in his shoulder, a crushed arm, and a badly lacerated leg.

The ranger thought rapidly. This Yaqui would live unless left there to die or be murdered by the Mexicans when they found courage to sneak back to the well. Swiftly he set to work, and with rifle ever under his hand, and shifting glance spared from his task, he bound up the Yaqui's wounds. At the same time he kept keen watch.

The Indians' burros and the horses of the raiders were all out of sight. Therefore, he lifted the Yaqui upon Sol's broad shoulders and climbed into the saddle. At a word Sol dropped his head and started eastward up the trail, walking swiftly, without resentment for his double burden.

Far ahead, between two huge mesas where the trail mounted over a pass, a long line of dust clouds marked the position of the horses that had escaped from the corral. The raiders were left on the desert without guns or mounts.

Once out of sight of Papago Well, Gale dismounted and walked beside the horse, steadying with one firm hand the helpless, dangling Yaqui.

The sun cleared the eastern ramparts, and the coolness of morning fled as if before a magic foe. As the heat increased, a wind rushed up out of the valley behind Gale.

Gale kept pace with his horse. When the wild and bold spurs of No Name Mountains loomed through a rent in flying clouds of sand he felt nearer home. Another hour brought him abreast of a dark straight shaft rising clear from a beetling escarpment. This was a monument marking the international boundary line. When he had passed it he had his own country under foot. In the heat of midday he halted in the shade of a rock, and, lifting the Yaqui down, gave him a drink.

The Yaqui was tenacious of life. He was still holding his own. He had a large head nobly cast, and a face that resembled a shrunken mask. It seemed chiseled in the dark-red, volcanic lava of his Sonora wilderness. The Indian's eyes were fixed on Gale, moved only when he moved. The Indian was short and broad, and his body showed unusual muscular development, although he seemed greatly emaciated from starvation or illness.

Gale resumed his homeward jour-

ney. When he got through the pass he faced a great depression, as rough as if millions of gigantic spikes had been driven by the hammer of Thor into a seamed and cracked floor. This was Altar Valley. With a wounded, helpless man across the saddle, this stretch of thorny and contorted desert was practically impassable, yet Gale headed into it unflinchingly. Blanco Sol plodded on over the dragging sand and through the rows of white-toothed *choyas*.

The sun sloped westward, bending fiercer heat in vengeful, parting reluctance. The wind slackened. Gale held grimly by the side of the tireless horse, holding the Yaqui on the saddle, taking the brunt of the merciless thorns.

To the last mile Gale held to Blanco Sol's gait and kept ever-watchful gaze ahead on the trail. Then, with the low, flat houses of Forlorn River shining red in the sunset, Gale flagged and rapidly weakened. The Yaqui slipped out of the saddle and dropped limp in the sand. Gale could not mount his horse. He clutched Sol's long tail and twisted his hand in it and staggered on.

CHAPTER SEVEN

White Horses

CRIPPLED YAQUI! Why the hell did you saddle yourself with him?" roared Belding, as he laid Gale upon the bed.

"Because I chose," whispered Gale in reply. "Go after him—he dropped in the trail—across the river—near the first big *saguaro*."

Belding began to swear as he fumbled with matches and the lamp. "You said you weren't hurt?" he demanded in sharp anxiety as he bent over Gale.

"I'm only—all in. Will you go—or send someone—for the Yaqui?"

"Sure, Dick, sure," Belding replied in softer tones. Then he stalked out; his heels rang on the flagstones; he opened a door and called: "Mother—girls, here's Dick back. He's done up. Do what you can to make him comfortable. I've got a little job on hand."

There were quick replies that Gale's dulling ears did not distinguish. Then it seemed Mrs. Belding was beside his bed, her very presence so cool and soothing and helpful; and Mercedes and Nell, wide-eyed and white-faced, were fluttering around him. He drank thirstily, but refused food. He wanted rest. And with their faces drifting away in a kind of haze, with a feeling of gentle hands about him, he lost consciousness.

He slept twenty hours. Then he arose, thirsty, hungry, lame, overworn, and presently went in search of Belding and the business of the day.

"Your Yaqui was near dead, but guess we'll pull him through," said Belding. "Dick, the other day that Indian came here by rail and foot and Lord only knows how else, all the way from New Orleans! He spoke English better than most Indians and I know a little Yaqui. I got some of his story and guessed the rest. The Mexican government is trying to root out the Yaquis. A year ago his tribe was taken in chains to a Mexican port on the Gulf. Well, this Yaqui you brought in escaped from his captors, got aboard ship, and eventually reached New Orleans. Somehow he traveled way

out here. I gave him a bag of food, and he went off with a Papago Indian. He was a sick man then."

Gale told of his experience at Papago Well. "That raider who tried to grind the Yaqui under a horse's hoofs —he was a hyena!" he concluded, shuddering. "I've seen some blood spilled and some hard sights, but that inhuman devil took my nerve. Why, as I told you, Belding, I missed a shot at him—not twenty paces!"

"Dick, in cases like that the sooner you clean up the bunch the better," said Belding grimly. "As for hard sights—wait till you've seen a Yaqui do up a Mexican. Bar none, that is the limit! It's blood lust, a racial hate, deep as life, and terrible. The Spaniards crushed the Aztecs four or five hundred years ago. That hate has had time to grow as deep as a cactus root. The Yaquis are mountain Aztecs. I think that this Indian was, or is, for that matter, dying of a broken heart. All he wanted was to get back to his mountains and die. There are no Yaquis left in that part of Sonora he was bound for."

"He had a strange look in his eyes," said Gale thoughtfully.

"Yes, I noticed that. But all Yaquis have a wild look. Dick, if I'm not mistaken, this fellow was a chief."

Gale remembered then to speak of his concern for Ladd.

"Laddy didn't go out to meet you," replied Belding. "I knew you were due in any day, and as there's been trouble between here and Casita, I sent him that way. Since you've been out our friend Carter lost a bunch of horses and a few steers. Did you get a good look at the horses those raiders had at Papago Well?"

Dick described the horses as a dark-colored drove, mostly bays and blacks, with one spotted sorrel.

"Some of Carter's—sure as you're born!" exclaimed Belding. "His bunch has been split up, divided among several bands of raiders. He has a grass ranch up here in Three Mile Arroyo. It's a good long ride in U. S. territory from the border."

"Those horses I saw will go home, don't you think?" asked Dick.

"Sure. They can't be caught or stopped."

"Well, what shall I do now?"

"Stay here and rest," bluntly replied Belding. "You need it. Let the women fuss over you—doctor you a little. When Jim gets back from Sonoyta I'll know more about what we ought to do. You know, since you've discovered the possibility of a big water supply, I've had dreams of a future for Forlorn River. If only this war was over! Dick, that's what it is —war—scattered war along the northern border of Mexico from gulf to gulf. What if it isn't our war? We're on the fringe. No, we can't develop Forlorn River until there's peace."

The discovery that Belding alluded to was one that might very well lead to the making of a wonderful and agricultural district of Altar Valley. Gale had discovered a long, narrow, rock-bottom and rock-walled gulch that could be damned at the lower end by the dynamiting of leaning cliffs above. An inexhaustable supply of water could be stored there. Furthermore, he had worked out an irrigation plan to bring the water down for mining uses, and to make a paradise out of that part of Altar Valley which lay in the United States. Gale, too, had come to have dreams of a

future for Forlorn River.

On the afternoon of the following day Ladd unexpectedly appeared leading a lame and lathered horse into the yard. Belding and Gale, who were at work at the forge, looked up and were surprised out of speech. The legs of the horse were raw and red, and he seemed about to drop. Ladd's sombrero was missing; he wore a bloody scarf round his head; sweat and blood and dust had formed a crust on his face; little streams of powdery dust slid from him; and the lower half of his scarred chaps were full of broken white thorns.

"Howdy, boys," he drawled. "I shore am glad to see you all."

"You've been fighting!" Belding blurted out.

"I reckon," replied Ladd, slipping the saddle.

"Laddy, go in the house to the women," said Belding. "I'll tend to your horse."

"Shore, Tom, in a minute. I've been down the road. An' I found hoss tracks an' steer tracks goin' across the line. But I seen no sign of raiders till this mornin'. Slept at Carter's last night. That raid the other day cleaned him out. He's shootin' mad. Well, this mornin' I rode plumb into a bunch of Carter's hosses, runnin' wild for home. Some greasers were tryin' to head them round an' chase them back across the line. I rode in between an' made matters embarrassin'. Carter's hosses got away. Then me an' the raiders had a little game of hide an' seek in the cactus. I was on the wrong side, an' had to break through their line to head toward home. We run some. But I had a closer call than I'm stuck on havin'."

Belding cursed low and deep in his throat. "Laddy, before it's too late can't I get my horses away from the border?"

"Mebbe it ain't too late, but where can we take them?"

"To San Felipe?"

"No. We've more chance to hold them here."

"To Casita and the railroad?"

"Afraid to risk gettin' there. An' the town's full of rebels who need hosses. I reckon we'd better stick here, Tom."

Then Belding led the lame horse toward the watering-trough, while the two rangers went toward the house. Dick was telling Ladd about the affair at Papago Well when they turned the corner under the porch. Nell was sitting in the door. She rose with a little scream and came flying toward them.

"Now I'll get it," whispered Ladd. "The women'll make a baby of me. An' shore I can't help myself."

"Oh, Laddy, you've been hurt!" cried Nell, as with white cheeks and dilating eyes she ran to him and caught his arm. "Mamma, here's Laddy, and he's been shot! Oh, these dreadful days we're having! I can't bear them! Forlorn River used to be so safe and quiet. Nothing happened. But now! Jim comes home with a bloody hole in him—then Dick—then Laddy! Oh, I'm afraid some day they'll *never* come home."

The morning was bright, still, and clear as crystal. The heat waves had not yet begun to rise from the desert. A soft gray, white, and green tint, perfectly blended, lay like a mantle over mesquite and sand and cactus. The canyons of distant mountains showed deep and full of lilac haze.

Nell sat perched high upon the topmost bar of the corral gate. Dick leaned beside her, now with his eyes on her face, now gazing out into the alfalfa field where Belding's thoroughbreds grazed and pranced and romped and whistled.

Belding had bred a hundred or more horses from the original stock he had brought up from Durango. His particular interest was in the almost unblemished white, and these he had given especial care. He made a good deal of money selling this strain to friends among the ranchers back in Texas. No mercenary consideration, however, could have made him part with the great, rangy white horses he had gotten from the Durango breeder. Belding had been laughed at by ranchers for preserving their sentimental Durango names, and he had been unmercifully ridiculed by cowboys. But the names had never been changed.

Blanco Diablo was the only horse in the field that was not free to roam and graze where he pleased. A stake and a halter held him to one corner, where he was severely let alone by the other horses. He did not like this isolation. Blanco Diablo was not happy unless he was running, or fighting a rival. Of the two he would rather fight. If anything white could resemble a devil, this horse surely did. Belding swore Diablo could stand more heat and thirst and cactus than any other horse he owned, and could run down and kill any horse in the Southwest. The fact that Ladd did not agree with Belding on these salient points was a great disappointment, and also a perpetual source for argument. Ladd and Lash both hated Diablo; and Dick Gale, after one or two narrow escapes from being brained, had inclined to the cowboys' side of the question.

The cowboys gave loyal and unshakable allegiance to Blanco Sol. As for Dick, he had to fight himself to keep out of arguments, for he sometimes imagined he was unreasonable about the horse. Free of heavy saddle and clumsy leg shields, Blanco Sol was somehow all-satisfying to the eyes of the rangers. As long and big as Diablo was, Sol was longer and bigger. Also, he was higher, more powerful. He looked more a thing for action—speedier. At a distance the honorable scars and lumps that marred his muscular legs were not visible. He grazed aloof from the others, and did not cavort or prance; but when he lifted his head to whistle, how wild he appeared, and proud and splendid! The dazzling whiteness of the desert sun shone from his coat; he had the fire and spirit of the desert in his noble head, its strength and power in his gigantic frame.

"I've often wondered how Belding ever came to give Blanco Sol to me," Dick said.

"He was jealous. I think he wanted to get rid of Sol."

"No? Why, Nell, he'd give Laddy or Jim one of the whites any day."

"Would he? Not Devil or Queen or White Woman. Never in this world! But Dad has lots of fast horses the boys could pick from. Dick, I tell you Dad wants Blanco Sol to run himself out—lose his speed on the desert. Dad is just jealous for Diablo."

"Maybe. He surely has strange passion for horses. I think I understand better than I used to. I owned a couple of racers once. They were just animals to me, I guess. But Blanco

Sol! It'll be—be pretty hard to leave him—when I go away."

Nell sat perfectly still. "Go away?" she asked presently, with just the faintest tremor in her voice.

"Yes. Sometimes when I get blue—as I am today—I think I'll go. But, in sober truth, Nell, it's not likely that I'll spend all my life here."

There was no answer to this. Dick put his hand softly over hers; and, despite her half-hearted struggle to free it, he held on.

"Nell!"

Her color fled. He saw her lips part. Then a heavy step on the gravel, a cheerful, complaining voice interrupted him, and made him release Nell and draw back. Belding strode into view round the adobe shed.

"Hey, Dick, that darned Yaqui Indian can't be driven or hired or coaxed to leave Forlorn River. He's well enough to travel. I offered him horse, gun, blanket, grub. But no go."

"That's funny," replied Gale with a smile. "Let him stay—put him to work."

"It doesn't strike me funny. But I'll tell you what I think. That poor, homeless, heartbroken Indian has taken a liking to you, Dick. You saved his life. That sort of thing counts big with any Indian, even with an Apache. With a Yaqui maybe it's of deep significance. I've heard a Yaqui say that with his tribe no debt to friend or foe ever went unpaid. Perhaps that's what ails this fellow."

"Dick, don't laugh," said Nell. "I've noticed the Yaqui. It's pathetic the way his great gloomy eyes follow you."

"You've made a friend," continued Belding. "A Yaqui could be a real friend on this desert. If he gets his strength back he'll be of service to you, don't mistake me. He's welcome here. But you're responsible for him, and you'll have trouble keeping him from massacring all the greasers in Forlorn River."

The probability of a visit from the raiders, and a dash bolder than usual on the outskirts of a ranch, led Belding to build a new corral. It was not sightly to the eye, but in was high and exceedingly strong.

Belding did not imagine that any wooden fence, however substantially built, could keep determined raiders from breaking it down. They would have to take time, however, and make considerable noise; and Belding relied on these facts. Belding did not believe a band of night raiders would hold out against hot rifle fire. So he began to make up some of the sleep he had lost. It was noteworthy, however, that Ladd did not share Belding's sanguine hopes.

One January morning Dick Gale was awakened by a shrill, menacing cry. He leaped up bewildered and frightened. He heard Belding's booming voice answering shouts, and rapid steps on flagstones. But these had not awakened him. Heavy breaths, almost sobs, seemed at his very door. In the cold and gray dawn Dick saw something white. Gun in hand, he bounded across the room. Just outside his door stood Blanco Sol.

It was not unusual for Sol to come poking his head in at Dick's door during daylight. But now in the early dawn, when he had been locked in the

corral, it meant raiders—no less. Dick called softly to the snorting horse, and hurriedly getting into clothes and boots, he went out with a gun in each hand. Sol was quivering in every muscle. Like a dog he followed Dick around the house. Hearing shouts in the direction of the corrals, Gale bent swift steps that way. He caught up with Jim Lash, who was also leading a white horse.

They reached the corral to find Belding shaking, roaring like a madman. The gate was open, the corral was empty. Ladd stooped over the ground, evidently trying to find tracks.

"I reckon we might just as well cool off an' wait for daylight," suggested Jim.

"Shore. They've flown the coop, you can gamble on that. Tom, where's the Papago?" said Ladd.

"He's gone, Laddy—gone!"

"Double-crossed us, eh? I see here's a crowbar lyin' by the gatepost. That Indian fetched it from the forge. It was used to pry out the bolts an' steeples. Tom, I reckon there wasn't much time lost forcin' that gate."

Daylight made clear some details of the raid. The cowboys found tracks of eight raiders coming up from the river bed where their horses had been left. But the men soon rounded up eleven of the whites, all more or less frightened, and among the number were Queen and Blanca Mujer. The raiders had been unable to handle more than one horse for each man. It was bitter irony of fate that Belding should lose his favorite, the one horse more dear to him than all the others. Somewhere out on the trail a raider was fighting the iron-jawed, savage Blanco Diablo.

Belding was unconsolable. He cursed and railed, and finally declared he was going to trail the raiders.

"Tom, you just ain't goin' to do nothin' of the kind," said Laddy coolly.

Belding groaned and bowed his head. "Laddy, you're right," he replied presently. "I've got to stand it. I can't leave the women and my property. But it's sure tough. I'm sore way deep down, and nothin' but blood would ever satisfy me."

"Leave that to me an' Jim," said Ladd.

"What do you mean to do?" demanded Belding, starting up.

"Shore I don't know yet— Give me a light for my pipe. An' Dick, go fetch out your Yaqui."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Running of Blanco Sol

THE Yaqui's strange dark glance roved over the corral, the swinging gate with its broken fastenings, and the tracks in the road. They led everywhither, but gradually he worked out of the thick net to take the trail that the cowboys had followed down to the river. Belding and the rangers kept close at his heels. Occasionally Dick lent a helping hand to the still feeble Indian. He found a trampled spot where the raiders had left their horses. From this point a deeply defined narrow trail led across the dry river bed.

Belding asked the Yaqui where the raiders would head for in the Sonora Desert. For answer the Indian followed the trail across the stream of sand,

through willows and mesquite, up to the level of rock and cactus. At this point he halted.

His dark hand stretched; he sighted over his finger at a low white escarpment in the distance. Then with a stick he traced a line in the sand, and then at the end of that another line at right angles. He made crosses and marks and holes, and as he drew the rude map he talked in Yaqui, in Spanish; with a word here and there in English. Belding translated as best he could. The raiders were heading southeast toward the railroad that ran from Nogales down into Sonora. It was four days' travel, bad trail, good sure water hole one day out; then water not sure for two days. Raiders traveling slow; bothered by too many horses, not looking for pursuit; were never pursued, could be headed and ambushed that night at the first water hole, a natural trap in a valley.

In less than an hour after the time of the raid the three rangers, heavily armed and superbly mounted on fresh horses, rode out on the trail. As Gale turned to look back from the far bank of Forlorn River, he saw Nell waving a white scarf. He stood high in his stirrups and waved his sombrero.

They rode in single file with Ladd in the lead. The cowboy took a beeline course for the white escarpment pointed out by the Yaqui; and nothing save deep washes and impassable patches of cactus or rocks made him swerve from it.

Whenever the rangers rode out on the brow of a knoll or ridge or an eminence, before starting to descend, Ladd required of Gale a long, careful, sweeping survey of the desert ahead through the field glass. There were streams of white dust to be seen, streaks of yellow dust, trailing low clouds of sand over the glistening dunes, but no steadily rising, uniformly shaped puffs that would tell a tale of moving horses on the desert.

The rangers rode on and the escarpment began to loom. The desert floor inclined perceptibly upward. When Gale got an unobstructed view of the slope of the escarpment he located the raiders and horses. In another hour's travel the rangers could see with naked eyes a long, faint, moving streak of black and white dots.

"They're headin' for that yellow pass," said Ladd, pointing to a break in the eastern end of the escarpment. "When they get out of sight we'll rustle. I'm thinkin' that water hole the Yaqui spoke of lays in the pass."

The rangers traveled swiftly over the remaining miles of level desert leading to the ascent of the escarpment. When they achieved the gateway of the pass the sun was low in the west. Dwarfed mesquite and greasewood appeared among the rocks. Ladd gave the word to tie up horses and go forward on foot.

"Keep down, boys," he said. "There's the water hole, an' hosses have sharp eyes. Shore the Yaqui figgered this place. I never seen its like for a trap."

Both white and black horses showed against the green, and a thin curling column of blue smoke rose lazily from amid the mesquites.

"I reckon we'd better wait till dark, or mebbe daylight," said Jim Lash.

"Let me figger some. Dick, what do you make of the outlet to this hole? Looks rough to me."

With his glass Gale studied the narrow construction of walls and roughened rising floor. "Laddy, it's harder to get out at that end than here," he replied.

"Shore that's hard enough. Let me have a look— Well, boys, it don't take no figgerin' for this job. Jim, I'll want you at the other end blockin' the pass when we're ready to start."

"When'll that be?" inquired Jim.

"Soon as it's light enough in the mornin'. That outfit will hang till tomorrow. There's no sure water ahead for two days, you remember."

"I reckon I can slip through to the other end after dark," said Lash thoughtfully. "It might get me in bad to go round."

The rangers stole back from the vantage point and returned to their horses, which they untied and left farther round among broken sections of cliff. Jim Lash rolled in his saddle blanket, his feet near the fire, and went to sleep. Ladd told Gale to do likewise while he kept the fire up and waited until it was late enough for Jim to undertake circling round the raiders. When Gale awakened the night was dark, cold, windy. The stars shone with white brilliance. Jim was up saddling his horse, and Ladd was talking low.

With Ladd leading, they moved away into the gloom. Advance was exceedingly slow, careful, silent. Under the walls the blackness seemed impenetrable. When the dense gloom of the pass lightened, and there was a wide space of sky and stars overhead, Ladd halted and stood silent a moment.

"Luck again!" he whispered. "The wind's in your face, Jim. The horses won't scent you. Go slow. Don't crack a stone. Keep close under the wall. Try to get up as high as this at the other end. Wait till daylight before riskin' a loose slope. I'll be ridin' the job early. That's all."

Ladd's cool, easy speech was scarcely significant of the perilous undertaking. Lash moved very slowly away, leading his horse. The soft pads of hoofs ceased to sound about the time the gray shape merged into the black shadows. Then Ladd touched Dick's arm, and turned back up the trail.

Together they picked a way back through the winding recesses of cliff. The campfire was smoldering. Ladd replenished it and lay down to get a few hours' sleep, while Gale kept watch.

When the black lightened to gray they saddled the horses and led them out to the pass and down to the point where they had parted with Lash.

The valley grew clear of gray shadow except under leaning walls on the eastern side. Then a straight column of smoke rose from among the mesquites. Manifestly this was what Ladd had been awaiting. He took the long .405 from its sheath and tried the lever. Then he lifted a cartridge belt from the pommel of his saddle. Every ring held a shell and these shells were four inches long. He buckled the belt round him.

"Come on, Dick."

Ladd led the way down the slope until he reached a position that commanded the rising of the trail from a level. It was the only place a man or horse could leave the valley for the pass.

"Dick, here's your stand. If any raider rides in range take a crack at

him. Now I want the lend of your hoss."

"Blanco Sol!" exclaimed Gale.

"Will you let me have him?" Ladd repeated, almost curtly.

"Certainly, Laddy."

"Shore I appreciate it, Dick. I know how you care for that hoss. I guess mebbe Charley Ladd has loved a hoss! An' one not so good as Sol. I was only tryin' your nerve, Dick, askin' you without tellin' my plan. Sol won't get a scratch, you can gamble on that! I'll ride him down into the valley an' pull the greasers out in the open. They've got short-ranged carbines. They can't keep out of range of the .405, and I'll be takin' the dust of their lead. Sabe, señor?"

"Laddy! You'll run Sol away from the raiders when they chase you? Run him after them when they try to get away?"

"Shore. I'll run all the time. They can't gain on Sol, an' he'll run them down when I want. Can you beat it?"

"No. It's great! But suppose a raider comes out on Blanco Diablo?"

"I reckon that's the one weak place in my plan. I'm figgerin' they'll never think of that till it's too late. But if they do, well, Sol can outrun Diablo. An' I can always kill the white devil!"

He spoke no more and set about changing the length of Sol's stirrups. When he had them adjusted to suit he mounted and rode down the trail and out upon the level. He rode leisurely as if merely going to water his horse. The long black rifle lying across his saddle, however, was ominous.

Gale securely tied the other horse to a mesquite at hand, and took a position behind a low rock over which he could easily see and shoot when necessary. He imagined Jim Lash in a similar position at the far end of the valley blocking the outlet.

Ladd rode a quarter of a mile out upon the flat before anything happened. Then a whistle rent the still, cold air. A horse had seen or scented Blanco Sol. The whistle was prolonged, faint, but clear. It made the blood thrum in Gale's ears. Sol halted. His head shot up with the old, wild, spirited sweep. Gale leveled his glass at the patch of mesquites. He saw the raiders running to an open place, pointing, gesticulating. The glass brought them so close that he saw dark faces. Suddenly they broke and fled back among the trees. Then he got only white and dark gleams of moving bodies.

Lowering the glass, Gale saw that Blanco Sol had started forward again. His gait was now a canter, and he had covered another quarter of a mile before horses and raiders appeared upon the outskirts of the mesquites. Then Blanco Sol stopped. His shrill, ringing whistle came distinctly to Gale's ears. The raiders were mounted on dark horses, and they stood abreast in a motionless line.

Then Gale saw a raider gallop swiftly from the group toward the farther outlet of the valley. This might have been owing to cowardice, but it was more likely a move of the raiders to make sure of retreat. Undoubtedly Ladd saw this galloping horseman. A few waiting moments ensued. The galloping horseman reached the slope, began to climb. With naked eyes Gale saw a puff of white smoke spring out of the rocks. Then the raider wheeled his plunging horse back to the level, and went racing wildly down the valley.

The compact bunch of bays and

blacks seemed to break apart and spread rapidly from the edge of the mesquites. Puffs of white smoke indicated firing, and showed the nature of the raiders' excitement. They were far out of ordinary range; but they spurred toward Ladd, shooting as they rode. Ladd held his ground; the big white horse stood like a rock in his tracks. Gale saw little spouts of dust rise in front of Blanco Sol and spread swift as sight to his rear. The raiders' bullets, striking low, were skipping along the hard, bare floor of the valley.

Then Ladd raised the long rifle. There was no smoke, but three high, spanging reports rang out. A gap opened in the dark line of advancing horsemen; then a riderless steed sheered off to the right. Blanco Sol seemed to turn as on a pivot and charged back toward the lower end of the valley. He circled to Gale's right and stretched out into his run. There were now five raiders in pursuit, and they came sweeping down, yelling and shooting, evidently sure of their quarry. Ladd reserved his fire. He kept turning from back to front in his saddle.

Gale saw how the space widened between pursuers and pursued, saw distinctly when Ladd eased up Sol's running. Manifestly Ladd intended to try to lead the raiders round in front of Gale's position, and, presently, Gale saw he was going to succeed. The raiders swept on in a curve, cutting off what distance they could. One fellow, a small, wiry rider, high on his mount's neck like a jockey, led his companions by many yards.

Gale tried to still the jump of heart and pulse, and turned his eyes again on the nearest pursuer. This raider was crossing in, his carbine held muzzle up in his right hand, and he was coming swiftly. It was a long shot, upward of five hundred yards. Gale had not time to adjust the sights of the Remington, but he knew the gun and, holding coarsely upon the swiftly moving blot, he began to shoot. The first bullet sent up a great splash of dust beneath the horse's nose, making him leap as if to hurdle a fence. The rifle was automatic; Gale needed only to pull the trigger. He saw now that the raiders behind were in line. Swiftly he worked the trigger. Suddenly the leading horse leaped convulsively, not up nor aside, but straight ahead, and crashed to the ground, throwing his rider like a catapult, and then slid and rolled. He half got up, fell back, and kicked; but his rider never moved.

The other rangers sawed the reins of plunging steeds and whirled to escape the unseen battery. Gale slipped a fresh clip into the magazine of his rifle. He restrained himself from useless firing and gave eager eye to the duel below. Ladd began to shoot while Sol was running. The .405 rang out sharply—then again. The heavy bullets streaked the dust all the way across the valley. Ladd aimed deliberately and pulled slowly, unmindful of the kicking dust-puffs behind Sol, and to the side. The raiders spurred madly in pursuit, loading and firing. They shot ten times while Ladd shot once, and all in vain; and on Ladd's sixth shot a raider toppled backward, threw his carbine and fell with his foot catching in a stirrup. The frightened horse plunged away, dragging him in a path of dust.

Gale had set himself to miss nothing of that fighting race, yet the ac-

'tion passed too swiftly for clear sight of all. Ladd had emptied a magazine, and now Blanco Sol quickened and lengthened his running stride. He ran away from his pursuers. Then it was that the ranger's ruse was divined by the raiders. They hauled sharply up and seemed to be conferring. But that was a fatal mistake. Blanco Sol was seen to break his gait and slow down in several jumps, then square away and stand stock-still. Ladd fired at the closely grouped raiders. An instant passed. Then Gale heard the spat of a bullet out in front, saw a puff of dust, then heard the lead strike the rocks and go whining away. And it was after this that one of the raiders fell prone from his saddle. The steel-jacketed .405 had gone through him on its uninterrupted way to hum past Gale's position.

The remaining two raiders frantically spurred their horses and fled up the valley. Ladd sent Sol after them. It seemed to Gale, even though he realized his excitement, that Blanco Sol made those horses seem like snails. The raiders split, one making for the eastern outlet, the other circling back of the mesquites. Ladd kept on after the latter. Then puffs of white smoke and rifle shots faintly crackling told of Jim Lash's hand in the game. However, he succeeded only in driving the raider back into the valley. But Ladd had turned the other horseman, and now it appeared the two raiders were between Lash above on the stony slope and Ladd below on the level. There was desperate riding on part of the raiders to keep from being hemmed in closer. Only one of them got away, and he came riding for life down under the eastern wall. Blanco Sol settled into his graceful, beautiful swing. He gained steadily, though he was far from extending himself.

Some few hundred rods to the left of Gale the raider put his horse to the weathered slope. He began to climb. The horse was superb, infinitely more courageous than his rider. Up and up he went, and the yellow dust clouds rose, and an avalanche rolled rattling and cracking down the slope. It was beyond belief that a horse, burdened or unburdened, could find footing and hold it upon that wall of narrow ledges and inverted, slanting gullies. But he climbed on, sure-footed as a mountain goat, and, surmounting the last rough steps, he stood a moment silhouetted against the white sky. Then he disappeared. Ladd sat astride Blanco Sol, gazing upward.

Gale, who had been too dumb to shout the admiration he felt, suddenly leaped up, and his voice came with a shriek: "Look out, Laddy!"

A big horse, like a white streak, was bearing down to the right of the ranger. Blanco Diablo! A matchless rider swung with the horse's motion. Gale was stunned. Then he remembered the first raider, the one Lash had shot at and driven away from the outlet. This fellow had made for the mesquite and had put a saddle on Belding's favorite. In the heat of the excitement, while Ladd had been intent upon the climbing horse, this last raider had come down with the speed of the wind straight for the western outlet.

A touch of the spur made Sol lunge forward to head off the raider. Diablo was in his stride, but the distance and angle favored Sol. The raider had no

carbine. He held aloft a gun, ready to level it and fire. He sat the saddle as if it were a stationary seat. Gale saw Ladd lean down and drop the .405 in the sand. He would take no chances of wounding Belding's best-loved horse.

Then Gale sat transfixed with suspended breath watching the horses thundering toward him. Blanco Diablo was speeding low, fleet as an antelope, fierce and terrible in his devilish action, a horse for war and blood and death. He seemed unbeatable. Yet to see the magnificently running Blanco Sol was but to court a doubt. Gale stood spellbound. He might have shot the raider; but he never thought of such a thing.

Blanco Sol thundered across. Then the race became straight-away up the valley. The gap between Diablo and Sol narrowed yard by yard.

All the devil that was in Blanco Diablo had its running on the downward stretch. The strange, cruel urge of bit and spur, the crazed rider who struck like a burr upon him, the shots and smoke added terror to his natural violent temper. He ran himself off his feet. But he could not elude that relentless horse behind him. The running of Blanco Sol was that of a sure, remorseless, driving power—steadier —stronger—swifter with every long and wonderful stride.

The raider tried to sheer Diablo off closer under the wall, to make the slope where his companion had escaped. But Diablo was uncontrollable. He was running wild, with breaking gait. Closer and closer crept that white, smoothly gliding, beautiful machine of speed.

Then, like one white flash following another, the two horses gleamed down the bank of a wash and disappeared in clouds of dust.

Gale watched with strained and smarting eyes. The thick throb in his ears was pierced by faint sounds of gunshots. Then he waited in almost unendurable suspense.

Suddenly something whiter than the background of dust appeared above the low roll of valley floor. Gale leveled his glass. In the clear circle shone Blanco Sol's noble head with its long black bar from ears to nose. Sol's head was drooping now. Another second showed Ladd still in the saddle.

The ranger was leading Blanco Diablo—spent—broken—dragging—riderless.

Chapter Nine

An Interrupted Siesta

NO MAN ever had a more eloquent and beautiful pleader for his cause than had Dick Gale in Mercedes Castañeda. He peeped through the green, shining twigs of the *palo verde* that shaded his door. The hour was high noon, and the patio was sultry. The only sounds were the hum of bees in the flowers and the low murmur of the Spanish girl's melodious voice. Nell lay in the hammock, her hands behind her head, with rosy cheeks and arch eyes. Indeed she looked rebellious. Mercedes's earnestness was not apparently having the effect it should have had.

Dick was inclined to be rebellious himself. Belding had kept the rangers in off the line, and therefore Dick had been idle most of the time, and,

though he tried hard, he had been unable to stay far from Nell's vicinity. He believed she cared for him, but he could not catch her alone long enough to verify his tormenting hope.

Gale pondered over an idea he had long revolved in mind, and which now suddenly gave place to a decision that made his heart swell and his cheek burn. He went in search of Mrs. Belding, and found her busy in the kitchen.

Gale had come to care greatly for Nell's mother. Not only was she the comfort and strength of her home, but also of the inhabitants of Forlorn River. Indian, Mexican, American were all the same to her in trouble or illness; and she was nurse, doctor, peacemaker, helper. She was good and noble, and there was not a child or grownup in Forlorn River who did not love and bless her.

Mrs. Belding heard Dick's step as he entered the kitchen, and, looking up, greeted him.

"Mother," began Dick earnestly—Belding called her that, and so did Ladd and Lash, but it was the first time for Dick. "Mother—I want to speak to you."

The only indication Mrs. Belding gave of being startled was in her eyes, which darkened, shadowed with multiplying thought.

"I love Nell," went on Dick simply, "and I want you to let me ask her to be my wife. I hope, I almost believe Nell cares a little for me."

"I've known that for a long time," said Mrs. Belding, low almost as a whisper.

"You know!" cried Dick, with a glow and rush of feeling.

"Dick, you must be very blind not to see what has been plain to all of us. I guess—it couldn't have been helped. You're a splendid fellow. No wonder she loves you."

She drew him to the light and looked with strange, piercing intentness into his face. "Dick Gale, you want my Nell? You love her just as she is—her sweetness—her goodness? Just herself, body and soul? There's nothing could change you—nothing?"

"Mrs. Belding, I love Nell for herself. If she loves me I'll be the happiest of men. There's absolutely nothing that could make any difference in me."

"But your people? Oh, Dick, you come of a proud family. I can tell. I—I once knew a young man like you. A few months can't change pride—blood. Years can't change them. You've become a ranger. You love the adventure—the wild life. That won't last. Perhaps you'll settle down to ranching. I know you love the West. But, Dick, there's your family—"

"My future and happiness are Nell's to make," Dick interrupted. "No one else shall count with me."

"Then, Dick—you may have her. God—bless—you—both." Mrs. Belding's strained face underwent a swift and mobile relaxation, and suddenly she was weeping in strangely mingled happiness and bitterness. In another moment she had gained command over herself, and, kissing him, she pushed him out of the door.

"There! Go tell her, Dick—and have some spunk about it!"

Dick lost his gravity in a flash, and something began to dance and ring within him. He simply could not keep his steps turned from the patio. Every path led there. His blood was throbbing, his hopes mounting, his spirit soaring.

"Now for some spunk!" he said under his breath.

Plainly he meant his merry whistle and his buoyant step to interrupt this first languorous stage of the siesta which the girls always took during the hot hours.

The instant his glance rested upon Nell's face he divined she was feigning sleep. The faint rose-blush had paled. The warm, rich, golden tint of her skin had fled. Dick dropped upon his knees and bent over her. Though the blood was churning in his veins, his breast laboring, his mind whirling with the wonder of that moment and its promise, he made himself deliberate. He wanted more than anything he had ever wanted in his life to see if she would keep up that pretense of sleep and let him kiss her.

She must have felt his breath, for her hair waved off her brow. Her cheeks were now white. Her breast swelled and sank. He bent down closer—closer. But he must have been maddeningly slow, for as he bent still closer Nell's eyes opened, and he caught a swift purple gaze of eyes as she whirled her head. Then, with a little cry, she rose and fled.

Chapter Ten

Rojas

NO WORD from George Thorne had come to Forlorn River in weeks. Gale grew concerned over the fact, and began to wonder if anything serious could have happened to him. Mercedes became silent, mournful. Her eyes were great black windows of tragedy.

A dozen times Gale declared he would ride in to Casita and find out why they did not hear from Thorne; however, older and wiser heads prevailed over his impetuosity. Belding was not sanguine over the safety of the Casita trail. Refugees from there arrived every day in Forlorn River, and if the tales they told were true, real war would have been preferable to what was going on along the border.

Belding and the rangers and the Yaqui held a consultation. Not only had the Indian become a faithful servant to Gale, but he was also of value to Belding. Yaqui had all the craft of his class, and superior intelligence. His knowledge of Mexicans was second only to his hate of them. And Yaqui, who had been scouting on all the trails, gave information that made Belding decide to wait some days before sending anyone to Casita.

It was upon Gale's coming from this conference that he encountered Nell. Since the interrupted siesta episode she had been more than ordinarily elusive, and about all he had received from her was a tantalizing smile from a distance. He got the impression now, however, that she had awaited him.

"Dick," she began hurriedly, "Dad's not going to send anyone to see about Thorne?"

"No, not yet. He thinks it best not to. We all think so. I'm sorry. Poor Mercedes!"

"I knew it. I tried to coax him to send Laddy or even Yaqui. He wouldn't listen to me. Dick, Mercedes is dying by inches. Can't you see what ails her? It's more than love or fear. It's uncertainty—suspense. Oh, can't we find out for her?"

"Nell, I feel as badly as you about her. I wanted to ride in to Casita. Belding shut me up quick, the last time."

"Dick, will you slip off without Dad's consent? Risk it! Go to Casita and find out what's happened to Thorne—at least if he ever started for Forlorn River?"

"No, Nell, I won't do that."

She drew away from him with passionate suddenness. "Are you afraid?"

"No, I'm not afraid," Gale replied, a little nettled.

"Will you go—for my sake?"

"Nell, I won't disobey Belding," protested Gale. "I won't break my word."

"Dick, listen! If you go—if you fetch some word of Thorne to comfort Mercedes, you—well, you will have your reward."

"Nell!"

"Dick, will you go?"

"No—no!" cried Gale, struggling with himself. "Nell Burton, I'll tell you this. To have the reward I want would mean pretty near heaven for me. But not even for that will I break my word to your father."

"Gracias, señor,"she replied mockingly. *"Adios."* Then she flashed out of his sight.

The following morning at the breakfast table Nell was not present. Mrs. Belding evidently considered the fact somewhat unusual, for she called out into the patio and then into the yard. Then she went to Mercedes's room. But Nell was not there, either.

"She's in one of her tantrums lately," said Belding. "Wouldn't speak to me this morning. Let her alone, Mother. She's spoiled enough, without running after her. She's always hungry. She'll be on hand presently, don't mistake me."

Notwithstanding Belding's conviction, which Gale shared, Nell did not appear at all during the hour. When Belding and the rangers went outside, Yaqui was eating his meal on the bench where he always sat.

"Yaqui—*Lluvia d' oro, si?"* asked Belding, waving his hand toward the corrals. The Indian's name for Nell meant "shower of gold," and Belding used it in asking Yaqui if he had seen her. He received a negative reply.

Perhaps half an hour afterward, as Gale was leaving his room, he saw the Yaqui running up the path from the fields. It was markedly out of the ordinary to see the Indian run. Gale wondered what was the matter. Yaqui ran straight to Belding, who was at work at his bench under the wagon shed. In less than a moment Belding was bellowing for his rangers. Gale got to him first, but Ladd and Lash were not far behind.

"Blanco Sol gone!" yelled Belding in a rage.

"Gone? In broad daylight, with the Indian a-watchin'?" queried Ladd.

"It happened while Yaqui was at breakfast. That's sure. He'd just watered Sol."

In the swift search that ensued Gale did not have anything to say; but his mind was forming a conclusion. When he found his old saddle and bridle missing from the peg in the barn his conclusion became a positive conviction, and it made him, for the moment, cold and sick and speechless.

"Hey, Dick, don't take it so much to heart," said Belding. "We'll likely find Sol, and if we don't, there's other good horses."

"I'm not thinking of Sol," replied Gale.

Ladd cast a sharp glance at Gale, snapped his fingers, and said, "Damn me if I ain't guessed it, too!"

"What's wrong with you locoed gents?" bluntly demanded Belding.

"Nell has slipped away on Sol," answered Dick. "She's started for Casita to fetch Mercedes some word about Thorne. Oh, Belding, you needn't shake your head. I know she's gone. She tried to persuade me to go, and was furious when I wouldn't."

That roused Belding to action. "I hope you're wrong," he said, starting for the corrals. "Maybe she's only taking a little ride, same as she's done often. But rustle now. Find out. Dick, you ride cross the valley. Jim, you hunt up and down the river. I'll head up San Felipe way. And you, Laddy, take Diablo and hit the Casita trail. If she really has gone after Thorne you can catch her in an hour or so."

Without more words the men saddled and were off, not waiting for the Yaqui to come in with possible information as to what trail Blanco Sol had taken. It certainly did not show in the clear sand of the level valley where Gale rode to and fro. When he returned to the house he found Belding and Lash awaiting him. They did not mention their own search, but stated that Yaqui had found Blanco Sol's tracks in the Casita trail. After some consultation Belding decided to send Lash along after Ladd.

Early on the morning of the second day, Gale, who had acquired an unbreakable habit of watching, saw three white horses and a bay come wearily stepping down the road. He heard Blanco Sol's familiar whistle, and he leaped up wild with joy. The horse was riderless. Gale's sudden joy received a violent check, then resurged when he saw a limp white form in Jim Lash's arms. Ladd was supporting a horseman who wore a military uniform.

Gale hurried out into the yard, closely followed by the Beldings.

Lash handed down a ragged, travel-stained, wan girl into Belding's arms.

"Dad! Mama!"

It was indeed a repentant Nell, but there was spirit yet in the tired blue eyes. Then she caught sight of Gale and gave him a faint smile.

"Hello—Dick."

"Nell!" Gale reached for her hand, held it tightly, and found speech difficult.

"You needn't worry—about your old horse," she said, as Belding carried her toward the door. "Oh, Dick! Blanco Sol is—glorious!"

Gale turned to greet his friend. It was but a haggard ghost of the cavalryman. Thorne looked ill or wounded. Gale's greeting was also a question full of fear.

Thorne's answer was a faint smile. He seemed ready to drop from the saddle. Gale helped Ladd hold Thorne upon the horse until they reached the house. Belding came out again. His welcome was checked as he saw the condition of the cavalryman. Thorne reeled into Dick's arms. But he was able to stand and walk.

"I'm not—hurt. Only weak—starved," he said. "Is Mercedes—Take me to her."

"She'll be well the minute she sees him," averred Belding as he and Gale led the cavalryman to Mercedes's room. There they left him, and Gale

felt his ears ringing with the girl's broken cry of joy.

When Belding and Gale hurried forth again the rangers were tending the tired horses. Upon returning to the house, Jim Lash calmly lit his pipe, and Ladd declared that, hungry as he was, he had to tell his story.

"Well," began Ladd, "I rode in Sol's tracks all the way to Casita. Never seen a rebel or a raider till I got to town. Figgered Nell made the trip in five hours. I went straight to the camp of the cavalrymen, an' found them just coolin' off an' dressin' down their hosses after what looked to me like a big ride. I got there too late for the fireworks.

"Shore there was so darn many fellers who wanted to an' tried to tell me what'd come off, I thought I'd never find out. But I got the story piece by piece. An' here's what happened.

"Nell rode Blanco Sol a-tearin' into camp, an' had a crowd round her in a jiffy. She told who she was, where she'd come from, an' what she wanted. Well, it seemed a day or so before Nell got there the cavalrymen had heard word of Thorne. You see, Thorne had left camp on leave of absence some time before. He was shore mysterious, they said, an' told nobody where he was goin'. A week or so after he left camp some greaser give it away that Rojas had a prisoner in a dobe shack near his camp. Nobody paid much attention to what the greaser said. He wanted money for mescal. An' it was usual for Rojas to have prisoners. But in a few more days it turned out pretty sure that for some reason Rojas was holdin' Thorne.

"Now it happened when this news came Colonel Weede was in Nogales with his staff, an' the officer left in charge didn't know how to proceed. Rojas's camp was across the line in Mexico, an' ridin' over there was serious business. Nell told them soldiers Rojas was holdin' Thorne—torturin' him to make him tell where Mercedes was. She told about Mercedes—how she had been hounded by the bandit—how ill an' miserable she was, waitin' for her lover. An' she begged the cavalrymen to rescue Thorne. But the officer in charge, bein' in a ticklish place, still held out for higher orders."

Ladd mopped his sweaty face with his dusty scarf. He was beaming. He was growing excited, hurried in his narrative.

"Right out then Nell *swore* she'd go after Thorne. If them cavalrymen couldn't ride with a Western girl to save a brother American—let them hang back! One feller, under orders, tried to stop Blanco Sol. An' that feller invited himself to the hospital. Then the cavalrymen went flyin' for their hosses.

"Say, I wish you fellers could see the lane that bunch of hosses left in the greasewood an' cactus. Looks like there'd been a cattle stampede on the desert. Blanco Sol stayed out in front, you can gamble on that. Right into Rojas's camp! Gawd Almighty! I never had a grief that'd hold a candle to this one of bein' too late to see Nell an' Sol in their one best race.

"Rojas an' his men vamoosed without a shot. That ain't surprisin'. There wasn't a shot fired by anybody. The cavalrymen soon found Thorne an' hurried with him back on Uncle Sam's land. Thorne was half naked, black an' blue all over, thin as a rail.

He looked mighty sick when I seen him first. That was a little after midday. He was given food an' drink. Shore he seemed a starved man. But he picked up wonderful, an' by the time Jim came along he was wantin' to start for Forlorn River. So was Nell. By main strength as much as persuasion we kept the two of them quiet till next evenin' at dark.

"Well, we made as sneaky a start in the dark as Jim an' me could manage, an' never hit the trail till we was miles from town. Thorne's nerve held him up for a while. Then all at once he tumbled out of his saddle. We got him back, an' Lash held him on. Nell didn't give out till daybreak."

"Laddy, what knocks me is Rojas holding Thorne prisoner, trying to make him tell where Mercedes had been hidden," said Belding after a heavy pause.

"Shore. It'd knock anybody."

"The bandit's crazy over her. That's the Spanish of it," replied Belding, his voice rolling. "Rojas is a peon. He's been a slave to the proud Castilian. Rojas wants this girl only to have her, then kill her. It's damn strange, boys, and even with Thorne here our troubles have just begun."

After twenty-four hours' sleep Thorne had recovered sufficiently to insist on marrying Mercedes immediately. Much to Gale's surprise neither Belding nor Ladd objected to the idea of bringing a padre into the household, and thereby making known to at least one Mexican the whereabouts of Mercedes Castañeda. Belding's caution was wearing out in wrath at the persistent unsettled condition of the border, and Ladd grew only the cooler and more silent as possibilities of trouble multiplied.

Gale fetched the padre, a little, weazened, timid man who was old and without interest or penetration. Apparently he married Mercedes and Thorne as he told his beads or mumbled a prayer.

All in a day, it seemed, Thorne grew so well and so hungry that his friends were delighted, and Mercedes was radiant. In a few days his weakness disappeared and he was going the round of the fields and looking over the ground marked out in Gale's plan of water development. Thorne was highly enthusiastic, and at once staked out his claim for one hundred and sixty acres of land adjoining that of Belding and the rangers. These five tracts took in all the ground necessary for their operations, but in case of the success of the irrigation project the idea was to increase their squatter holding by purchase of more land down the valley. A hundred families had lately moved to Forlorn River; more were coming all the time; and Belding vowed he could see a vision of the whole Altar Valley green with farms.

Meanwhile everybody in Belding's household, except the quiet Ladd and the watchful Yaqui, in the absence of disturbance of any kind along the border, grew freer and more unrestrained, as if anxiety was slowly fading in the peace of the present. Jim Lash made a trip to the Sonoyta Oasis, and Ladd patrolled fifty miles of the line eastward without incident or sight of raiders. Evidently all the border hawks were in at the picking of Casita.

The February nights were cold, with a dry, icy, penetrating coldness that made a warm fire most comfort-

able. Belding's household usually congregated in the sitting-room, where burning mesquite logs crackled in the open fireplace.

One night there came a low knock on the door.

"Come in," called Belding.

The door opened, and the short, square, powerfully built Yaqui entered. He had a magnificent head, strangely staring, somber black eyes, and very darkly bronzed face. He carried a rifle and strode with impressive dignity.

"Yaqui, what do you want?" asked Belding, and repeated his question in Spanish.

"Señor Dick," replied the Indian.

Gale jumped up, stifling an exclamation, and he went outdoors with Yaqui. He felt his arm gripped, and allowed himself to be led away without asking a question. Yaqui's presence was always one of gloom, and now his stern action boded catastrophe. Once clear of trees he pointed to the level desert across the river, where a row of campfires shone bright out of the darkness.

"Raiders!" ejaculated Gale. Then he cautioned Yaqui to keep sharp lookout, and, hurriedly returning to the house, he called the men out.

Ladd did not say a word. Belding, with an oath, slammed down his cigar.

"I knew it was too good to last! Dick, you and Jim stay here while Laddy and I look around."

Dick returned to the sitting-room. The women were nervous and not to be deceived. So Dick merely said Yaqui had sighted some lights off in the desert, and they probably were campfires. Belding did not soon return, and when he did he was alone, and, saying he wanted to consult with the men, he sent Mrs. Belding and the girls to their rooms.

"Laddy's gone over to scout around and try to find out who the outfit belongs to and how many are in it," said Belding.

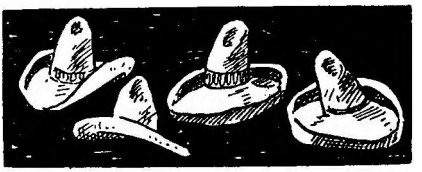
"I reckon if they're raiders with bad intentions we wouldn't see no fires," remarked Jim calmly.

"It'd be useless, I suppose, to send for the cavalry," said Gale. "Whatever's coming off would be over before the soldiers could be notified, let alone reach here."

"Hell, fellows! I don't look for an attack on Forlorn River," burst out Belding. "As Jim says, if they wanted to steal a few horses or cattle they wouldn't build fires. I'm afraid it's—" He hesitated and looked with grim concern at the cavalryman.

"What?" queried Thorne.

"I'm afraid it's Rojas."



Breakfast was prepared earlier than usual, and an air of suppressed, waiting excitement pervaded the place. Otherwise the ordinary details of the morning's work continued as on any other day. Ladd came in hungry and cold, and said the Mexicans were not breaking camp. He reported a good-sized force of rebels, and was taciturn as to his idea of forthcoming events.

About an hour after sunrise Yaqui ran in with the information that part of the rebels were crossing the river.

"That can't mean a fight yet," declared Belding. "But get in the house, boys, and make ready anyway. I'll meet them."

"Drive them off the place same as if you had a company of soldiers backin' you," said Ladd. "Don't give them an inch. We're in bad, and the bigger bluff we put up the more likely our chance."

The rangers, with Yaqui and Thorne, stationed themselves at the several windows of the sitting-room. Rifles and smaller arms and boxes of shells littered the tables and window seats.

"Here they come, boys," called Gale from his window.

"Reckon there's about a dozen in the bunch," observed the calm Lash.

"Do any of you see Rojas?" whispered Thorne.

"Nix. No dandy bandit in that outfit."

The horsemen halted at the corrals. Belding stalked out to meet them. Apparently a leader wanted to parley with him, but Belding would hear nothing: He shook his head, waved his arms, stamped to and fro, and his loud, angry voice could be heard clear back at the house. Whereupon the detachment of rebels retired to the bank of the river, beyond the white post that marked the boundary line, and there they once more drew rein. Belding started swiftly for the house. He came striding into the room and looked at his rangers. It was characteristic of the man that, now when catastrophe appeared inevitable, all the gloom and care and angry agitation passed from him.

"Laddy, it's Rojas all right. How many men has he out there?"

"Mebbe twenty. Not more."

"We can lick twice that many."

"Shore."

Jim Lash removed his pipe long enough to speak. "I reckon. But it ain't sense to start a fight when mebbe we can avoid it."

"What's your idea?"

"Let's stave the greaser off till dark. Then Laddy an' me an' Thorne will take Mercedes an' hit the trail for Yuma."

"Camino del Diablo! That awful trail with a woman! Jim, do you forget how many hundreds of men have perished on the Devil's Road?"

"I reckon I ain't forgettin' nothin'," replied Jim. "The water holes are full now. There's grass, an' we can do the job in six days."

"It's three hundred miles to Yuma."

"Beldin', Jim's idea hits me pretty reasonable," interposed Ladd. "Lord knows that's about the only chance we've got except fightin'."

"But suppose we do stave Rojas off, and you get safely away with Mercedes. Isn't Rojas going to find it out quick? Then what'll he try to do to us who're left here?"

"I reckon he'd find out by daylight," replied Jim. "But, Tom, he ain't goin' to start a scrap then. He'd want time an' hosses an' men to chase us out on the trail. You see, I'm figgerin' on the crazy greaser wantin' the girl. I reckon he'll try to clean up here to get her. But he's too smart to fight you for nothin'. Rojas may be nutty about women, but he's afraid of the U. S. Take my word for it he'd discover the trail in the mornin' an' light out on it. I reckon with ten hours' start we could travel comfortable."

Belding paced up and down the room. Jim and Ladd whispered together. Gale walked to the window and looked out at the distant group

of bandits, and then turned his gaze to rest upon Mercedes. Thorne held her hands, and the other women were trying to still her tremblings.

Presently Belding called his rangers to him, and then Thorne.

"Listen to this," he said earnestly. "I'll go out and have a talk with Rojas. I'll try to reason with him; tell him to think a long time before he sheds blood on Uncle Sam's soil. That he's now after an American's wife! I'll play for time. If my bluff goes through, well and good.

"After dark, the four of you, Laddy, Jim, Dick and Thorne, will take Mercedes and my best white horses, and with Yaqui as guide circle round through Altar Valley to the trail, and head for Yuma—wait now, Laddy. Let me finish. I want you to take the white horses for two reasons—to save them and to save you. Savvy? If Rojas should follow on my horses he'd be likely to catch you. Also, you can pack a great deal more than on the broncs. Also, the big horses can travel faster and farther on little grass and water. I want you to take the Indian, because in a case of this kind he'll be a godsend. He could hide you, find water and grass, when you would absolutely believe it impossible. When you're gone I'll hide Nell so Rojas won't see her if he searches the place. Then I think I could sit down and wait without any particular worry."

The rangers approved of Belding's plan, and Thorne choked in his effort to express his gratitude.

"All right, we'll chance it," concluded Belding. "I'll go out now and call Rojas and his outfit over."

Belding went outdoors while the rangers took up their former position at the west window. Each had his own somber thoughts, Gale imagined, and knew his own were dark enough. A slow fire crept along his veins. He saw Belding halt at the corrals and wave his hand. Then the rebels mounted and came briskly up the road, this time to rein in abreast.

Rojas dismounted and seemed to be listening. He betrayed none of the excitement Gale had seen in him that night at the Del Sol. Evidently this composure struck Ladd and Lash as unusual in a Mexican supposed to be laboring under stress of feeling. Belding made gestures, vehemently bobbed his big head, appeared to talk with his body as much as with his tongue. Then Rojas was seen to reply, and after that it was clear that the talk became painful and difficult. It ended finally in what appeared to be mutual understanding. Rojas mounted and rode away with his men, while Belding came tramping back to the house.

"You can rope me if I'm not locoed!" he burst out. "I went out to conciliate a red-handed little murderer, and damn me if I didn't meet a—a—well, I've no suitable name handy. I started my bluff and got along pretty well, but I forgot to mention that Mercedes was Thorne's wife. And what do you think? Rojas swore he loved Mercedes—swore he'd marry her right here in Forlorn River—swore he would give up robbing and killing people, and take her away from Mexico. He has gold—jewels. He swore if he didn't get her nothing mattered. He'd die anyway without her. . . . And here's the strange thing. I believe him! He was cold as ice, and all hell inside.

"Well, I pretended to be greatly

impressed. We got to talking friendly, I suppose, though I didn't understand half he said, and I imagine he gathered less what I said. Anyway, without my asking he said for me to think it over for a day and then we'd talk again."

"Shore we're born lucky!" ejaculated Ladd.

"I reckon Rojas'll be smart enough to string his outfit across the few trails leadin' out of Forlorn River," remarked Jim.

"That needn't worry us. All we want is dark to come," replied Belding. "Yaqui will slip through. Now, boys, take eight horses, the pick of my bunch. You must pack all that's needed for a possible long trip. Mind, Yaqui may lead you down into some wild Sonora valley and give Rojas the slip. You may get to Yuma in six days, and maybe in six weeks. Yet you've got to pack light—a small pack in saddles—larger ones on the two free horses. You may have a big fight. Laddy, take the .405. Dick will pack his Remington. All of you go gunned heavy. But the main thing is a pack that'll be light enough for swift travel, yet one that'll keep you from starving on the desert."

The rest of that day passed swiftly. Dick had scarcely a word with Nell, and all the time, as he chose and deliberated and worked over his little pack, there was a dull pain in his heart.

The sun set, twilight fell, then night closed down, fortunately a night slightly overcast. Gale saw the white horses pass his door like silent ghosts. Gale went out to put his saddle on Blanco Sol. The horse rubbed a soft nose against his shoulder. Then Gale returned to the sitting-room. Mercedes came clad in leather chaps and coat, a slim stripling of a cowboy, her dark eyes flashing.

Gale drew Nell off into the shadow of the room. She was trembling, and as she leaned toward him she was very different from the coy girl who had so long held him aloof. He took her into his arms.

"Dearest, I'm going—soon. And maybe I'll never—come back. I love you—I've loved you ever since the first moment I saw you. Do you care for me—a little?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, I love you so! I never knew it till now. I love you so. Dick, I'll be safe and I'll wait—and hope and pray for your return."

"If I come back—no—*when* I come back, will you marry me?"

"I—I—oh yes!" she whispered, and returned his kiss.

Belding was in the room speaking softly.

"Nell, darling, I must go," said Dick. With a wrench that shook him he let her go. He heard Belding's soft voice.

"Yaqui says the early hour's best. Trust him, Laddy. Remember what I say—Yaqui's a godsend."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Across Cactus and Lava

BLANCO SOL showed no inclination to bend his head to the alfalfa which swished softly about his legs. Gale felt the horse's sensitive, almost human alertness. Sol knew as well as his master the nature of that flight.

At the far corner of the field Yaqui

halted and moved away into the shadows as noiselessly as if he were one of them. The darkness swallowed him. He had taken a direction parallel with the trail. Gale wondered if Yaqui meant to try to lead his string of horses by the rebel sentinels. Ladd had his head bent low, his ear toward the trail. Jim's long neck had the arch of a listening deer.

Gale listened, too, and as the slow, silent moments went by his faculty of hearing grew more acute from strain. He heard Blanco Sol breathe; he heard the pound of his own heart; he heard the silken rustle of the alfalfa; he heard a faint, far-off sound of voice, like a lost echo. Then his ear seemed to register a movement of air, a disturbance so soft as to be nameless. Then followed long, silent moments.

Yaqui appeared as he had vanished. He might have been part of the shadows. He started off down the trail leading Diablo. Again the white line stretched slowly out. Gale fell in behind. A bench of ground, covered with sparse greasewood, sloped gently down to the deep, wide arroyo of Forlorn River. Blanco Sol shied a few feet out of the trail. Peering low with keen eyes, Gale made out three objects—a white sombrero, a blanket, and a Mexican lying face down. The Yaqui had stolen upon this sentinel like a silent wind of death. Just then a desert coyote wailed, and the wild cry fitted the darkness and the Yaqui's deed.

The cavalcade of white horses passed within five hundred yards of campfires, around which dark forms moved in plain sight. Soft pads in sand, faint metallic tickings of steel on thorns, low, regular breathing of horses—these were all the sounds the fugitives made, and they could not have been heard at one-fifth the distance. The lights disappeared from time to time, grew dimmer, more flickering, and at last they vanished altogether. Belding's fleet and tireless steeds were out in front; the desert opened ahead wide, dark, vast. Rojas and his rebels were behind, eating, drinking, careless and a somber shadow lifted from Gale's heart.

Yaqui suited the gait of his horse to the lay of the land, and his followers accepted his pace. There were canter and trot, and swift walk and slow climb, and long swing—miles up and down and forward. The sun soared hot. The heated air lifted, and incoming currents from the west swept low and hard over the barren earth. In the distance, all around the horizon, accumulations of dust seemed like ranging, mushrooming yellow clouds.

Presently, in a sheltered spot where blown sand had not obliterated the trail, Yaqui found the tracks of horses. The curve of the iron shoes pointed westward. An intersecting trail from the north came in here. Gale thought the tracks either one or two days old. Ladd said they were one day. The Indian shook his head.

No farther advance was undertaken. The Yaqui headed south and traveled slowly, climbing to the brow of a bold height of weathered mesa. There he sat his horse and waited. No one questioned him. The rangers dismounted to stretch their legs, and Mercedes was lifted to a rock, where she rested.

The sun went down, and the golden, rosy veils turned to blue and shaded darker till twilight was there in the

valley. Only the spurs of mountains, spiring the near and far horizon, retained their clear outline. Darkness approached, and the clear peaks faded. The horses stamped to be on the move.

"Malo!" exclaimed the Yaqui. His falcon head was outstretched, and his piercing eyes gazed at the blurring spot which marked the location of Coyote Tanks.

"Jim, can you see anything?" asked Ladd.

"Nope, but I reckon he can."

Darkness increased momentarily till night shaded the deepest part of the valley. Then Ladd suddenly straightened up, turned to his horse, and muttered low under his breath.

"I reckon so," said Lash, and for once his easy, good-natured tone was not in evidence. His voice was harsh.

Gale's eyes, keen as they were, were last of the rangers to see tiny needle points of light just faintly perceptible in the blackness. "Laddy! Campfires?"

"Shore's you're born, my boy."

"How many?"

Ladd did not reply; but Yaqui held up his hand, his fingers wide. Five campfires! A strong force of rebels or raiders or some other desert troop was camping at Coyote Tanks.

Yaqui sat his horse for a moment, motionless as stone, his dark face immutable and impassive. Then he stretched wide his right arm in the direction of No Name Mountains, now losing their last faint traces of the afterglow, and he shook his head. He made the same impressive gesture toward the Sonoyta Oasis with the same somber negation.

Thereupon he turned Diablo's head to the south and started down the slope. His manner had been decisive, even stern. Lash did not question it, nor did Ladd. Both rangers hesitated, however, and showed a strange, almost a sullen reluctance which Gale had never seen in them before.

"Oh, where is he going?" cried Mercedes.

"Shore, lady, Yaqui's goin' home," replied Ladd gently. "An' considerin' our troubles I reckon we ought to thank God he knows the way."

Not until night travel was obstructed by a wall of cactus did the Indian halt to make a dry camp. Water and grass for the horses and fire to cook by were not to be had. Mercedes bore up surprisingly; but she fell asleep almost the instant her thirst had been allayed. Yaqui bade the men sleep.

Day dawned with the fugitives in the saddle. A picketed wall of cactus hedged them in, yet the Yaqui made a tortuous path, that, zigzag as it might, in the main always headed south.

At noon Yaqui halted the cavalcade. He had selected a field of *bisnagi* cactus for the place of rest. Presently his reason became obvious. With long, heavy knife he cut off the tops of these barrel-shaped plants. He scooped out soft pulp, and with stone and hand then began to pound the deeper pulp into a juicy mass. When he threw this out there was a little water left, sweet, cool water which man and horse shared eagerly.

But he did not halt long. Miles of gray-green spiked walls lay between him and that line of ragged, red lava which manifestly he must reach before dark. The travel became faster, straighter. And the glistening thorns clutched and clung to leather and cloth and flesh. The horses reared,

snorted, balked, leaped—but they were sent on. Only Blanco Sol, the patient, the plodding, the indomitable, needed no goad or spur. Waves and scarfs and wreaths of heat smoked up from the sand. Mercedes reeled in her saddle. Thorne bade her drink, bathed her face, supported her, and then gave way to Ladd, who took the girl with him on Torres's broad back.

The giant cactus came to be only so in name. These *saguaros* were thinning out, growing stunted, and most of them were single columns. Gradually other cactus forms showed a harder struggle for existence, and the spaces of sand between were wider. But now the dreaded, glistening *choya* began to show pale and gray and white upon the rising slope. Round-topped hills, sunset-colored above, blue-black below, intervened to hide the distant spurs and peaks. Long tongues of red lava streamed out between the hills and wound down to stop abruptly upon the slope.

This red lava seemed to have flowed and hardened there only yesterday. It was broken, sharp, dull rust color, full of cracks and caves and crevices, and everywhere upon its jagged surface grew the white-thorned *choya*.

Again twilight encompassed the travelers. But there was still enough for Gale to see the constricted passage open into a wide, deep space where the dull color was relieved by the gray of gnarled and dwarfed mesquite. Blanco Sol, keenest of scent, whistled his welcome herald of water. The other horses answered, quickened their gait. Gale smelled it, too, sweet, cool, damp on the dry air.

Yaqui turned the corner of a pocket in the lava wall. The file of white horses rounded the corner after him. And Gale, coming last, saw the pale, glancing gleam of a pool of water beautiful in the twilight.

Next day the Yaqui's relentless driving demand on the horses was no longer in evidence. As the manner rather than the purpose of the Indian changed, so there seemed to be subtle differences in the others of the party. Gale himself lost a certain sickening dread, which had not been for himself, but for Mercedes and Nell, and Thorne and the rangers. Jim, good-natured again, might have been patrolling the boundary line. Ladd lost his taciturnity and his gloom changed to a cool, careless air. A mood that was almost defiance began to be manifested in Thorne. Mercedes had found a reserve fund of strength, and her mental condition was not the same that it had been. Her burden of fear had been lifted.

Thirty miles of easy stages brought the fugitives to another water hole, a little round pocket under the heaved-up edge of lava. There was spare, short, bleached grass for the horses, but no wood for a fire. This night there was question and reply, conjecture, doubt, opinion, and conviction expressed by the men of the party. But the Indian, who alone could have told where they were, where they were going, what chance they had to escape, maintained his stoical silence. Gale took the early watch, Ladd the midnight one, and Lash that of the morning.

The day broke rosy, glorious, cold as ice. Action was necessary to make useful benumbed hands and feet.

It was a significant index to the day's travel that Yaqui should keep a

blanket from the pack and tear it into strips to bind the legs of the horses. It meant the dreaded *choya* and the knife-edged lava. That Yaqui did not mount Diablo was still more significant. Mercedes must ride; but the others must walk.

The Indian led off into one of the gray notches between the tumbled streams of lava. These streams were about thirty feet high, a rotting mass of splintered lava, rougher than any other kind of roughness in the world. At the apex of the notch, where two streams met, a narrow gully wound and ascended. Gale caught sight of the dim, pale shadow of a one-time trail. Near at hand it was invisible; he had to look far ahead to catch the faint tracery. Yaqui led Diablo into it, and then began the most laborious and vexatious and painful of all slow travel.

The disintegrating surface of a lava bed was at once the roughest, the hardest, the meanest, the cruelest, the most deceitful kind of ground to travel. It was rotten, yet it had corners as hard and sharp as pikes. It was rough, yet as slippery as ice. If there was a foot of level surface, that space would be one to break through under a horse's hoofs. It was seamed, lined, cracked, ridged, knotted iron. The millions of minute crevices were dominated by deep fissures and holes, ragged and rough beyond all comparison.

The fugitives made slow progress. Blanco Diablo refused to answer to the power of the Yaqui. He balked, he plunged, he bit and kicked. He had to be pulled and beaten over many places. Mercedes's horse almost threw her, and she was put upon Blanco Sol.

The lava caused Gale toil and worry and pain, but he hated the *choyas*. As the travel progressed this species of cactus increased in number of plants and in size. Everywhere the red lava was spotted with little round patches of glistening frosty white. And under every bunch of *choya*, along and in the trail, were the discarded joints, like little frosty pine cones covered with spines. It was utterly impossible always to be on the lookout for these, and when Gale stepped on one, often as not the steel-like thorns pierced leather and flesh. The pain was almost unendurable. It burned, stung, beat—almost seemed to freeze. It made him bite his tongue to keep from crying out. It made the sweat roll off him. It made him sick.

Darkness overtook the party as they unpacked beside a pool of water deep under an overhanging shelf of lava. It had been a hard day. The horses drank their fill, and then stood patiently with drooping heads. Hunger and thirst were appeased, and a warm fire cheered the weary and foot-sore fugitives. Yaqui said, "Sleep." And so another night passed.

Upon the following morning, ten miles or more up the slow-ascending lava slope, Gale's attention was called from his somber search for the less rough places in the trail.

"Dick, why does Yaqui look back?" asked Mercedes.

Gale was startled. "Does he?"

"Every little while," replied Mercedes.

Gale was in the rear of all the other horses, so as to take, for Mercedes's sake, the advantage of the broken trail. Yaqui was leading Diablo, winding around a break. His head was bent as he stepped slowly and uneven-

ly upon the lava. Gale turned to look back, the first time in several days. The mighty hollow of the desert below seemed wide strip of red—wide strip of green—wide strip of gray—streaking to purple peaks.

Many times during the ensuing hour the Indian faced about, and always his followers did likewise. It was high noon, with the sun beating hot and the lava radiating heat, when the Yaqui halted for a rest. The place selected was a ridge of lava, almost a promontory, considering its outlook. The horses bunched here and drooped their heads. The rangers were about to slip the packs and remove saddles when Yaqui restrained them.

He fixed a changeless, gleaming gaze on the slow descent; but did not seem to look afar. Suddenly he pointed down the lava slope, pointing with finger and arm and neck and head—his whole body was instinct with direction. His whole being seemed to have been animated and then frozen.

"Shore he sees somethin'," said Ladd. "But my eyes are no good."

"I reckon I ain't sure of mine," replied Jim. "I'm bothered by a dim movin' streak down there."

Thorne gazed eagerly down as he stood beside Mercedes, who sat motionless facing the slope. Gale looked and looked till he hurt his eyes. Then he took his glasses out of its case on Sol's saddle.

There appeared to be nothing upon the lava but the innumerable dots of *choya* shining in the sun. Gale swept his glass slowly forward and back. Then into a nearer field of vision crept a long white-and-black line of horses and men. Without a word he handed the glass to Ladd. The ranger used it, muttering to himself.

"They're on the lava fifteen miles down in an air line," he said presently. "Jim, shore they're twice that an' more accordin' to the trail."

Jim had his look and replied, "I reckon we're a day an' a night in the lead."

"Is it Rojas?" burst out Thorne.

"Yes, Thorne. It's Rojas and a dozen men or more," replied Gale.

The fight predicted by Belding was at hand. What a fight that must be! Rojas was traveling light and fast. He was gaining. He had bought his men with gold, with extravagant promises, perhaps with offers of the body and blood of an aristocrat hateful to their kind.

Yaqui looked back no more. Mercedes looked back no more. But the others looked, and the time came when Gale saw the creeping line of pursuers with naked eyes.

A level line above marked the rim of the plateau. Sand began to show in the little lava pits. On and upward toiled the cavalcade, still very slowly advancing. At last Yaqui reached the rim. He stood with his hand on Blanco Diablo; and both were silhouetted against the sky The others toiled on and upward, and at last Gale led Blanco Sol over the rim.

There were upon a high point of the western slope of the plateau. It was a slope, but so many leagues long in its descent that only from a great height could any slant have been perceptible. Yaqui and his white horse stood upon the brink of a crater miles in circumference, a thousand feet deep, with its red walls patched in frost-colored spots by the silvery *choya*. The giant tracery of lava streams waved down the slope to disappear in undulating sand dunes. And

these bordered a seemingly endless arm of blue sea. This was the Gulf of California. Beyond the Gulf rose dim, bold mountains, and above them hung the setting sun, dusky red, flooding all that barren empire with a sinister light.

It was strange to Gale then, and perhaps to the others, to see their guide lead Diablo into a smooth and well-worn trail along the rim of the awful crater. Gale looked down into that red chasm. It resembled an inferno. The dark cliffs upon the opposite side were veiled in blue haze that seemed like smoke. Here Yaqui was at home. He moved and looked about him as a man coming at last into his own. Gale saw him stop and gaze out over that red-ribbed void to the Gulf.

Gale divined that somewhere along this crater of hell the Yaqui would make his final stand; and one look into his strange, inscrutable eyes made imagination picture a fitting doom for the pursuing Rojas.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Crater of Hell

THE trail led along a gigantic fissure in the side of the crater, and then down and down into a red-walled, blue-hazed labyrinth.

Presently Gale, upon turning a sharp corner, was utterly amazed to see that the split in the lava sloped out and widened into an arroyo. It was so green and soft and beautiful in all the angry, contorted red surrounding that Gale could scarcely credit his sight. Blanco Sol whistled his welcome to the scent of water. Then Gale saw a great hole, a pit in the shiny lava, a dark, cool, shady well. There was evidence of the fact that at flood seasons the water had an outlet into the arroyo. The soil appeared to be a fine sand, in which a reddish tinge predominated; and it was abundantly covered with a long grass, still partly green. Mesquites and *palo verdes* dotted the arroyo and gradually closed in thickets that obstructed the view.

Camp was made on a level spot. Yaqui took the horses to water, and then turned them loose in the arroyo. It was a tired and somber group that sat down to eat. The strain of suspense equaled the wearing effects of the long ride. Mercedes was calm, but her great eyes burned in her white face.

Little of Yaqui's purpose or plan could be elicited from him. The rangers and Thorne, however, talked in low tones. It was absolutely impossible for Rojas and his men to reach the water hole before noon of the next day. And long before that time the fugitives would have decided on a plan of defense. What that defense would be, and where it would be made, were matters which the men considered gravely.

Morning broke with the sun hidden back of the uplift of the plateau. The horses trooped up the arroyo and snorted for water. After a hurried breakfast the packs were hidden in holes in the lava. The saddles were left where they were, and the horses allowed to graze and water at will. Canteens were filled, a small bag of food was packed, and blankets made into a bundle. Then Yaqui faced the steep ascent of the lava slope.

The trail he followed led up on the

right side of the fissure, opposite to the one he had come down. It was a steep climb, and encumbered as the men were they made but slow progress. Mercedes had to be lifted up smooth steps and across crevices. They passed places where the rims of the fissure were but a few yards apart. At length the rims widened out and the red, smoky crater yawned beneath. Yaqui left the trail and began clambering down over the rough and twisted convolutions of lava which formed the rim. Sometimes he hung sheer over the precipice. It was with extreme difficulty that the party followed him. Mercedes had to be held on narrow, foot-wide ledges. The *choya* was there to hinder passage. Finally the Indian halted upon a narrow bench of flat, smooth lava, and his followers worked with exceeding care and effort down to his position.

At the back of this bench, between bunches of *choya,* was a niche, a shallow cave with floor lined apparently with mold. Ladd said the place was a refuge which had been inhabited by mountain sheep for many years. Yaqui spread blankets inside, left the canteen and the sack of food, and with a gesture at once humble, yet that of a chief, he invited Mercedes to enter. A few more gestures and fewer words disclosed his plan. In this inaccessible nook Mercedes was to be hidden. The men were to go around upon the opposite rim, and block the trail leading down to the water hole.

Gale marked the nature of this eyrie. It was the wildest and most rugged place he had ever stepped upon. Only a sheep could have climbed up the wall above or along the slanting shelf of lava beyond. Below glistened a whole bank of *choya,* frosty in the sunlight, and it overhung an apparently bottomless abyss.

Ladd chose the smallest gun in the party and gave it to Mercedes. "Shore, it's best to go the limit of bein' ready," he said simply. "The chances are you'll never need it. But if you do—"

Mercedes answered him with a fearless flash of eyes. Thorne was the only one who showed any shaken nerve. His leave-taking of his wife was affecting and hurried. Then he and the rangers carefully stepped in the tracks of the Yaqui.

They climbed up to the level of the rim and went along the edge. When they reached the fissure and came upon its narrowest point, Yaqui showed in his actions that he meant to leap it. Ladd restrained the Indian. They then continued along the rim till they reached several bridges of lava which crossed it. The fissure was deep in some parts, choked in others. Evidently the crater had no direct outlet into the arroyo below. Its bottom, however, must have been far beneath the level of the water hole.

After the fissure was crossed the trail was soon found. Here it ran back from the rim. Yaqui waved his hand to the right, where along the corrugated slope of the crater there were holes and crevices and coverts for a hundred men. Yaqui strode up the trail toward a higher point, where presently his dark figure stood motionless against the sky. The rangers and Thorne selected a deep depression, out of which led several ruts deep enough for cover. According to

Ladd it was as good a place as any, perhaps not so hidden as others, but freer from the dreaded *choya*. Here the men laid down rifles and guns, and, removing their heavy cartridge belts, settled down to wait.

Their location was close to the rim wall and probably five hundred yards from the opposite rim, which was now seen to be considerably below them. The glaring red cliff presented a deceitful and baffling appearance. It had a thousand ledges and holes in its surfaces, and one moment it looked perpendicular and the next there seemed to be a long slant. Thorne pointed out where he thought Mercedes was hidden; Ladd selected another place, and Lash still another. Gale searched for the bank of the *choya* he had seen under the bench where Mercedes's retreat lay, and when he found it the others disputed his opinion. Then Gale brought his field glass into requisition, proving that he was right. Once located and fixed in sight, the white patch of *choya,* the bench, and the sheep eyrie stood out from the other features of that rugged wall. But all the men were agreed that Yaqui had hidden Mercedes where only the eyes of a vulture could have found her.

The hours passed. As the sun climbed, the clear, steely lights vanished, the blue hazes deepened, and slowly the glistening surfaces of lava turned redder. Ladd was concerned to discover that Yaqui was missing from his outlook upon the high point. Jim Lash came out of the shady crevice, and stood up to buckle on his cartridge belt. His narrow, gray glance slowly roved from the height of lava down along the slope, paused in doubt, and then swept on to resurvey the whole vast eastern dip of the plateau.

"I reckon my eyes are pore," he said. "Mebbe it's this damn red glare. Anyway, what's them creepin' spots up there?"

Gale adjusted the field glass and began to search the lava, beginning close at hand and working away from him. Presently the glass became stationary.

"Fourteen horses—two packed—some mounted—others without riders, and lame," said Gale slowly.

Yaqui appeared far up the trail, coming swiftly. Presently he saw the rangers and halted to wave his arms and point. Then he vanished as if the lava had opened beneath him.

"Lemme that glass," suddenly said Jim Lash. "I'm seein' red, I tell you—Well, pore as my eyes are they had it right. Rojas an' his outfit have left the trail."

"Jim, you ain't meanin' they've taken to that awful slope?" queried Ladd.

"I sure do. There they are—still comin', but goin' down, too."

"Mebbe Rojas is crazy, but it begins to look like he—"

"Laddy, I'll be danged if the greaser bunch hasn't vamoosed. Gone out of sight! Right there not a half mile away, the whole caboodle—gone!"

"Shore they're behind a crust or have gone down into a rut," suggested Ladd. "They'll show again in a minute. Look sharp, boys, for I'm figgerin' Rojas'll spread his men."

Minutes passed, but nothing moved upon the slope. Each man crawled up to a vantage point along the crest of rotting lava. The watchers were careful to peer through little notches or from behind a spur, and the con-

stricted nature of their hiding-place kept them close together. Ladd's muttering grew into a growl, then lapsed into the silence that marked his companions. From time to time the rangers looked inquiringly at Gale. The field glass, however, like the naked sight, could not catch the slightest moving object out there upon the lava. A long hour of slow, mounting suspense wore on.

"Shore it's all goin' to be as queer as the Yaqui," said Ladd.

"Boys, look sharp!" suddenly called Lash. "Low down to the left—mebbe three hundred yards. See, along by them seams of lava—behind the *choyas*. First off I thought it was a sheep. But it's the Yaqui! Crawlin' swift as a lizard! Can't you see him?"

It was a full moment before Jim's companions could locate the Indian. Flat as a snake, Yaqui wound himself along with incredible rapidity. His advance was all the more remarkable for the fact that he appeared to pass directly under the dreaded *choyas*. Sometimes he paused to lift his head and look. He was directly in line with a huge whorl of lava that rose higher than any point on the slope. This spur was a quarter of a mile from the position of the rangers.

"Shore he's headin' for that high place," said Ladd. "He's going slow now. There, he's stopped behind some *choyas*. He's gettin' up—no, he's kneelin'—Now what the hell!"

"Laddy, take a peek at the side of that lava ridge," sharply called Jim. "I guess mebbe somethin' ain't comin' off. See! There's Rojas an' his outfit climbin'. Don't make out no hosses. Dick, use your glass an' tell us what's doin'. I'll watch Yaqui an' tell you what his move means."

Clearly and distinctly, almost as if he could have touched them, Gale had Rojas and his followers in sight. They were toiling up the rough lava on foot. They were heavily armed. Spurs, chaps, jackets, scarfs were not in evidence. Gale saw the lean, swarthy faces, the black straggly hair, the ragged, soiled garments which had once been white.

"They're almost up now," Gale was saying. "There! They halt on top. I see Rojas. He looks wild. By God! fellows, an Indian! It's a Papago—Belding's old herder! The Indian points—this way—then down. He's showing Rojas the lay of the trail."

"Boys, Yaqui's in range of that bunch," said Jim swiftly. "He's raisin' his rifle slow—Lord, how slow he is! . . . He's covered someone. Which one I can't say. But I think he'll pick Rojas."

"The Yaqui can shoot. He'll pick Rojas," added Gale grimly.

"Not on your life!" Ladd's voice cut in with scorn. "Gentlemen, you can gamble Yaqui'll kill the Papago. That traitor Indian knows these sheep haunts. He's tellin' Rojas—"

A sharp rifle shot rang out.

"Laddy's right," called Gale. "The Papago's hit—his arm falls— There, he tumbles!"

More shots rang out. Yaqui was seen standing erect firing rapidly at the darting Mexicans. For all Gale could make out no second bullet took effect. Rojas and his men vanished behind the bulge of lava. Then Yaqui deliberately backed away from his position. He made no effort to run or hide. Evidently he watched cautiously for signs of pursuers in the ruts and behind the *choyas*. Presently he turned and came straight toward the

position of the rangers, sheered off perhaps a hundred paces below it, and disappeared in a crevice. Plainly his intention was to draw pursuers within rifle shot.

"Shore, Jim, you had your wish. Somethin' come off," said Ladd. "An' I'm sayin' thank God for the Yaqui! That Papago'd have ruined us. Even so, mebbe he's told Rojas more'n enough to make us sweat blood."

"He had a chance to kill Rojas," cried out the drawn-faced, passionate Thorne. "He didn't take it!"

"Listen, son," Ladd said, and his voice rang. "We all know how you feel. An' if I'd had that one shot never in the world could I have picked the Papago guide. I'd have had to kill Rojas. That's the white man of it. But Yaqui was right. Only an Indian could have done it. You can gamble the Papago alive meant slim chance for us. Because he'd led straight to where Mercedes is hidden, an' then we'd have left cover to fight it out. Damn me, my som-brer-ro is off to the Indian!"

"I reckon so, an' I reckon the ball's opened," rejoined Lash. He tapped the breach of his Winchester with a sinewy brown hand, and he did not appear to be addressing any one in particular. "Look up your pardners there, gents, an' get ready to dance."

Another wait set in then. The four men were lying under the bank of a half-circular hole in the lava. It was notched and cracked, and its rim was fringed by *choyas*. It sloped down and opened to an unobstructed view of the crater. Gale had the upper position, farthest to the right, and therefore was best shielded from possible fire from the higher ridges of the rim, some three hundred yards distant. Jim came next, well hidden in a crack. The positions of Thorne and Ladd were most exposed. They kept sharp lookout over the uneven rampart of their hiding-place.

Suddenly the stillness was rent by a shot, clear and stinging, close at hand. It was from a rifle, not a carbine. With startling quickness a cry followed—a cry that pierced Gale—it was so thin, so high-keyed, so different from all other cries. It was the involuntary human shriek of death.

"Yaqui's called out another pardner," said Jim Lash laconically.

Carbines began to crack. The reports were quick, light, like sharp spats without any ring. Gale peered from behind the edge of his covert. Above the ragged wave of lava floated faint whitish clouds, all that was visible of smokeless powder. Then Gale made out round spots, dark against the background of red, and in front of them leaped out small tongues of fire.

Ladd's .405 began to *spang* with its beautiful sound of power. Thorne was firing, somewhat wildly, Gale thought. Then Jim Lash pushed his Winchester over the rim under a *choya,* and between shots Gale could hear him singing: "Turn the lady, turn—turn the lady, turn!—Alaman left! Swing your pardners!—Forward an' back—Turn the lady, turn!" Gale got into the fight himself, not so sure that he hit any of the round, bobbing objects he aimed at, but growing sure of himself as action liberated something forced and congested within his breast.

Then over the position of the rangers came a hail of steel bullets. Those that struck the lava hissed away into the crater; those that came biting

through the *choyas* made a sound which resembled a sharp ripping of silk. Bits of cactus stung Gale's face, and he dreaded the flying thorns more than he did the flying bullets.

"Hold on, boys," called Ladd, as he crouched down to reload his rifle. "Save your shells. The greasers are spreadin' on us, some goin' down below Yaqui, others movin' up for that high ridge. When they get up there I'm damned if it won't be hot for us. There ain't room for all of us to hide here."

Ladd raised himself to peep over the rim. Shots were now scattering, and all appeared to come from below. Emboldened by this, he rose higher. A shot from in front, a rip of bullet through the *choya,* a spat of something hitting Ladd's face, a steel missile hissing upward—these inseparably blended sounds were all registered by Gale's sensitive ear.

With a curse Ladd tumbled down into the hole. His face showed a great gray blotch and starting blood. Gale felt a sickening assurance of desperate injury to the ranger. He ran to him calling, "Laddy! Laddy!"

"Shore I ain't plugged. It's a damn *choya* burr. The bullet knocked it in my face. Pull it out!"

The oval, long-spiked cone was firmly imbedded in Ladd's cheek. Blood streamed down his face and neck. Carefully Gale tried to pull the cactus joint away. It was as firm as if it had been nailed there. That was the damnable feature of the barbed thorns: once set, they held on as that strange plant held to its desert life. Ladd began to writhe, and sweat mingled with the blood on his face. He cursed and raved, and his movements made it almost impossible for Gale to do anything.

"Put you knife blade under an' tear it out!" shouted Ladd hoarsely.

Thus ordered, Gale slipped a long blade in between the imbedded thorns, and with a powerful jerk literally tore the *choya* out of Ladd's quivering flesh.

A volley of shots from a different angle was followed by the quick ring of steel bullets striking the lava all around Gale. His first idea, as he heard the projectiles sing and hum and whine away into the air, was that they were coming from above him. He looked up to see a number of low white and dark knobs upon the high point of lava. They had not been there before. Then he saw little, pale, leaping tongues of fire. As he dodged down he distinctly heard a bullet strike Ladd. At the same instant he seemed to hear Thorne cry out and fall, and Lash's boots scrape rapidly away.

Ladd fell backward still holding the .405. Gale dragged him into the shelter of his own position, and dreading to look at him, took up the heavy weapon. It was with a kind of savage strength that he gripped the rifle; and it was with a cold and deadly intent that he aimed and fired.

The first raider huddled low, let his carbine go clattering down, and then crawled behind the rim. The second and third jerked back. The fourth seemed to flop up over the crest of lava. A dark arm reached for him, clutched his leg, tried to drag him up. It was in vain. Wildly grasping at the air, the bandit fell, slid down a steep shelf, rolled over the rim, to go hurtling down out of sight.

Fingering the hot rifle with close-pressed hands, Gale watched the sky

line above the high point of lava. It remained unbroken. As his passion left him, he feared to look back at his companions, and the cold chill returned to his breast.

"Shore—I'm damn glad—them greasers ain't using soft-nose bullets," drawled a calm voice.

Swift as lightning Gale whirled. "Laddy! I thought you were done for," he cried, with a break in his voice.

"I ain't a-mindin' the bullet much. But that *choya* joint took my nerve, an' you can gamble on it. Dick, this hole's pretty high up, ain't it?"

The ranger's blouse was open at the neck, and on his right shoulder under the collar bone was a small hole just beginning to bleed.

"Sure it's high, Laddy," replied Gale gladly. "Went clear through, clean as a whistle!" He tore a handkerchief into two parts, made wads, and pressing them close over the wounds, he bound them there with Ladd's scarf.

"Shore it's funny how a bullet can floor a man an' then not do any damage," said Ladd. "I felt a zip of wind an' somethin' like a pat on my chest an' down I went. Well, so much for the small caliber with their steel bullets. Supposin' I'd connected with a .405!"

"Laddy, I—I'm afraid Thorne's done for," whispered Gale. "He's lying over there in that crack. I can see part of him. He doesn't move."

"I was wonderin' if I'd have to tell you that. Dick, he went down hard hit, fallin', you know, limp an' soggy. It was a cinch one of us would get it in this fight; but God! I'm sorry Thorne had to be the man."

"Laddy, maybe he's not dead," replied Gale. He called aloud to his friend. There was no answer.

Ladd got up, and, after peering keenly at the height of lava, he strode swiftly across the space. It was only a dozen steps to the crack in the lava where Thorne had fallen in headfirst. Ladd bent over, went to his knees, so that Gale saw only his head. Then he appeared, rising with arms round the cavalryman. He dragged him across the hole to the sheltered corner that alone offered protection. He had scarcely reached it when a carbine cracked and a bullet struck the flinty lava, striking sparks, then singing away into the air.

Thorne was either dead or unconscious, and Gale, with a contracting throat and numb heart, decided for the former. Not so Ladd, who probed the bloody gash on Thorne's temple, and then felt his breast.

"He's alive an' not bad hurt. That bullet him him glancin'. Shore them steel bullets are some lucky for us. Dick, you needn't look so glum. I tell you he ain't bad hurt. I felt his skull with my finger. There's no hole in it. Wash him off an' tie— Wow! did you get the wind of that one? An' mebbe it didn't sing off the lava! Dick, look after Thorne while I—"

The completion of his speech was the stirring ring of the .405, and then he uttered a laugh that was unpleasant. "Shore, there's a man-size bullet for you! No slim, sharp-point, steel-jacket nail! I'm takin' it on me to believe you're appreciatin' of the .405, seein' as you don't make no fuss."

It was a relief to Gale to find that Thorne had not received a wound necessarily fatal, though it was serious enough. Gale bathed and bound it, and laid the cavalryman against the slant of the bank, his head high to

lessen the probability of bleeding.

As Gale straightened up Ladd muttered low and deep, and swung the heavy rifle around to the left. Far along the slope a figure moved. Ladd began to work the lever of the Winchester and to shoot. At every shot the heavy firearm sprang up, and the recoil made Ladd's shoulder give back. Gale saw the bullets strike the lava behind, beside, before the fleeing Mexican, sending up dull puffs of dust. On the sixth shot he plunged down out of sight, either hit or frightened into seeking cover.

"Dick, mebbe there's one or two left above; but we needn't figger much on it," said Ladd as, loading the rifle, he jerked his fingers quickly from the hot breach. "Listen! Jim an' Yaqui are hittin' it up lively down below. I'll sneak down there. You stay here an' keep about half an eye peeled up yonder, an' keep the rest my way."

Ladd crossed the hole, climbed down into the deep crack where Thorne had fallen, and then went stooping along with only his head above the level. Presently he disappeared.

Gale, having little to fear from the high ridge, directed most of his attention toward the point beyond which Ladd had gone. The firing had become desultory, and the light carbine shots outnumbered the sharp rifle shots five to one. Gale made a note of the fact that for some little time he had not heard the unmistakable report of Jim Lash's automatic. Then ensued a long interval in which the desert silence seemed to recover its grip. The .405 ripped it asunder—*spang—spang—spang*. Gale fancied he heard yells. There were a few pattering shots still farther down the trail. Gale had an uneasy conviction that Rojas and some of his band might go straight to the water hole. It would be hard to dislodge even a few men from that retreat.

There seemed a lull in the battle. Gale ventured to stand high, and, screened behind *choyas,* he swept the three-quarter circle of lava with his glass. In the distance he saw horses, but no riders. Below him, down the slope along the crater rim and the trail, the lava was bare of all except tufts of *choya.* Gale gathered assurance. It looked as if the day was favoring his side. Then Thorne, coming partly to consciousness, engaged Gale's care.

For the first time in hours, it seemed, Gale took note of the physical aspect of his surroundings. He began to look upon them without keen gaze strained for crouching form or bobbing head or spouting carbine. Either Gale's sense of color and proportion had become deranged during the fight, or the encompassing air and desert had changed. The yawning chasm circled wider, redder, deeper. It was a weird, ghastly mouth of hell.

Gale stood fascinated, unable to tell how much he saw was real, how much the exaggeration of overwrought emotions. The mood that gripped Gale now added to its somber portent an unshakable foreboding of calamity.

Suddenly harsh, prolonged yells brought him to his feet, and the unrealities vanished. Far down the trails where the crater rims closed in the deep fissure he saw moving forms. They were three in number. Two of them ran nimbly across the lava bridge. The third staggered far be-

hind. It was Ladd. He appeared hard hit. He dragged at the heavy rifle which he seemed unable to raise. The yells came from him. He was calling the Yaqui.

Gale's heart stood still momentarily. He hardly dared sweep that fissure with his glass. The two fleeing figures halted—turned to fire at Ladd. Gale recognized the foremost one—small, compact, gaudy—Rojas! The bandit's arm was outstretched. Puffs of white smoke rose, and shots rapped out. When Ladd went down Rojas threw his gun aside and with a wild yell bounded over the lava. His companion followed.

A tide of passion, first hot as fire, then cold as ice, rushed over Gale when he saw Rojas take the trail toward Mercedes's hiding-place. The little bandit appeared to have the sure-footedness of a mountain sheep. The Mexican following was not so sure or fast. He turned back. Gale heard the bark of the .405. Ladd was kneeling. He shot again—again. The retreating bandit seemed to run full into an invisible obstacle, then fall lax, inert, lifeless. Rojas sped on, unmindful of the spurts of dust about him. Yaqui, high over Ladd, was also firing at the bandit. Then both rifles were emptied. Rojas turned at a high break in the trail. He shook a defiant hand, and his exulting yell pealed faintly to Gale's ears. Then he clambered down the trail.

Ladd dropped the .405, and rising, gun in hand, he staggered toward the bridge of lava. Before he had crossed it, Yaqui came bounding down the slope, and in one splendid leap he cleared the fissure. He ran beyond the trail and disappeared on the lava above. Rojas had not seen this sudden, darting move of the Indian.

Gale felt himself bitterly powerless to aid in that pursuit. He could only watch. He wondered fearfully what had become of Lash. Presently, when Rojas came out of the cracks and ruts of lava, there might be a chance of disabling him by a long shot. His progress was now slow. But he was making straight for Mercedes's hiding-place. What was it leading him there—an eagle eye, or hate, or instinct? Why did he go on when there could be no turning back for him on that trail?

Ladd was slow, heavy, staggering on the trail; but he was relentless. Only death could stop the ranger now. Surely Rojas must have known that when he chose the trail. From time to time Gale caught glimpses of Yaqui's dark figure stealing along the higher rim of the crater. He was making for a point above the bandit.

Moments—endless moments—dragged by. The lowering sun colored only the upper half of the crater walls. Far down, the depths were murky-blue. Again Gale felt the insupportable silence. The red haze became a transparent veil before his eyes. Sinister, evil, brooding, waiting, seemed that yawning abyss. Ladd staggered along the trail, at times he crawled. The Yaqui gained; he might have had wings; he leaped from jagged crust to jagged crust; his sure-footedness was a wonderful thing.

But for Gale the marvel of that endless period of watching was the purpose of the bandit Rojas. He had now no weapon. Gale's glass made this fact plain. There was death behind him, death below him, death before him, and though he could not have known it, death above him. He

never faltered—never made a misstep upon the narrow, flinty trail. When he reached the lower end of the level ledge Gale's poignant doubt became a certainty. Rojas had seen Mercedes. Then his heart clamped as in an icy vise, Gale threw forward the Remington, and sinking on one knee, began to shoot. He emptied the magazine. Puffs of dust near Rojas did not even make him turn.

As Gale began to reload, he was horror-stricken by a low cry from Thorne. The cavalryman had recovered consciousness. He was half raised, pointing with shaking hand at the opposite ledge. His distended eyes were riveted upon Rojas. He was trying to utter speech that would not come.

Gale wheeled, rigid now, steeling himself to one last forlorn hope—that Mercedes could defend herself. She had a gun. He doubted not at all that she would use it. But, remembering her terror of this savage, he feared for her.

Rojas reached the level of the ledge. He halted. He crouched. It was the act of a panther. Manifestly he saw Mercedes within the cave. The faint shots patted the air, broke in quick echo. Rojas went down as if struck a heavy blow. He was hit. But even as Gale yelled in sheer madness the bandit leaped erect. He seemed too quick, too supple to be badly wounded.

A slight, dark figure flashed out of the cave. Mercedes! She backed against the wall. Gale saw a puff of white—heard a report. But the bandit lunged at her. Mercedes ran, not to try to pass him, but straight for the precipice, her intention plain. But Rojas outstripped her, even as she reached the verge. Then a piercing scream pealed across the crater—a scream of despair.

Thorne echoed Mercedes's scream. Gale looked round just in time to leap and catch the cavalryman as he staggered, apparently for the steep slope. And then, as Gale dragged him back, both fell. Gale saved his friend, but he plunged into a *choya*. He drew his hands away full of the great glistening cones of thorns.

"For God's sake, Gale, shoot! Shoot! *Kill her! Kill her!* Can't—you —see—Rojas—"

Gale, stunned for the instant, stood with uplifted hands, and gazed from Thorne across the crater. Rojas was overpowering Mercedes. His actions seemed slow, wearing, purposeful. Hers were violent. She fought like a trapped she-wolf. She tore, struggled, flung herself.

Rojas's intention was terribly plain.

In agony now, both mental and physical, cold and sick and weak, Gale gripped his rifle and aimed at the struggling forms on the ledge. He pulled the trigger. The bullet struck up a cloud of red dust close to the struggling couple. Again Gale fired, hoping to hit Rojas, praying to kill Mercedes. The bullet struck high. A third—fourth—fifth time the Remington spoke—in vain! The rifle fell from Gale's racked hands.

How horribly plain that fiend's intention! Gale tried to close his eyes, but could not. He prayed wildly for a sudden blindness—but he was transfixed to the spot with eyes that pierced the red light.

Mercedes was growing weaker, seemed about to collapse.

Suddenly a dark form literally fell

down the wall behind the ledge where Rojas fought the girl. It sank in a heap, then bounded erect.

"Yaqui!" screamed Gale, and he waved his bleeding hands till the blood spattered his face. Then he choked. Utterance became impossible.

The Indian bent over Rojas and flung him against the wall. Mercedes, sinking back, lay still. When Rojas got up the Indian stood between him and escape from the ledge. Rojas backed the other way along the narrowing shelf of lava. His manner was abject, stupefied. Slowly he stepped backward.

It was then that Gale caught the white gleam of a knife in Yaqui's hand. Rojas turned and ran. He rounded a corner of wall where the footing was precarious. Yaqui followed slowly. His figure was dark and menacing. But he was not in a hurry. When he passed off the ledge Rojas was edging farther and farther along the wall. He was clinging now to the lava, creeping inch by inch. Perhaps he had thought to work around the buttress or climb over it. Evidently he went as far as possible, and there he clung, an unscalable wall above, the abyss beneath.

The approach of the Yaqui was like a slow dark shadow of gloom. If it seemed so to the stricken Gale what must it have been to Rojas? He appeared to sink against the wall. The Yaqui stole closer and closer. He was the savage now, and for him the moment must have been glorified. Gale saw him gaze up at the great circling walls of the crater, then down into the depths. Perhaps the red haze hanging above him, or the purple haze below, or the deep caverns in the lava, held for Yaqui spirits of the desert, his gods to whom he called. Perhaps he invoked shadows of his loved ones and his race, calling them in this moment of vengeance.

Gale heard—or imagined he heard—that wild, strange Yaqui cry.

Then the Indian stepped close to Rojas, and bent low, keeping out of reach. How slow were his motions! Would Yaqui never—never end it? A wail drifted across the crater to Gale's ears.

Rojas fell backward and plunged sheer. The bank of white *choyas* caught him, held him upon their steel spikes. How long did the dazed Gale sit there watching Rojas wrestling and writhing in convulsive frenzy? The bandit now seemed mad to win the delayed death.

When he broke free he was a white patched object no longer human, a ball of *choya* burrs, and he slipped off the bank to shoot down and down into the purple depths of the crater.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Changes at Forlorn River

THE first of March saw the federal occupation of the garrison at Casita. After a short, decisive engagement the rebels were dispersed into small bands and driven eastward along the boundary line toward Nogales.

It was the destiny of Forlorn River, however, never to return to the slow, sleepy tenor of its former existence. Refugees from Mexico and from Casita spread the word that water and wood and grass and land were to be had at Forlorn River, and as if by magic the white tents and red adobe

houses sprang up to glisten in the sun.

Belding was happier than he had been for a long time. He believed that evil days for Forlorn River, along with the apathy and lack of enterprise, were in the past. He hired a couple of trustworthy Mexicans to ride the boundary line, and he settled down to think of ranching and irrigation and mining projects. No word was received from the rangers. But this caused Belding no concern, for it seemed to him that his womenfolk considered no news good news.

One morning early in this spring month, while Belding was on his way from the house to the corrals, he saw Nell running Blanco José down the road at a gait that amazed him. She did not take the turn of the road to come in by the gate. She put José at a four-foot wire fence, and came clattering into the yard.

It did not take more than half an eye for Belding to see that she was furious. She went into the corral, removed José's bridle, and led him to the watering-trough.

Belding came up, and without saying anything began to unbuckle José's saddle girths. But he ventured a look at Nell. The red had gone from her face, and he was surprised to see her eyes brimming with tears. While taking off José's saddle and hanging it in the shed Belding pondered in his slow way. When he came back to the corral Nell had her face against the bars, and she was crying. He slipped a big arm around her and waited. Although it was not often expressed, there was a strong attachment between them.

"I guess you'd better tell me what happened," he said gently.

"Dad, I will, if you promise."

"What?"

"Not to mention it to Mother, not to pack a gun down there, and never, never tell Dick."

Belding was silent. Seldom did he make promises readily. "Well, I promise not to tell Mother," he said, presently, "and seeing you're here safe and well, I guess I won't go packing a gun down there, wherever that is. But I won't promise to keep anything from Dick that perhaps he ought to know."

"Dad, what would Dick do if—if he were here and I were to tell him I'd—I'd been horribly insulted?"

"I guess that'd depend. Mostly, you know, Dick does what you want. But you couldn't stop him—nobody could—if there was a reason, a man's reason—Nell, tell me what's happened."

Nell, regaining her composure, wiped her eyes and smoothed back her hair.

"The other day, Wednesday," she began, "I was coming home, and in front of that mescal drinking-place there was a crowd. It was a noisy crowd. I didn't want to walk out into the street or seem afraid. But I had to do both. There were several young men, and if they weren't drunk they certainly were rude. I never saw them before, but I think they must belong to the mining company that was run out of Sonora by rebels. Mrs. Carter was telling me. Anyway, these young fellows were Americans. They stretched themselves across the walk and smiled at me. I had to go out in the road. One of them, the rudest, followed me. He was a big fellow, red-faced, with prominent eyes and a bold look. He came up beside me and spoke to me. I ran home. And as I ran I heard his companions jeering.

This argument was unanswerable, and Belding knew it. "According to law!" exclaimed Belding. "Then you own up; you've jumped our claims."

"Mr. Belding, I'm a plain businessman. I come along. I see a good opening. Nobody seems to have tenable grants. I stake out claims, locate squatters, start to build. It seems to me your rangers have overlooked certain precautions. That's unfortunate for them. I'm prepared to hold my claim and to back all the squatters who work for me. If you don't like it you can carry the matter to Tucson. The law will uphold me."

"The law? Say, on this southwest border we haven't any law except a man's word and a gun."

"Then you'll find United States law has come along with Ben Chase," replied the other, snapping his fingers. He was still smooth, outspoken, but his mask had fallen.

"You're not a Westerner?" queried Belding.

"No, I'm from Illinois."

"I thought the West hadn't bred you. I know your kind. You'd last a long time on the Texas border, now, wouldn't you? You're one of the land and water hogs that has come to root in the West. You're like the timber sharks—take it all and leave none for those who follow. Mr. Chase, the West would fare better and last longer if men like you were driven out."

Belding abruptly left the camp and went home. Nell met him, probably intended to question him, but one look into his face confirmed her fears. She silently turned away. Belding realized he was powerless to stop Chase, and he was sick with disappointment for the ruin of Dick's hopes and his own.

Chapter Fourteen

A Lost Son

TIME passed. The population of Forlorn River grew apace. Belding, who had once been the head of the community, found himself a person of little consequence. Even had he desired it he would not have had any voice in the selection of postmaster, sheriff, and a few other officials. The Chases divided their labors between Forlorn River and their Mexican gold mine, which had been restored to them.

Belding was not so busy as he had been formerly. As he lost ambition he began to find less work to do. All day long he heard the heavy, booming blasts and the rumble of avalanches up in the gorge. Chase's men were dynamiting the cliffs in the narrow box canyon. They were making the dam just as Gale had planned to make it. When this work of blasting was over Belding experienced a relief. He would not now be continually reminded of his and Gale's loss. Resignation finally came to him. But he could not reconcile himself to misfortune for Gale.

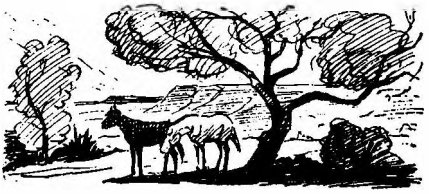
Moreover, Belding had other worry and strain. April arrived with no news of the rangers. From Casita came vague reports of raiders in the Sonoyta country—reports impossible to verify until his Mexican rangers returned. When these men rode in, one of them, Gonzales, an intelligent and reliable half-breed, said he had met prospectors at the oasis. They had just come in on the Camino del Diablo, reported a terrible trip of

They, with a force of miners, had been besieged by rebels and finally driven off their property. This property was not destroyed, but held for ransom. And the Chases, pending developments, had packed outfits and struck for the border. Casita had been their objective point, but, for some reason which Belding did not learn, they had arrived instead at Forlorn River. It had taken Ben Chase just one day to see the possibilities of Altar Valley, and in three days he had men at work.

Belding returned home without going to see the Chases and their operations. He wanted to think over the situation. Next morning he went out to the valley to see for himself. Mexicans were hastily erecting adobe houses upon Ladd's one hundred and sixty acres, upon Dick Gale's, upon Jim Lash's and Thorne's. There were men staking the valley floor and the river bed. That was sufficient for Belding. He turned back toward town and headed for the camp of these intruders.

In fact, the surroundings of Forlorn River, except on the river side, reminded Belding of the mushroom growth of a newly discovered mining camp. Tents were everywhere; adobe shacks were in all stages of construction; rough clapboard houses were going up. The latest of this work was new and surprising to Belding, all because he was a busy man, with no chance to hear village gossip. When he was directed to the headquarters of the Chase Mining Company he went there in slow-growing wrath.

He came to a big tent with a huge canvas fly stretched in front, under which sat several men in their shirt sleeves. They were talking and smoking.



"My name's Belding. I want to see this Mr. Chase," said Belding gruffly.

Slow-witted as Belding was, and absorbed in his own feelings, he yet saw plainly that his advent was disturbing to these men. They looked alarmed, exchanged glances, and then quickly turned to him. One of them, a tall, rugged man with sharp face and shrewd eyes and white hair, got up and offered his hand.

"I'm Chase, senior," he said. "My son Radford Chase is here somewhere. You're Belding, the line inspector, I take it? I meant to call on you." He seemed a rough-and-ready, loud-spoken man, though cordial enough.

"Yes, I'm the inspector," replied Belding, ignoring the proffered hand, "and I'd like to know what in hell you mean by taking up land claims—staked ground that belongs to my rangers?"

"Land claims?" slowly echoed Chase, studying his man. "We're taking up only unclaimed land."

"That's a lie. You couldn't miss the stakes."

"Well, Mr. Belding, as to that, I think my men did run across some staked ground. But we recognize only squatters. If your rangers think they've got property just because they drove a few stakes in the ground they're much mistaken. A squatter has to build a house and live on his land so long, according to law, before he owns it."

This argument was unanswerable, and Belding knew it. "According to law!" exclaimed Belding. "Then you own up; you've jumped our claims."

"Mr. Belding, I'm a plain businessman. I come along. I see a good opening. Nobody seems to have tenable grants. I stake out claims, locate squatters, start to build. It seems to me your rangers have overlooked certain precautions. That's unfortunate for them. I'm prepared to hold my claim and to back all the squatters who work for me. If you don't like it you can carry the matter to Tucson. The law will uphold me."

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A Lost Son

TIME passed. The population of Forlorn River grew apace. Belding, who had once been the head of the community, found himself a person of little consequence. Even had he desired it he would not have had any voice in the selection of postmaster, sheriff, and a few other officials. The Chases divided their labors between Forlorn River and their Mexican gold mine, which had been restored to them.

Belding was not so busy as he had been formerly. As he lost ambition he began to find less work to do. All day long he heard the heavy, booming blasts and the rumble of avalanches up in the gorge. Chase's men were dynamiting the cliffs in the narrow box canyon. They were making the dam just as Gale had planned to make it. When this work of blasting was over Belding experienced a relief. He would not now be continually reminded of his and Gale's loss. Resignation finally came to him. But he could not reconcile himself to misfortune for Gale.

Moreover, Belding had other worry and strain. April arrived with no news of the rangers. From Casita came vague reports of raiders in the Sonoyta country—reports impossible to verify until his Mexican rangers returned. When these men rode in, one of them, Gonzales, an intelligent and reliable half-breed, said he had met prospectors at the oasis. They had just come in on the Camino del Diablo, reported a terrible trip of

heat and drought, and not a trace of the Yaqui's party.

"That settles it," declared Belding. "Yaqui never went to Sonoyta. He's circled round to the Devil's Road, and the rangers, Mercedes, Thorne, the horses—they—I'm afraid they have been lost in the desert. It's an old story on Camino del Diablo."

He had to tell Nell that, and it was an ordeal which left him weak.

Mrs. Belding listened to him, and was silent for a long time. Then she opposed his convictions with the quiet strength so characteristic of her arguments.

"Well, then," decided Belding. "Rojas headed the rangers at Papago Well or the Tanks."

"Tom, when you are down in the mouth, you use poor judgment," she went on. "You know only by a miracle could Rojas or anybody have headed those white horses. Where's your old stubborn confidence? Yaqui was up on Diablo. Dick was up on Sol. And there were the other horses. They could not have been headed or caught. Miracles don't happen."

"All right, Mother, it's sure good to hear you," said Belding. She always cheered him, and now he grasped at straws. "I'm not myself these days, don't mistake that. Tell us what you think. You always say you feel things when you really don't know them."

"I can say little more than what you said yourself the night Mercedes was taken away. You told Laddy to trust Yaqui, that he was a godsend. He might go south into some wild Sonora valley. He might lead Rojas into a trap. He would find water and grass where no Mexican or American could."

"But Mother, they're gone seven weeks. Seven weeks! At the most I gave them six weeks. Seven weeks in the desert!"

"How do the Yaquis live?" she asked.

Belding could not reply to that, but hope revived in him. He had faith in his wife, though he could not in the least understand what he considered was something mystic in her.

"Oh, Mother!" cried Nell. "I can't give up hope while I have you."

That talk with the strong mother worked a change in Nell and in Belding. Nell, who had done little but brood and watch the west and take violent rides, seemed to settle into a waiting patience that was sad, yet serene. She helped her mother more than ever; she was a comfort to Belding; she began to take active interest in the affairs of the growing village. Belding, who had been breaking under the strain of worry, recovered so that to outward appearance he was his old self. He alone knew, however, that his humor was forced, and that the slow, burning wrath he felt for the Chases was flaming into hate.

Belding shook off a lethargic spell and decided he had better set about several tasks, if he wanted to get them finished before the hot months. He made a trip to the Sonoyta Oasis. He satisfied himself that matters along the line were favorable, and that there was absolutely no trace of his rangers. Upon completing this trip, he went to Casita with a number of his white thoroughbreds and shipped them to ranchers and horse breeders in Texas.

Then, being near the railroad, and having time, he went up to Tucson. There he learned some interesting particulars about the Chases. They

had an office in the city, influential friends in the capital. They were powerful men in the rapidly growing finance of the West. They had interested the Southern Pacific Railroad, and in the near future a branch line was to be constructed from San Felipe to Forlorn River.

These details of the Chase development were insignificant when compared to a matter striking close home to Belding. A doubt had been cast upon his capability of executing the duties of immigration inspector to the best advantage of the state. Belding divined that this was only an entering wedge. The Chases were bent upon driving him out of Forlorn River; but, perhaps to serve better their own ends, they were proceeding at leisure. Belding returned home consumed by rage. But he controlled it. For the first time in his life he was afraid of himself. He had his wife and Nell to think of.

"Dad, there's another Rojas round these diggings," was Nell's remark, after the greetings were over and the usual questions and answers passed.

Belding's exclamation was cut short by Nell's laugh. She was serious with a kind of amused contempt.

"Mr. Radford Chase!"

"Now, Nell, what the—" roared Belding.

"Hush, Dad! Don't swear," interrupted Nell. "I only meant to tease you."

"Humph! Say, my girl, that name Chase makes me see red. If you must tease me hit on some other way. *Sabe,* señorita?"

"*Si, si,* Dad."

"Nell, you may as well tell him and have it over," said Mrs. Belding.

"You promised me once, Dad, that you'd not go packing a gun off down there, didn't you?"

"Yes, I remember," replied Belding, but he did not answer her smile.

"Will you promise again?" she asked lightly. Here was Nell with arch eyes, yet not the old arch eyes, so full of fun and mischief. Her lips were tremulous; her cheeks seemed less round.

"Yes," rejoined Belding, and he knew why his voice was a little thick.

"Well, if you weren't such a good old blind Dad you'd have seen long ago the way Mr. Radford Chase ran around after me. At first it was only annoying, and I did not want to add to your worries. But these two weeks you've been gone, I've been more than annoyed. After that time I struck Mr. Chase with my quirt he made all possible efforts to meet me. He did meet me wherever I went. He sent me letters till I got tired of sending them back.

"When you left home on your trips I don't know that he grew bolder, but he had more opportunity. I couldn't stay in the house all the time, but anyway, a little thing like a girl sticking close to her mother and her room doesn't stop Mr. Chase. I think he's crazy. Anyway, he's a most persistent fool. I want to be charitable, because the man swears he loves me, and maybe he does, but he is making me nervous. I don't sleep. I'm afraid to be in my room at night. I've gone to mother's room. He's always hanging round. Bold! Why, that isn't the thing to call Mr. Chase. He's absolutely without a sense of decency. He bribes our servants. He comes into our patio. Think of that! He makes the most ridiculous excuses. He bothers Moth-

er to death. I feel like a poor little rabbit holed by a hound. And I daren't peep out."

Somehow the thing struck Belding as funny, and he laughed. He had not had a laugh for so long that it made him feel good. He stopped only at sight of Nell's surprise and pain. Then he put his arms round her.

"Never mind, dear. I'm an old bear. But it tickled me, I guess. I sure hope Mr. Radford Chase *has* got it bad. Nell, it's only the old story. The fellows fall in love with you. It's your good looks, Nell. What a price women like you and Mercedes have to pay for beauty! I'd a good deal rather be ugly as a mud fence."

"So would I, Dad, if—if Dick would still love me."

"He wouldn't, you can gamble on that, as Laddy says. Well, the first time I catch this locoed Romeo sneaking round here I'll—I'll—"

"Dad, you promised."

"Confound it, Nell, I promised not to pack a gun. That's all. I'll only shoo this fellow off the place—gently, mind you, gently. I'll leave the rest for Dick Gale!"

April soon gave way to May. One morning Belding was called from some garden work by the whirring of an automobile and a "Halloa!" He went forward to the front yard and there saw a car he thought resembled one he had seen in Casita. It contained a familiar-looking driver, but the three figures in gray coats and veils were strange to him. By the time he had gotten to the road he decided two were women and the other a man. At the moment their faces were emerging from dusty veils.

Belding saw an elderly, sallow-faced, rather frail-appearing man who was an entire stranger to him; a handsome dark-eyed woman whose hair showed white through her veil; and a superbly built girl, whose face made Belding at once think of Dick Gale.

"Is this Mr. Tom Belding, inspector of immigration?" inquired the gentleman courteously.

"I'm Belding, and I know who you are," replied Belding heartily, as he stretched forth his big hand. "You're Dick Gale's dad—the Governor, Dick used to say. I'm sure glad to meet you."

"Thank you. Yes, I'm Dick's governor, and here, Mr. Belding—Dick's mother and his sister Elsie."

Beaming his pleasure, Belding shook hands with the ladies, who showed their agitation clearly.

"Mr. Belding, I've come west to look up my lost son," said Mr. Gale. "His sister's letters were unanswered. We haven't heard from him in months. Is he still here with you?"

"Well, now, sure I'm awful sorry," began Belding, his slow mind at work. "Dick's away just now—been away for a considerable spell. I'm expecting him back any day. Won't you come in? You're all dusty and hot and tired. Come in, and let Mother and Nell make you comfortable. Of course you'll stay. We've a big house. You must stay till Dick comes back. Maybe that'll be— Aw, I guess it won't be long. Let me handle the baggage, Mr. Gale— Come in. I sure am glad to meet you all."

Eager, excited, delighted, Belding went on talking as he ushered the Gales into the sitting-room, presenting them in his hearty way to the astounded Mrs. Belding and Nell. For

the space of a few moments his wife and daughter were bewildered. Belding did not recollect any other occasion when a few callers had thrown them off their balance. But of course this was different. He was a little flustered himself—a circumstance that dawned upon him with surprise.

When the Gales had been shown to rooms, Mrs. Belding gained the poise momentarily lost, but Nell, out of breath, ran away, evidently to make herself presentable, according to her idea of the exigency of the case. Belding caught a glimpse of his wife's face as she went out, and it wore a sad, strange, anxious expression.

Then Belding sat alone, pondering the contrasting emotions of his wife and daughter. It was beyond his understanding. Women were creatures of feeling. Belding saw reason to be delighted to entertain Dick's family; and for the time being no disturbing thought entered his mind.

Presently the Gales came back into the sitting-room, looking very different without the long gray cloaks and veils. Belding saw distinction and elegance. Mr. Gale seemed a grave, troubled, kindly person, ill in body and mind. Belding received the same impression of power that Ben Chase had given him, only here it was minus any harshness or hard quality. He gathered that Mr. Gale was a man of authority. Mrs. Gale rather frightened Belding, but he could not have told why. The girl was just like Dick as he used to be.

Their manner of speaking also reminded Belding of Dick. They talked of the ride from Ash Fork down to the border, of the ugly and torn-up Casita, of the heat and dust and cactus along the trail.

Presently Nell came in, now cool and sweet in white, with a red rose at her breast. Belding had never been so proud of her. He saw that she meant to appear well in the eyes of Dick's people, and began to have a faint perception of what the ordeal was for her. Belding imagined the sooner the Gales were told that Dick was to marry Nell the better for all concerned, and especially for Nell. In the general conversation that ensued he sought for an opening in which to tell this important news, but he was kept so busy answering questions about his position on the border, the kind of place Forlorn River was, the reason for so many tents, etc., that he was unable to find opportunity.

"It's interesting, very interesting," said Mr. Gale. "At another time I want to learn all you'll tell me about the West. It's new to me. I'm surprised, amazed, sir, I may say. But, Mr. Belding, what I want to know most is about my son. I'm broken in health. I've worried myself ill over him. I don't mind telling you, sir, that we quarreled. I laughed at his threats. He went away. And I've come to see I didn't know Richard. I was wrong to upbraid him. For a year we've known nothing of his doings, and now for almost six months we've not heard from him at all.

"Frankly, Mr. Belding, I weakened first, and I've come to hunt him up. My fear is that I didn't start soon enough. The boy will have a great position some day—God knows, perhaps soon! I should not have allowed him to run over this wild country for so long. But I hope, though I hardly believed, that he might find himself. Now I'm afraid he's—"

Mr. Gale paused, and the white

hand he raised expressively shook a little.

Belding was not so thick-witted where men were concerned. He saw how the matter lay between Dick Gale and his father. "Well, Mr. Gale, sure most young bucks from the East go to the bad out here," he said bluntly.

"I've been told that," replied Mr. Gale, and a shade overspread his worn face.

"They blow their money, then go to punching cows, take to whisky."

"Yes," rejoined Mr. Gale, feebly nodding.

"Then they get to gambling, lose their jobs," went on Belding.

Mr. Gale lifted haggard eyes.

"Then it's bumming around, regular tramps, and to the bad generally." Belding spread wide his big arms, and when one of them dropped round Nell, who sat beside him, she squeezed his hand tight. "Sure, it's the regular thing," he concluded cheerfully.

He rather felt a little glee at Mr. Gale's distress and Mrs. Gale's crushed I-told-you-so woe in no wise bothered him, but the look in the big, dark eyes of Dick's sister was too much for Belding.

He choked off his characteristic oath when excited and blurted out, "Say, but *Dick Gale* never went to the bad! Listen!"

Belding had scarcely started Dick Gale's story when he perceived that never in his life had he such an absorbed and breathless audience. Presently they were awed, and at the conclusion of that story they sat white-faced, still, amazed beyond speech. Dick Gale's advent in Casita, his rescue of Mercedes, his life as a border ranger certainly lost no picturesque or daring or even noble detail in Belding's telling. He kept back nothing but the present doubt of Dick's safety.

Mr. Gale rose unsteadily from his chair. His frailty was now painfully manifest. "Mr. Belding, do you mean my son—Richard Gale—has done all that you told us?" he asked incredulously.

"I sure do," replied Belding with hearty good will.

"He's a ranger now—riding, fighting, sleeping on the sand, preparing his own food?"

"Well, I should smile," rejoined Belding.

"He cares for his horse, with his own hands?" This query seemed to be the climax of Mr. Gale's strange hunger for truth. He had raised his head a little higher, and his eye was brighter.

"Does Dick Gale *care* for his horse? Say, there are not many *men* as well loved as that white horse of Dick's. Blanco Sol he is, Mr. Gale. That's Mex for White Sun. Wait till you see Blanco Sol! Bar one, the whitest, biggest, strongest, fastest, grandest horse in the Southwest!"

"So he loves a horse! I shall not know my own son. Mr. Belding, you say Richard works for you. May I ask at what salary?"

"He gets forty dollars, board and outfit," replied Belding proudly.

"Forty dollars?" echoed the father. "By the day or week?"

"The month, of course," said Belding, somewhat taken aback.

"Forty dollars a month for a young man who spent five hundred in the same time when he was at college, and who ran it into thousands when he got out!" Mr. Gale laughed for the

first time, and it was the laugh of a man who wanted to believe what he heard yet scarcely dared to do it.

"What does he do with so much money—money earned by peril, toil, sweat, and blood? Forty dollars a month!"

"He saves it," replied Belding.

Evidently this was too much for Dick Gale's father, and he gazed at his wife in sheer speechless astonishment. Dick's sister clapped her hands like a little child.

Belding saw that the moment was propitious. "Sure he saves it. Dick's engaged to marry Nell here. My stepdaughter, Nell Burton."

"Oh-h, Dad!" faltered Nell, and she rose, white as her dress.

How strange it was to see Dick's mother and sister rise, also, and turn to Nell with dark, proud, searching eyes. Belding vaguely realized some blunder he had made. Nell's white, appealing face gave him a pang. What had he done? Surely this family of Dick's ought to know his relation to Nell. There was a silence that positively made Belding nervous.

Then Elsie Gale stepped close to Nell. "I think I am going to be very, very glad," she said, and kissed Nell.

"Miss Burton, we are learning wonderful things about Richard," added Mr. Gale in an earnest though shaken voice. "If you have had to do with making a man of him—and now I begin to see, to believe so—may God bless you!—My dear girl, I have not really looked at you. Richard's fiancée! Mother, we have not found him yet, but I think we've found his secret. We believed him a lost son. But here is his sweetheart!"

It was only then that the pride and hauteur of Mrs. Gale's face broke into an expression of mingled pain and joy. She opened her arms. Nell, uttering a strange little stifled cry, flew into them.

Belding suddenly discovered an unaccountable blur in his sight. He could not see perfectly, and that was why, when Mrs. Belding entered the sitting-room, he was not certain that her face was as sad and white as it seemed.

Chapter Fifteen

Bound in the Desert

FAR away from Forlorn River Dick Gale sat stunned, gazing down into the purple depths where Rojas had plunged to his death. The Yaqui stood motionless upon the steep red wall of lava from which he had cut the bandit's hold. Mercedes lay quietly where she had fallen. From across the depths there came to Gale's ear the Indian's strange, wild cry.

Action on the part of the Yaqui loosened the spell which held Gale as motionless as his surroundings. The Indian was edging back toward the ledge. He did not move with his former lithe and sure freedom. He crawled, slipped, dragged himself, rested often, and went on again. He had been wounded. When at last he reached the ledge where Mercedes lay, Gale jumped to his feet, strong and thrilling, spurred to meet the responsibility that now rested upon him.

Hastily taking up canteen and rifles, he put a supporting arm around Thorne. "Come, old man. Can you walk? Sure you can walk! Lean on me, and we'll soon get out of this.

Don't look across. Look where you step. We've not much time before dark. Thorne, I'm afraid Jim has cashed in! And the last I saw of Laddy he was badly hurt."

Gale was keyed up to a high pitch of excitement and alertness. He seemed to be able to do many things. But once off the ragged notched lava into the trail he had not such difficulty with Thorne and could keep his keen gaze shifting everywhere for sight of enemies.

"Listen, Thorne! What's that?" asked Gale, halting as they came to a place where the trail led down through rough breaks in the lava. The silence was broken by a strange sound, almost unbelievable considering the time and place.

A voice was droning: "Turn the lady, turn! Turn the lady, turn; Alamon left. All swing; turn the lady, turn!"

"Jim!" called Gale, dragging Thorne round the corner of lava. "You son of a gun! I thought you were dead. Oh, I'm glad to see you! Jim, are you hurt?"

Jim Lash stood in the trail, leaning over the butt of his rifle, which evidently he was utilizing as a crutch. He was pale but smiling. His hands were bloody. A scarf had been bound tightly round his left leg just above the knee. The leg hung limp, and the foot dragged.

"I reckon I ain't injured much," replied Jim. "But my leg hurts like hell, if you want to know."

"Where's Laddy?"

"He's just across the crack there. I was trying to get to him. We had it hot an' heavy down here. Laddy was pretty bad shot up before he tried to head Rojas off the trail. Thorne, you're standin' up pretty fair. Dick, is he bad hurt?"

"No, he's not. A hard knock on the skull and a scalp wound," replied Dick. "Here, Jim, let me help you over this place."

Step by step, Gale got the two injured men down the uneven declivity and then across the narrow lava bridge over the fissure. Here he bade them rest while he went along the trail on that side to search for Laddy. Gale found the ranger stretched out, face downward, a reddened hand clutching a gun. Gale thought he was dead. Upon examination, however, it was found that Ladd still lived, though he had many wounds. Gale lifted him and carried him back to the others.

"He's alive, but that's all," said Dick as he laid the ranger down. "Do what you can. Stop the blood. I'll hurry back for Mercedes and Yaqui."

Gale, like a fleet, sure-footed mountain sheep, ran along the trail. When he came across the Mexican, Rojas's last ally, Gale had evidence of the terrible execution of the .405. He did not pause. On the first part of that descent he made faster time than had Rojas. But he exercised care along the hard, slippery, ragged slope leading to the ledge.

Presently he came upon Mercedes and the Yaqui. She ran right into Dick's arms, and there her strength, if not her courage, broke, and she grew lax.

"Mercedes, you're safe! Thorne's safe. It's all right now."

"Rojas!" she whispered.

"Gone! To the bottom of the crater! A Yaqui's vengeance, Mercedes."

He heard the girl whisper the name of the Virgin. Then he gathered her

up in his arms.

"Come, Yaqui."

The Indian grunted. He had one hand pressed close over a bloody place in his shoulder. Gale looked keenly at him. Yaqui was inscrutable, as of old, yet Gale somehow knew that wound meant little to him. The Indian followed him.

Without pausing, moving slowly in some places, very carefully in others, and swiftly on the smooth part of the trail, Gale carried Mercedes up to the rim and along to the others.

Jim Lash worked awkwardly over Ladd. Thorne was trying to assist. Ladd, himself, was conscious, but he was a pallid, apparently a death-stricken man. The greeting between Mercedes and Thorne was calm—strangely so, it seemed to Gale. But he was now calm himself. Ladd smiled at him, and evidently would have spoken had he the power. Yaqui then joined the group, and his piercing eyes roved from one to the other, lingering longest over Ladd.

"Dick, I'm figger'n' hard," said Jim faintly. "In a minute it'll be up to you an' Mercedes. I've about shot my bolt. Reckon you'll do—best by bringin' up blankets—water—salt an' firewood. Laddy's got—one chance—in a hundred. Fix him up—first. Use hot salt water. If my leg's broken—set it best you can. That hole in Yaqui—only'll bother him a day. Thorne's bad hurt. Now rustle—Dick, old—boy."

Lash's voice died away in a husky whisper, and he quietly lay back, stretching out all but the crippled leg. Gale examined it, assured himself the bones had not been broken, and then rose, ready to go down the trail.

"Mercedes, hold Thorne's head up, in your lap—so. Now I'll go."

On the moment Yaqui appeared to have completed the binding of his wounded shoulder, and he started to follow Gale. He paid no attention to Gale's order for him to stay back. But he was slow, and gradually Gale forged ahead. The lingering brightness of the sunset lightened the trail, and the descent to the arroyo was swift and easy. Some of the white horses had come in for water. Blanco Sol spied Gale and whistled and came pounding toward him.

It was twilight down in the arroyo. Yaqui appeared and began collecting a bundle of mesquite sticks. Gale hastily put together the things he needed and, packing them all in a tarpaulin, he turned to retrace his steps up the trail.

Darkness was setting in. The trail was narrow, exceedingly steep, and in some places fronted on precipices. Gale found it necessary to wait for Yaqui to take the lead. At last they reached a level, and were soon on the spot with Mercedes and the injured men.

Gale then set to work. Yaqui's part was to keep the fire blazing and the water hot, Mercedes's to help Gale in what way she could. Gale found Ladd had many wounds, yet not one of them was directly in a vital place. Evidently, the ranger had almost bled to death. He remained unconscious through Gale's operations. According to Jim Lash, Ladd had one chance in a hundred, but Gale considered it one in a thousand. Having done all that was possible for the ranger, Gale slipped blankets under and around him, and then turned his attention to Lash.

Jim came out of his stupor. A mushrooming bullet had torn a great hole in his leg. Gale, upon examination,

could not be sure the bones had been missed, but there was no bad break. The application of hot salt water made Jim groan. When he had been bandaged and laid beside Ladd, Gale went on to the cavalryman. Thorne was very weak and scarcely conscious. A furrow had been plowed through his scalp down to the bone. When it had been dressed, Mercedes collapsed. Gale laid her with the three in a row and covered them with blankets and the tarpaulin.

Then Yaqui submitted to examination. A bullet had gone through the Indian's shoulder. To Gale it appeared serious. Yaqui said it was a flea bite. But he allowed Gale to bandage it, and obeyed when he was told to lie quiet in his blanket beside the fire.

Gale stood guard. He seemed still calm, and wondered at what he considered a strange absence of poignant feeling. If he had felt weariness it was now gone. He coaxed the fire with as little wood as would keep it burning; he sat beside it; he walked to and fro close by; sometimes he stood over the five sleepers, wondering if two of them, at least, would ever awaken.

Gale patrolled his short beat, becoming colder and damper as dawn approached. Slowly the heavy black belt close to the lava changed to a pale gloom, then to gray, and after that morning came quickly.

The hour had come for Dick Gale to face his great problem. He awoke Mercedes.

"Mercedes—come. Are you all right? Laddy is alive. Thorne's not—not so bad. But we've got a job on our hands! You must help me."

She bent over Thorne and laid her hands on his hot face. Then she rose —a woman such as he had imagined she might be in an hour of trial.

Gale took up Ladd as carefully and gently as possible. "Mercedes, bring what you can carry and follow me," he said. Then, motioning for Yaqui to remain there, he turned down the slope with Ladd in his arms.

Neither pausing nor making a misstep nor conscious of great effort, Gale carried the wounded man down into the arroyo. Mercedes kept at his heels, light, supple, lithe as a panther. He left her with Ladd and went back. When he had started off with Thorne in his arms he felt the tax on his strength. Surely and swiftly, however, he bore the cavalryman down the trail to lay him beside Ladd. Again he started back, and when he began to mount the steep lava steps he was hot, wet, breathing hard. As he reached the scene of that night's camp a voice greeted him. Jim Lash was sitting up.

"Hello, Dick. I woke some late this mornin'. Where's Laddy? Dick, you ain't a-goin' to say—"

"Laddy's alive—that's about all," replied Dick.

"Where's Thorne an' Mercedes? Look here, man! I reckon you ain't packin' this crippled outfit down that awful trail?"

"Had to, Jim. An hour's sun—would kill—both Laddy and Thorne. Come on now."

For once Jim Lash's cool good nature and careless indifference gave precedence to amaze and concern. "Always knew you was a husky chap. But, Dick, you're no hoss! Get me a crutch an' give me a lift on one side."

"Come on," replied Gale. "I've no time to monkey."

He lifted the ranger, called to Ya-

qui to follow with some of the camp outfit, and once more essayed the steep descent. Jim Lash was the heaviest man of the three, and Gale's strength was put to enormous strain to carry him on that broken trail. Nevertheless, Gale went down, down, walking swiftly and surely over the bad places; and at last he staggered into the arroyo with bursting heart and red-blinded eyes. When he had recovered he made a final trip up the slope for the camp effects which Yaqui had been unable to carry.

Then he drew Jim and Mercedes and Yaqui, also, into an earnest discussion of ways and means whereby to fight for the life of Thorne. Ladd's case Gale now considered hopeless, though he meant to fight for him, too, as long as he breathed.

In the labor of watching and nursing it seemed to Gale that two days and two nights slipped by like a few hours. During that time the Indian recovered from his injury, and became capable of performing all except heavy tasks. Then Gale succumbed to weariness. After his much-needed rest he relieved Mercedes of the care and watch over Thorne which, up to that time, she had absolutely refused to relinquish.

The cavalryman had high fever, and Gale feared he had developed blood poisoning. He required constant attention. His condition slowly grew worse, and there came a day which Gale thought surely was the end. But that day passed, and the night, and the next day, and Thorne lived on, ghastly, stricken, raving. Mercedes hung over him with jealous, passionate care and did all that could have been humanly done for a man. She grew wan, absorbed, silent.

Suddenly, to Gale's thanksgiving, there came an abatement of Thorne's fever. With it, some of the heat and redness of the inflamed wound disappeared. Next morning he was conscious, and Gale grasped some of the hope that Mercedes had never abandoned. He forced her to rest while he attended to Thorne. That day he saw that the crisis was past. Recovery for Thorne was now possible, and would perhaps depend entirely upon the care he received.

Jim Lash's wound healed without any aggravating symptoms. It would be only a matter of time until he had the use of his leg again. All these days, however, there was little apparent change in Ladd's condition, unless it was that he seemed to fade away as he lingered. At first his wounds remained open; they bled a little all the time outwardly, perhaps internally also; his blood did not seem to clot; and so the bullet holes did not close.

Then Yaqui asked for the care of Ladd. Gale yielded it with opposing thoughts—that Ladd would waste slowly away till life ceased, and that there never was any telling what might lie in the power of this strange Indian. Yaqui absented himself from camp for a while, and when he returned he carried the roots and leaves of desert plants unknown to Gale. From these the Indian brewed an ointment. Then he stripped the bandages from Ladd and applied the mixture to his wounds. That done he let him lie with the wounds exposed to the air, at night covering him. Next day he again exposed the wounds to the warm, dry air. Slowly they closed, and Ladd ceased to bleed externally.

Days passed and grew into what

Gale imagined must have been weeks. Yaqui recovered fully. Jim Lash began to move about on a crutch; he shared the Indian's watch over Ladd. Thorne lay a haggard, emaciated ghost of his former rugged self, but with life in the eyes that turned always toward Mercedes.

Ladd lingered and lingered. The life seemingly would not leave his bullet-pierced body. He faded, withered, shrunk till he was almost a skeleton. He knew those who worked and watched over him, but he had no power of speech. His eyes and eyelids moved; the rest of him seemed stone. All those days nothing except water was given him. It was marvelous how tenaciously, however feebly, he clung to life.

Gale imagined it was the Yaqui's spirit that held back death. That tireless, implacable, inscrutable savage was ever at the ranger's side. His great somber eyes burned. At length he went to Gale, and, with that strange light flitting across the hard bronzed face, he said Ladd would live.

The second day after Ladd had been given such thin nourishment as he could swallow he recovered the use of his tongue. "Shore—this's—hell," he whispered.

From that time forward Ladd gained, but he gained so immeasurably slowly that only the eyes of hope could have seen any improvement. Nevertheless, at last he could walk about, and soon he averred that, strapped to a horse, he could last out the trip to Forlorn River.

There was rejoicing in camp, and plans were eagerly suggested. The Yaqui happened to be absent. When he returned the rangers told him they were now ready to undertake the journey back across lava and cactus.

Yaqui shook his head. They declared again their intention.

"No!" replied the Indian, and his deep, sonorous voice rolled out upon the quiet of the arroyo. He spoke briefly then. They had waited too long. The smaller water holes back in the trail were dry. The hot summer was upon them. There could be only death waiting down in the burning valley. Here was water and grass and wood and shade from the sun's rays, and sheep to be killed on the peaks. The water would hold unless the season was that dreaded *ano seco* of the Mexicans.

"Wait for rain," concluded Yaqui, and now as never before he spoke as one with authority. "If no rain—" Silently he lifted a speaking hand.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mountain Sheep

WHAT Gale might have thought an appalling situation, if considered from a safe and a comfortable home away from the desert, became, now that he was shut in by the red-ribbed lava walls and great dry wastes, a matter calmly accepted as inevitable. So he imagined it was accepted by the others. Not even Mercedes uttered a regret. No word was spoken of home. If there was thought of loved ones, it was locked deep in their minds. In Mercedes there was no change in womanly quality, perhaps because all she had to love was there in the desert with her.

By tacit agreement Ladd again became the leader of the party. Ladd

was a man who would have taken all the responsibility whether or not it was given him. In moments of hazard, of uncertainty, Lash and Gale, even Belding, unconsciously looked to the ranger. He had that kind of power.

The first thing Ladd asked was to have the store of food that remained spread out upon a tarpaulin. Assuredly, it was a slender enough supply. The ranger stood for long moments gazing down at it. He was groping among past experiences, calling back from his years of life on range and desert that which might be valuable for the present issue. The slow shake of his head told Gale much. There was a grain of hope, however, in the significance with which he touched the bags of salt and said, "Shore it was sense packin' all that salt!" Then he turned to face his comrades.

"That's little grub for six starvin' people corralled in the desert. But the grub end ain't worryin' me. Yaqui can get sheep up the slopes. Water! That's the beginnin' an' middle an' end of our case."

"Laddy, I reckon the water hole here never goes dry," replied Jim.

"Ask the Indian."

Upon being questioned, Yaqui repeated what he had said about the dreaded *ano seco* of the Mexicans. In a dry year this water hole failed.

"Dick, take a rope an' see how much water's in the hole."

Gale could not find bottom with a thirty-foot lasso. The water was as cool, clear, sweet as if it had been kept in a shaded iron receptacle.

Ladd welcomed this information with surprise and gladness. "Let's see. Last year was shore pretty dry. Mebbe this summer won't be. Mebbe our wonderful good luck'll hold. Ask Yaqui if he thinks it'll rain."

Mercedes questioned the Indian, then: "He says no man can tell surely. But he thinks the rain will come."

"Shore it'll rain, you can gamble on that now," continued Ladd. "An' there's grass for the hosses! Now all we've got to do is use sense. Friends, I'm the commissary department of this outfit, an' what I say goes. You all won't eat except when I tell you. Mebbe it'll not be so hard to keep our health. Starved beggars don't get sick. But there's the heat comin', an' we can all go loco, you know. To pass the time! Lord, that's our problem. Now if you all only had a hankerin' for checkers. Shore I'll make a board an' make you play.

"Thorne, you're the luckiest. You've got your girl, an' this can be a honeymoon. Now with a few tools an' little material see what a grand house you can build for your wife. Dick, you're lucky, too. You like to hunt, an' up there you'll find the finest bighorn-huntin' in the West. Take Yaqui and the .405. We need the meat, but while you're gettin' it have your sport. The same chance will never come again. I wish we all was able to go. But crippled men can't climb the lava. Shore you'll see some country from the peaks. There's no wilder place on earth, except the poles. An' when you're older, you an' Nell, with a couple of fine boys, think what it'll be to tell them about bein' lost in the lava, an' about huntin' sheep with a Yaqui. Shore I've hit it. You can take yours out in huntin' and thinkin'. Now if I had a girl like Nell I'd never go crazy. That's your game, Dick. Rustle now, son. Get some enthusiasm. For shore you'll need it for yourself an' us."

Gale climbed the lava slope, away round to the right of the arroyo, along an old trail that Yaqui said the Papagos had made before his own people hunted there. Part way it led through spiked, crested, upheaved lava that would have been almost impassable even without its silver coating of *choya* cactus. There were benches and ledges and ridges bare and glistening in the sun. From the crests of these Yaqui's searching falcon gaze roved near and far for signs of sheep, and Gale used his glass on the reaches of lava that slanted steeply upward to the corrugated peaks, and down over endless heave and roll and red-waved slopes. The heat smoked up from the lava, and this, with the red color and shiny *choyas,* gave the impression of a world of smoldering fire.

Farther along the slope Yaqui halted and crawled behind projections to a point commanding a view over an extraordinary section of country. Suddenly he grasped Gale and pointed across a deep, wide gully.

With the aid of his glass Gale saw five sheep. They were much larger than he had expected, dull-brown in color, and two of them were rams with great curved horns. They were looking in his direction. Remembering what he had heard about the wonderful eyesight of these mountain animals, Gale could only conclude that they had seen the hunters.

Then Yaqui's movements attracted and interested him. The Indian had brought with him a red scarf and a mesquite branch. He tied the scarf on the stick, and propped this up in a crack of the lava. The scarf waved in the wind. That done, the Indian bade Gale watch.

Once again he leveled the glass at the sheep. All five now were motionless, standing like statues, heads pointed across the gully. They were more than a mile distant. When Gale looked without his glass they merged into the roughness of the lava. He was intensely interested. Did the sheep see the red scarf? It seemed incredible, but nothing else could account for that statuesque alertness. The sheep held this rigid position for perhaps fifteen minutes. Then the leading ram started to approach. The others followed. He took a few steps, then halted. Always he held his head up, nose pointed.

"By George, they're coming!" exclaimed Gale. "They see that flag. They're hunting us. They're curious. If this doesn't beat me!"

Evidently the Indian understood, for he grunted.

Gale found difficulty in curbing his impatience. The approach of the sheep was slow. The advances of the leader and the intervals of watching had a singular regularity. He worked like a machine. Gale followed him down the opposite wall, around holes, across gullies, over ridges. Then Gale shifted the glass back to find the others. They were coming also, with exactly the same pace and pause of their leader. What steppers they were! How sure-footed! What leaps they made! Gale forgot he had a rifle. The Yaqui pressed a heavy hand down upon his shoulder. He was to keep well hidden and to be quiet.

The big ram led on with the same

regular persistence, and in half an hour's time he was in the bottom of the great gulf, and soon he was facing up the slope. Gale knew then that the alluring scarf had fascinated him. It was no longer necessary now for Gale to use his glass. There was a short period when an intervening crest of lava hid the sheep from view. After that the two rams and their smaller followers were plainly in sight for perhaps a quarter of an hour. Then they disappeared behind another ridge. A tense period of waiting passed, then a sudden pressure of Yaqui's hand made Gale tremble.

Very cautiously he shifted his position. There, not fifty feet distant upon a high mound of lava, stood the leader of the sheep. His size astounded Gale. He seemed all horns. But only for a moment did the impression of horns overbalancing body remain with Gale. The sheep was graceful, sinewy, slender, powerfully built, and in poise magnificent. As Gale watched, spellbound, the second ram leaped lightly upon the mound, and presently the three others did likewise.

The splendid leader stepped closer, his round, protruding amber eyes, which Gale could now plainly see, intent upon that fatal red flag. Like automatons the other four crowded into his tracks. A few little slow steps, then the leader halted.

At this instant Gale's absorbed attention was directed by Yaqui to the rifle, and so to the purpose of the climb. A little cold shock affronted Gale's vivid pleasure. It would be little less than murder to kill them. Gale regretted the need of slaughter. Nevertheless, he could not resist the desire to show himself and see how tame they really were.

He reached for the .405, and as he threw a shell into the chamber the slight metallic click made the sheep jump. Then Gale rose quickly to his feet.

The noble ram and his band simply stared at Gale. They had never seen a man. They showed not the slightest indication of instinctive fear. Curiosity, surprise, even friendliness, seemed to mark their attitude of attention. Gale imagined that they were going to step still closer. He did not choose to wait to see if this were true. Certainly it already took a grim resolution to raise the heavy .405.

His shot killed the big leader. The others bounded away with remarkable nimbleness. Gale used up the remaining four shells to drop the second ram, and by the time he had reloaded the others were out of range.

The Yaqui's method of hunting was sure and deadly and saving in energy, but Gale never would try it again. He chose to stalk the game. This entailed a great expenditure of strength, the eyes and the lungs of a mountaineer, and, as Gale put it to Ladd, the need of seven-league boots. After being hunted a few times and shot at, the sheep became exceedingly difficult to approach.

Gale learned to know that their fame as the keenest-eyed of all animals was well founded. If he worked directly toward a flock, crawling over the sharp lava, always a sentinel ram espied him before he got within range. The only method of attack that he found successful was to locate sheep with his glass, work round to windward of them, and then, getting behind a ridge or buttress, crawl like a lizard to a vantage point. He failed often.

The stalk called forth all that was in him of endurance, cunning, speed. As the days grew hotter he hunted in the early-morning hours and a while before the sun went down. More than one night he lay out on the lava, with the great stars close overhead and the immense void all beneath him. This pursuit he learned to love. Upon those scarred and blasted slopes the wild spirit that was in him had free rein. And like a shadow the faithful Yaqui tried ever to keep at his heels.

The torrid summer heat came imperceptibly, or it could never have been borne by white men. It changed the lives of the fugitives, making them partly nocturnal in habit. The nights had the balmy coolness of spring, and would have been delightful for sleep, but that would have made the blazing days unendurable.

The sun rose in a vast white flame. With it came the blasting, withering wind from the gulf. A red haze, like that of earlier sunsets, seemed to come sweeping on the wind, and it roared up the arroyo, and went bellowing into the crater, and rushed on in fury to lash the peaks.

During these hot, windy hours the desert-bound party slept in deep recesses in the lava, and if necessity brought them forth they could not remain out long. The sand burned through boots, and a touch of bare hand on lava raised a blister.

A short while before sundown the Yaqui went forth to build a campfire, and soon the others came out, heat-dazed, half-blinded, with parching throats, to allay thirst and hunger that was never satisfied. A little action and a cooling of the air revived them, and when night set in they were comfortable round the campfire.

As Ladd had said, one of their greatest problems was the passing of time. The nights were interminably long, but they had to be passed in work or play or dream—anything except sleep. That was Ladd's most inflexible command. He gave no reason. But not improbably the ranger thought that the terrific heat of the day spent in slumber lessened a wear and strain, if not a real danger of madness.

Accordingly, at first the occupations of this little group were many and various. They worked if they had something to do, or could invent a pretext. They told and retold stories until all were wearisome. They sang songs. Mercedes taught Spanish. They played every game they knew. They invented others that were so trivial children would scarcely have been interested, and these they played seriously. With all that was civilized and human, they fought the ever-infringing loneliness, the savage solitude of their environment.

Thus the nights passed, endlessly long, with Gale fighting for his old order of thought, fighting the fascination of that infinite sky, and the gloomy, insulating whirl of the wide shadows, fighting for belief, hope, prayer, fighting against that terrible ever-recurring idea of being lost, lost, lost in the desert, fighting harder than any other thing the insidious, penetrating, tranquil, unfeeling self that was coming between him and his memory.

He was losing the battle, losing his hold on tangible things, losing his power to stand up under this ponderous, merciless weight of desert space and silence.

He acknowledged it in a kind of

despair, and the shadows of the night seemed whirling fiends. *Lost! Lost! Lost! What are you waiting for? Rain?— Lost! Lost! Lost in the desert.* So the shadows seemed to scream in voiceless mockery.

At the moment he was alone on the promontory. The night was far spent. A ghastly moon haunted the black volcanic spurs. The winds blew silently. Was he alone? No, he did not seem to be alone. The Yaqui was there. Suddenly a strange, cold sensation crept over Gale. It was new. He felt a presence. Turning, he expected to see the Indian, but instead, a slight shadow, pale, almost white, stood there, not close nor yet distant. It seemed to brighten. Then he saw a woman. She was white-faced, golden-haired, and her lips were sweet, and her eyes were turning black. *Nell!* She was holding out her arms—she was crying aloud to him across the sand and the cactus and the lava. She was in trouble, and he had been forgetting.

That night he climbed the lava to the topmost cone, and never slipped on a ragged crust nor touched a *choya* thorn. A voice had called to him. He saw Nell's eyes in the stars, in the velvet blue of sky, in the blackness of the engulfing shadows. She was with him, a slender shape, a spirit, keeping step with him, and memory was strong, sweet, beating, beautiful. Far down in the west, faintly golden with light of the sinking moon, he saw a cloud that resembled her face. A cloud on the desert horizon! He gazed and gazed. Was that a spirit face like the one by his side? No—he did not dream.

In the hot, sultry morning Yaqui appeared at camp, after long hours of absence, and he pointed with a long, dark arm toward the west. A bank of clouds was rising above the mountain barrier.

"Rain!" he cried; and his sonorous voice rolled down the arroyo.

Then up out of the gulf of the west swept a bellowing wind and a black pall and terrible flashes of lightning and thunder like the end of the world —fury, blackness, chaos—the desert storm.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Whistle of a Horse

AT THE ranch house at Forlorn River Belding stood alone in his darkened room. It was quiet there and quiet outside; the sickening midsummer heat, like a hot heavy blanket, lay upon the house.

The Chases, those grasping and conscienceless agents of a new force in the development of the West, were bent upon Belding's ruin, and, so far as his fortunes at Forlorn River were concerned, had almost accomplished it. One by one he lost points for which he contended with them. He carried into the Tucson courts the matter of the staked claims, and mining claims, and water claims, and he lost all. Following that, he lost his government position as inspector of immigration, and this fact, because of what he considered its injustice, had been a hard blow. He had been made to suffer a humiliation equally as great. It came about that he actually had to pay the Chases for water to irrigate his alfalfa fields. The never-failing spring upon his land answered for the needs

of household and horses, but no more.

These matters were not by any means wholly accountable for his worry and unhappiness and brooding hate. He believed Dick Gale and the rest of the party taken into the desert by the Yaqui had been killed or lost. Two months before, a string of Mexican horses, riderless, saddled, starved for grass and wild for water, had come in to Forlorn River. They were a part of the horses belonging to Rojas and his band. Their arrival complicated the mystery and strengthened convictions of the loss of both pursuers and pursued.

Belding's unhappiness could hardly be laid to material loss. He had been rich and was now poor, but change of fortune such as that could not have made him unhappy. Something more somber and mysterious and sad than the loss of Dick Gale and their friends had come into the lives of his wife and Nell. He dated the time of this change back to a certain day when Mrs. Belding recognized in the elder Chase an old schoolmate and a rejected suitor.

It took time for slow-thinking Belding to discover anything wrong in his household, especially as the fact of the Gales lingering there made Mrs. Belding and Nell, for the most part, hide their real and deeper feelings. Gradually, however, Belding had forced on him the fact of some secret cause for grief other than Gale's loss. He was sure of it when his wife signified her desire to make a visit to her old home back in Peoria. She did not give many reasons, but she did show him a letter that had found its way from old friends.

This letter contained news that may or may not have been authentic; but it was enough, Belding thought, to interest his wife. An old prospector had returned to Peoria, and he had told relatives of meeting Robert Burton at the Sonoyta Oasis fifteen years before, and that Burton had gone into the desert never to return. To Belding this was no surprise, for he had heard that before his marriage. There appeared to have been no doubts as to the death of his wife's first husband. The singular thing was that both Nell's father and grandfather had been lost somewhere in the Sonora Desert.

Belding did not oppose his wife's desire to visit her old home. He thought it would be a wholesome trip for her, and did all in his power to persuade Nell to accompany her. But Nell would not go.

It was after Mrs. Belding's departure that Belding discovered in Nell a condition of mind that amazed and distressed him. She had suddenly became strangely wretched, so that she could not conceal it from even the Gales. She would tell him nothing, but after a while, when he had thought it out, he dated this change in Nell back to a day on which he had met Nell with Radford Chase.

This indefatigable wooer had not in the least abandoned his suit. Something about the fellow made Belding grind his teeth. But Nell grew entreatingly earnest in her importunities to Belding not to insult or lay a hand on Chase. This had bound Belding so far; it had made him think and watch. But a slow surprise gathered and grew upon him when he saw that Nell, apparently, had now accepted young Chase's attentions. At least, she no longer hid from him. Belding could not account for this, because he was sure Nell cordially despised the

fellow. He divined that these Chases possessed some strange power over Nell, and were using it. That stirred a hate in Belding—a hate he had felt at the first and had manfully striven against, which now gave him over to dark brooding thoughts.

Midsummer passed, and the storms came late. But when they arrived they made up for tardiness. Belding did not remember so terrible a storm of wind and rain as that which broke the summer's drought.

In a few days, it seemed, Altar Valley was a bright and green expanse, where dust clouds did not rise. Forlorn River ran a slow, heavy, turgid torrent. Belding never saw the river in flood that it did not give him joy; yet now, desert man as he was, he suffered a great regret when he thought of the great Chase reservoir full and overflowing. The dull thunder of the spillway was not pleasant. It was the first time in his life that the sound of falling water jarred upon him.

Belding noticed workmen once more engaged in the fields bounding his land. The Chases had extended a main irrigation ditch down to Belding's farm, skipped the width of his ground, then had gone on down through Altar Valley. They had exerted every influence to obtain the right to connect these ditches by digging through his land, but Belding remained obdurate. He refused to have any dealing with them. It was therefore with some curiosity and suspicion that he saw a gang of Mexicans once more at work upon these ditches.

At daylight next morning a tremendous blast almost threw Belding out of his bed. It cracked the adobe walls of his house and broke windows and sent pans and crockery to the floor with a crash. Belding's idea was that the store of dynamite kept by the Chases for blasting had blown up. Hurriedly getting into his clothes, he went to Nell's room to reassure her, and telling her to have a thought for their guests, he went out to see what had happened.

The villagers were badly frightened. Many of the poorly constructed adobe huts had crumbled almost into dust. A great yellow cloud, like smoke, hung over the river. This appeared to be at the upper end of Belding's plot, and close to the river. When he reached his fence the smoke and dust were so thick he could scarcely breathe, and for a little while he was unable to see what had happened. Presently he made out a huge hole in the sand just about where the irrigation ditch had stopped near his line. For some reason or other, not clear to Belding, the Mexicans had set off an extraordinarily heavy blast at that point.

Belding pondered. He did not now for a moment consider an accidental discharge of dynamite. But why had this blast been set off? The loose sandy soil had yielded readily to shovel; there were no rocks; as far as construction of a ditch was concerned, such a blast would have done more harm than good.

Slowly, with reluctant feet, Belding walked toward a green hollow, where in a cluster of willows lay the never-failing spring that his horses loved so well, and, indeed, which he loved no less. He was actually afraid to part the drooping willows to enter the little cool, shady path that led to the spring. Then, suddenly seized by

suspense, he ran the rest of the way.

He was just in time to see the last of the water. It seemed to sink as in quicksand. The shape of the hole had changed. The tremendous force of the blast had obstructed or diverted the underground stream of water.

Belding's never-failing spring had been ruined. What had made this little plot of ground green and sweet and fragrant was now no more. Belding's first feeling was for the pity of it. The pale Ajo lilies would bloom no more under those willows. The willows themselves would soon wither and die. He thought how many times in the middle of hot summer nights he had come down to the spring to drink. Never again!

The pall of dust drifting over him, the din of the falling water up at the dam, diverted Belding's mind to the Chases. All at once he was in the harsh grip of a cold certainty. The blast had been set off intentionally to ruin his spring. What a hellish trick!

It was then that Belding's worry and indecision and brooding were as if they had never existed. As he strode swiftly back to the house, his head, which had long been bent thoughtfully and sadly, was held erect. He went directly to his room, and with an air that was now final he buckled on his gun belt. He looked the gun over and tried the action. He squared himself and walked a little more erect.

"Let's see," he was saying. "I can get Carter to send the horses I've got left back to Waco to my brother. I'll make Nell take what money there is and go hunt up her mother. The Gales are ready to go—today, if I say the word. Nell can travel with them part way East. That's your game, Tom Belding, don't mistake me."

As he went out he encountered Mr. Gale coming up the walk. The long sojourn at Forlorn River, despite the fact that it had been laden with a suspense which was gradually changing to a sad certainty, had been of great benefit to Dick's father. The dry air, the heat, and the quiet had made him, if not entirely a well man, certainly stronger than he had been in many years.

"Belding, what was that terrible roar?" asked Mr. Gale. "We were badly frightened until Miss Nell came to us. We feared it was an earthquake."

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Gale, we've had some quakes here, but none of them could hold a candle to this jar we just had." Then Belding explained what had caused the explosions, and why it had been set off so close to his property.

"It's an outrage, sir, an unspeakable outrage," declared Mr. Gale hotly. "Such a thing would not be tolerated in the East. Mr. Belding, I'm amazed at your attitude in the face of all this trickery."

"You see—there was Mother and Nell," began Belding, as if apologizing. He dropped his head a little and made marks in the sand with the toe of his boot. "Mr. Gale, I've been sort of half-hitched, as Laddy used to say. I'm planning to have a little more elbow room round this ranch. I'm going to send Nell East to her mother. Then I'll— See here, Mr. Gale, would you mind having Nell with you part way when you go home?"

"We'd all be delighted to have her go all the way and make us a visit," replied Mr. Gale.

"That's fine. And you'll be going soon? Don't take that as if I wanted

to—" Belding paused, for the truth was that he did want to hurry them off.

"We would have been gone before this, but for you," said Mr. Gale. "Long ago we gave up hope of—of Richard ever returning. And I believe, now we're sure he was lost, that we'd do well to go home at once. You wished us to remain till the heat was broken —till the rains came to make traveling easier for us. Now I see no need for further delay. My stay here has greatly benefited my health. I shall never forget your hospitality. This Western trip would have made me a new man if—only—Richard—"

"Sure. I understand," said Belding gruffly. "Let's go in and tell the women to pack up."

Nell was busy with the servants preparing breakfast. Belding took her into the sitting-room while Mr. Gale called his wife and daughter.

"My girl, I've some news for you," began Belding. "Mr. Gale is leaving today with his family. I'm going to send you with them—part way, anyhow. You're invited to visit them. I think that'd be great for you—help you to forget. But the main thing is—you're going East to join Mother."

Nell gazed at him, white-faced, without uttering a word.

"You see, Nell, I'm about done in Forlorn River," went on Belding. "That blast this morning sank my spring. There's no water now. It was the last straw. So we'll shake the dust of Forlorn River. I'll come on a little later—that's all."

"Dad, you're packing your gun!" She ran to him and for the first time in his life Belding put her away from him. His movements had lost the old slow gentleness.

"Why, so I am," replied Belding coolly, as his hand moved down to the sheath swinging at his hip. "Nell, I'm that absent-minded these days!"

"Dad!" she cried.

"That'll do from you," he replied, in a voice he had never used to her. "Get breakfast now, then pack to leave Forlorn River."

"Leave Forlorn River!" whispered Nell. She turned away to the west window and looked out across the desert toward the dim blue peaks in the distance. Belding watched her, likewise the Gales, and no one spoke. There ensued a long silence. Belding felt a lump rise in his throat. Nell laid her arm against the window frame, but gradually it dropped, and she was leaning with her face against the wood. A low sob broke from her. Elsie Gale went to her, embraced her, took the drooping head on her shoulder.

"We've come to be such friends," she said. "I believe it'll be good for you to visit me in the city. Here—all day you look out across that awful lonely desert. Come, Nell."

Heavy steps sounded outside on the flagstones, then the door rattled under a strong knock. Belding opened it. The Chases, father and son, stood beyond the threshold.

"Good morning, Belding," said the elder Chase. "We were routed out early by that big blast and came up to see what was wrong. All a blunder—the greaser foreman was drunk yesterday, and his ignorant men made a mistake. Sorry if the blast bothered you."

"Chase, I reckon that's the first of your blasts I was ever glad to hear," replied Belding in a way that made Chase look blank.

"So? Well, I'm glad you're glad," he went on, evidently puzzled. "I was a little worried—you've always been so touchy—we never could get together. I hurried over, fearing maybe you might think the blast—you see, Belding—"

"I see this, Mr. Ben Chase," interrupted Belding in curt and ringing voice. "The blast *was* a mistake, the biggest you ever made in your life."

"What do you mean?" demanded Chase.

"You'll have to excuse me for a while, unless you're dead set on having it out right now. Mr. Gale and his family are leaving, and my daughter is going with them. I'd rather you'd wait a little."

"Nell going away!" exclaimed Radford Chase. He reminded Belding of an overgrown boy in disappointment.

"Yes. But—*Miss Burton* to you, young man—"

"Mr. Belding, I certainly would prefer a conference with you right now," interposed the elder Chase, cutting short Belding's strange speech. "There are other matters—important matters to discuss. They've got to be settled. May we step in, sir?"

"No, you may not," replied Belding bluntly. "I'm sure particular who I invite into my house. But I'll go with you." He stepped out and closed the door. "Come away from the house so the women won't hear the—the talk."

The elder Chase was purple with rage, yet seemed to be controlling it. The younger man looked black, sullen, impatient. He appeared not to have a thought of Belding. He was absolutely blind to the situation, as considered from Belding's point of view. Ben Chase found his voice about the time Belding halted under the trees out of earshot from the house.

"Sir, you've insulted me—my son. How dare you? I want you to understand that you're—"

"Chop that kind of talk with me, you——— ——— ——— ———!" interrupted Belding.

Chase turned livid, gasped, and seemed about to give way to fury. But something about Belding evidently exerted a powerful quieting influence.

"Talk sense and I'll listen," went on Belding. He was frankly curious. He did not think any argument or inducement offered by Chase could change his mind on past dealings or his purpose of the present. But he believed by listening he might get some light on what had long puzzled him. The masterly effort Chase put forth to conquer his aroused passions gave Belding another idea of the character of this promoter.

"I want to make a last effort to propitiate you," began Chase in his quick, smooth voice. "You've had losses here, and naturally you're sore. I don't blame you. But you can't see this thing from my side of the fence. Business is business. In business the best man wins. The law upheld those transactions of mine the honesty of which you questioned. As to mining and water claims, you lost on this technical point—that you had nothing to prove you had held them for five years. Five years is the time necessary in law. A dozen men might claim the source of Forlorn River, but if they had no house or papers to prove their squatters' rights any man could go in and fight them for the water.

"Now I want to run that main ditch along the river through your farm. Can't we make a deal? I'm ready to

be liberal—to meet you more than halfway. I'll give you an interest in the company. I think I've influence enough up at the capital to have you reinstated as inspector. A little reasonableness on your part will put you right again in Forlorn River, with a chance of growing rich. There's a big future here.

"My interest, Belding, has become personal. Radford is in love with your stepdaughter. He wants to marry her. I'll admit now if I had foreseen this situation I wouldn't have pushed you so hard. But we can square the thing. Now let's get together not only in business, but in a family way. If my son's happiness depends upon having this girl, you may rest assured I'll do all I can to get her for him. I'll absolutely make good all your losses. Now what do you say?"

"No," replied Belding. "Your money can't buy a right of way across my ranch. And Nell doesn't want your son. That settles that."

"But you could persuade her."

"I won't, that's all."

"May I ask why?" Chase's voice was losing its suave quality.

"Sure. I don't mind your asking," replied Belding in slow deliberation. "I wouldn't do such a low-down trick. Besides, if I would, I'd want it to be a man I was persuading for. I know greasers—I know a Yaqui I'd rather give Nell to than your son."

Radford Chase began to roar in inarticulate rage. Belding paid no attention to him; indeed, he never glanced at the young man. The elder Chase checked a violent start. He plucked at the collar of his gray flannel shirt, opened it at the neck.

"My son's offer of marriage is an honor—more an honor, sir, than you perhaps are aware of."

Belding made no reply. His steady gaze did not turn from the long lane that led down to the river. He waited coldly, sure of himself.

"Mrs. Belding's daughter has no right to the name of Burton," snapped Chase. "Did you know that?"

"Sure you can prove what you say?" queried Belding in a cool, unemotional tone. It struck him strangely at the moment what little knowledge this man had of the West and of Western character.

"Prove it? I went to school with Nell Warren. That was your wife's maiden name. She was a beautiful, gay girl. All the fellows were in love with her. I knew Bob Burton well. He was a splendid fellow, but wild. Nobody ever knew for sure, but we all supposed he was engaged to marry Nell. He left Peoria, however, and soon after that the truth about Nell came out. She ran away. It was at least a couple of months before Burton showed up in Peoria. He did not stay long. Then for years nothing was heard of either of them. When word did come Nell was in Oklahoma, Burton was in Denver.

"There's a chance, of course, that Burton followed Nell and married her. That would account for Nell Warren taking the name of Burton. But it isn't likely. None of us ever heard of such a thing and wouldn't have believed it if we had. The affair seemed destined to end unfortunately. But Belding, while I'm at it, I want to say that Nell Warren was one of the sweetest, finest, truest girls in the world. If she drifted to the Southwest and kept her past a secret that was only natural. Certainly it should not be held against her. Why, she was

only a child—a girl—seventeen—eighteen years old. In a moment of amazement—when I recognized your wife as an old schoolmate—I blurted the thing out to Radford. You see now how little it matters to me when I ask your stepdaughter's hand in marriage for my son."

Belding stood listening. The genuine emotion in Chase's voice was as strong as the ring of truth. Belding knew truth when he heard it. The revelation did not surprise him.

"So you told my wife you'd respect her secret—keep her dishonor from husband and daughter?" demanded Belding, his dark gaze sweeping back from the lane.

"What! I—I—" stammered Chase.

"You made your son swear to be a man and die before he'd hint the thing to Nell?" went on Belding, and his voice rang louder.

Ben Chase had no answer. The red left his face. His son slunk back against the fence.

"I say you never held this secret over the heads of my wife and her daughter?" thundered Belding.

He had his answer in the gray faces, in the lips that fear made mute. Like a flash Belding saw the whole truth of Mrs. Belding's agony, the reason for her departure; he saw what had been driving Nell; and it seemed that all the dogs of hell were loosed within his heart. He struck out blindly, instinctively in his pain, and the blow sent Ben Chase staggering into the fence corner. Then he stretched forth a long arm and whirled Radford Chase back beside his father.

"I see it all now," went on Belding hoarsely. "You found the woman's weakness—her love for the girl. You found the girl's weakness—her pride and fear of shame. So you drove the one and hounded the other. God, what a base thing to do! To *tell* the girl was bad enough, but to *threaten* her with betrayal; there's no name for that!"

Belding's voice thickened, and he paused, breathing heavily. He stepped back a few paces. "And now, gentlemen," he continued, speaking low and with difficulty, "seeing I've turned down your proposition, I suppose you think you've no more call to keep your mouths shut?"

The elder Chase appeared fascinated by something he either saw or felt in Belding, and his gray face grew grayer. He put up a shaking hand. Then Radford Chase, livid and snarling, burst out: "I'll talk till I'm black in the face. You can't stop me!"

"You'll go black in the face, but it won't be from talking," hissed Belding.

His big arm swept down, and when he threw it up the gun glittered in his hand. Simultaneously with the latter action pealed out a shrill, penetrating whistle.

The whistle of a horse! It froze Belding's arm aloft. For an instant he could not move even his eyes. The familiarity of that whistle was terrible in its power to rob him of strength. Then he heard the rapid, heavy pound of hoofs, and again the piercing whistle.

"Blanco Diablo!" he cried huskily.

He turned to see a huge white horse come thundering into the yard—a wild, gaunt, terrible horse. A bronzed, long-haired Indian bestrode him. More white horses galloped into the yard, pounded to a halt, whistling home. Belding saw a slim shadow of

a girl who seemed all great black eyes.

Under the trees flashed Blanco Sol, as dazzling white, as beautiful as if he had never been lost in the desert. He slid to a halt, then plunged and stamped. His rider leaped, throwing the bridle. Belding saw a powerful, spare, ragged man, with dark, gaunt face and eyes of flame.

Then Nell came running from the house, her golden hair flying, her hands outstretched, her face wonderful. "Dick! Dick! Oh-h-h, Dick!" she cried.

Belding's eyes began to blur. He was not sure he saw clearly. Whose face was this now close before him—a long thin, shrunken face, haggard, tragic in its semblance of torture, almost of death? But the eyes were keen and kind. Belding thought wildly that they proved he was not dreaming.

"I shore am glad to see you all," said a well-remembered voice in a slow, cool drawl.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Reality Against Dreams

LADD, Lash, Thorne, Mercedes, they were all held tight in Belding's arms. Then he ran to Blanco Diablo. For once the great horse was gentle, quiet, glad. He remembered this kindest of masters and reached for him with warm, wet muzzle.

Dick Gale was standing bowed over Nell's slight form, almost hidden in his arms. Belding hugged them both. He was like a boy. He saw Ben Chase and his son slip away under the trees, but the circumstance meant nothing to him then.

"Dick! Dick!" he roared. "Is it you? Say, who do you think's here—here, in Forlorn River?"

Gale gripped Belding with a hand as rough and hard as a file and as strong as a vise. But he did not speak a word.

It was then three more persons came upon the scene—Elsie Gale, running swiftly, her father assisting Mrs. Gale, who appeared about to faint.

"Belding! Who on earth's that?" cried Dick hoarsely.

"*Quien sabe,* my son," replied Belding, and now his voice seemed a little shaky. "Nell, come here. Give him a chance." He slipped his arm round Nell, and whispered in her ear. "This-'ll be great!"

Elsie Gale's face was white and agitated, a face expressing extreme joy. "Oh, brother! Mama saw you—Papa saw you, and never knew you! But I knew you when you jumped quick—that way—off your horse. And now I don't know you. You wild man! You giant! You splendid barbarian! Mama, Papa, hurry! It *is* Dick! Look at him. Just look at him! Oh-h, thank God!"

Belding turned away and drew Nell with him. In another second she and Mercedes were clasped in each other's arms. Then followed a time of joyful greetings all round.

The Yaqui stood leaning against a tree watching the welcoming home of the lost. No one seemed to think of him, until Belding, ever mindful of the needs of horses, put a hand on Blanco Diablo and called to Yaqui to bring the others. They led the string

of whites down to the barn, freed them of wet and dusty saddles and packs, and turned them loose in the alfalfa, now breast-high.

At last Belding tore himself away from watching Blanco Diablo and returned to the house. It was only to find that he might have spared himself the hurry. Jim and Ladd were lying on the beds that had not held them for so many months. Their slumber seemed as deep and quiet as death.

Curiously Belding gazed down upon them. They had removed only boots and chaps. Their clothes were in tatters. Jim appeared little more than skin and bones, a long shape, dark and hard as iron. Ladd's appearance shocked Belding. The ranger looked an old man, blasted, shriveled, starved. Yet his gaunt face, though terrible in its records of tortures, had something fine and noble, even beautiful to Belding, in its strength, its victory.

Thorne and Mercedes had disappeared. The low murmur of voices came from Mrs. Gale's room, and Belding concluded that Dick was still with his family.

Belding went through the patio and called in at Nell's door. She was there sitting by her window. The flush of happiness had not left her face, but she looked stunned, and a shadow of fear lay dark in her eyes. Belding had intended to talk. He wanted someone to listen to him. The expression in Nell's eyes, however, silenced him.

Nell read his thought in his face, and then she lost all her color and dropped her head. Belding entered, stood beside her with a hand on hers. He tried desperately hard to think of the right thing to say, and realized so long as he tried that he could not speak at all.

"Nell—Dick's back safe and sound," he said slowly. "That's the main thing. I wish you could have seen his eyes when he held you in his arms out there! Of course, Dick's coming knocks out your trip East and changes plans generally. We haven't had the happiest time lately. But now it'll all be different. Dick's as true as a Yaqui. He'll chase that Chase fellow, don't mistake me. Then Mother will be home soon. She'll straighten out this—this mystery. And Nell—however it turns out—I know Dick Gale will feel just the same as I feel. Brace up now, girl."

Belding left the patio and traced thoughtful steps back toward the corrals. He found the Yaqui curled up in a corner of the barn in as deep a sleep as that of the rangers. Looking down at him, Belding felt again the rush of curious thrilling eagerness to learn all that had happened since the dark night when Yaqui had led the white horses away into the desert. Belding curbed his impatience and set to work upon tasks he had long neglected.

Presently he was interrupted by Mr. Gale, who came out, beside himself with happiness and excitement. He flung a hundred questions at Belding and never gave him time to answer one, even if that had been possible. Finally, when Mr. Gale lost his breath, Belding got a word in:

"See here, Mr. Gale, you know as much as I know. Dick's back. They're all back—a hard lot, starved, burned, torn to pieces, worked out to the limit I never saw in desert travelers, but they're alive—alive and well, man! Just wait. Just gamble I won't sleep or eat till I hear that story. But *they've* got to sleep and eat."

About the middle of the forenoon on the following day the rangers hobbled out of the kitchen to the porch.

"I'm a sick man, I tell you," Ladd was complaining, "an' I gotta be fed. Soup! Beef tea! That ain't so much as wind to me. I want about a barrel of bread an' butter an' a whole platter of mashed potatoes with gravy an' green stuff—all kinds of green stuff—an' a whole big apple pie. Give me everythin' an' anythin' to eat but meat. Shore I never, never want to taste meat again, an' sight of a piece of sheep meat would jest about finish me. Jim, you used to be a human bein' that stood up for Charlie Ladd."

"Laddy, I'm lined up beside you with both guns," replied Jim plaintively. "Hungry? Say, the smell of breakfast in that kitchen made my mouth water so I near choked to death. I reckon we're gettin' most onhuman treatment."

"But I'm a sick man," protested Ladd, "an' I'm a-goin' to fall over in a minute if somebody doesn't feed me. Nell, you *used* to be fond of me."

"Oh, Laddy, I am yet," replied Nell.

"Shore I don't believe it. Any girl with a tender heart just couldn't let a man starve under her eyes. Look at Dick, there. I'll bet he's had something to eat, mebbe potatoes an' gravy, an' pie an'—"

"Laddy, Dick has had no more than I gave you—indeed, not nearly so much."

"Shore he's had a lot of kisses then, for he hasn't hollered onct about this treatment."

"Perhaps he has," said Nell with a blush, "and if you think that—they would help you to be reasonable I might—I'll—"

"Well, powerful fond as I am of you, just now kisses'll have to run second to bread an' butter."

"Oh, Laddy, what a gallant speech!" laughed Nell. "I'm sorry, but I've Dad's orders."

"Laddy," interrupted Belding, "you-'ve got to be broke in gradually to eating. Now you know that. You'd be the severest kind of a boss if you had some starved beggars on your hands."

"But I'm sick—I'm dyin'," howled Ladd.

"You were never sick in your life, and if all the bullet holes I see in you couldn't kill you, why, you never will die."

"Can I smoke?" queried Ladd with sudden animation. "My Gawd, I used to smoke. Shore I've forgot. Nell, if you want to be reinstated in my gallery of angels, just find me a pipe an' tobacco."

Ladd filled the pipe Nell brought, puffed ecstatically at it, and settled himself upon the bench for a long talk. Nell glanced appealingly at Dick, who tried to slip away. Mercedes did go, and was followed by Thorne. Mr. Gale brought chairs, and in subdued excitement called his wife and daughter. Belding leaned forward, rendered all the more eager by Dick's reluctance to stay, the memory of the quick tragic change in the expression of Mercedes's beautiful eyes, by the strange gloomy cast stealing over Ladd's face.

The ranger talked for two hours—talked till his voice weakened to a husky whisper. At the conclusion of his story there was an impressive silence. Then Elsie Gale stood up, and with her hand on Dick's shoulder, her eyes bright and warm as sunlight, she showed the rangers what a woman thought of them and of the Yaqui.

Nell clung to Dick, weeping silently. Mrs. Gale was overcome, and Mr. Gale, very white and quiet, helped her up to her room.

"The Indian! the Indian!" burst out Belding, his voice deep and rolling. "What did I tell you? Didn't I say he'd be a godsend? Laddy, no story of Camino del Diablo can hold a candle to yours. The flight and the fight were jobs for men. But living through this long hot summer and coming out—that's a miracle. Only the Yaqui could have done it!"

"Shore. Charlie Ladd looks up at an Indian these days. But Beldin', as for the comin' out, don't forget the hosses. Without grand old Sol an' Diablo, who I don't hate no more, an' the other Blancos, we'd never have got here. Yaqui *an'* the hosses, that's my story!"

Early in the afternoon of the next day Belding encountered Dick at the water barrel.

"Belding, this is river water, and muddy at that," said Dick. "Lord knows I'm not kicking. But I've dreamed some of our cool running spring, and I want a drink from it."

"Never again, son. The spring's gone, faded, sunk, dry as dust."

"Dry!" Gale slowly straightened. "We've had rains. The river's full. The spring ought to be overflowing. What's wrong? Why is it dry?"

"Dick, seeing you're interested, I may as well tell you that a big charge of nitroglycerin choked my spring."

"Nitroglycerin?" echoed Gale. Then he gave a quick start. "My mind's been on home, Nell, my family. But all the same I felt something was wrong here with the ranch, with you, with Nell— Belding, that ditch there is dry. The roses are dead. The little green in that grass has come with the rains. What's happened? The ranch's run down. Now I look around I see a change."

"Some change, yes," replied Belding bitterly. "Listen, son." Briefly, but not the less forcibly for that, Belding related his story of the operations of the Chases.

Astonishment appeared to be Gale's first feeling. "Our water gone, our claims gone, our plans forestalled! Why, Belding, it's unbelievable. Forlorn River with promoters, business, railroad, bank, and what not!" Suddenly he became fiery and suspicious. "These Chases—did they do all this on the level?"

"Barefaced robbery! Worse than a greaser holdup," replied Belding grimly.

"You say the law upheld them?"

"Sure. Why, Ben Chase has a pull as strong as Diablo's on a down grade. Dick, we're robbed, outfigured, beat, tricked, and we can't do a thing."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Belding, most of all for Laddy," said Gale feelingly. "He's all in. He'll never ride again. He wanted to settle down here on the farm he thought he owned, grow grass and raise horses, and take it easy. Oh, but it's tough! Say, he doesn't know it yet. He was just telling me he'd like to go out and look the farm over. Who's going to tell him? What's he going to do when he finds out about this deal?"

"Son, that's made me think some," replied Belding, with keen eyes fast upon the young man. "And I was kind of wondering how you'd take it."

"I? Well, I'll call on the Chases. Look here, Belding, I'd better do some forestalling myself. If Laddy gets started now there'll be blood spilled.

He's not just right in his mind yet. He talks in his sleep sometimes about how Yaqui finished Rojas. If it's left to him—he'll kill these men. But if I take it up—"

"You're talking sense, Dick. Only here, I'm not so sure of you. And there's more to tell. Son, you've Nell to think of and your mother."

Belding's ranger gave him a long and searching glance. "You can be sure of me," he said.

"All right, then; listen," began Belding. With deep voice that had many a break and tremor he told Gale how Nell had been hounded by Radford Chase, how her mother had been driven by Ben Chase—the whole sad story.

"So that's the trouble!" murmured Gale. "I felt something was wrong. Nell wasn't natural, like her old self. And when I begged her to marry me soon, while Dad was here, she couldn't talk. She could only cry."

"It *was* hard on Nell," said Belding simply. "But it'll be better now you're back. Dick, I know the girl. She'll refuse to marry you and you'll have a hard job to break her down, as hard as the one you just rode in off of. I think I know you, too, or I wouldn't be saying—"

"Belding, what're you hinting at?" demanded Gale. "Do you dare insinuate that—that—if the thing were true it'd make any difference to me?"

"Aw, come now, Dick; I couldn't mean that. I'm only awkward at saying things. And I'm cut pretty deep—"

"For God's sake, you don't *believe* what Chase said?" queried Gale in passionate haste. "It's a lie. I swear it's a lie. I know it's a lie. And I've got to tell Nell this minute. Come on in with me. I want you, Belding."

Belding felt himself dragged by an iron arm into the sitting-room, out into the patio, and across that to where Nell sat in her door. At sight of them she gave a little cry, drooped for an instant, then raised a pale, still face, with eyes beginning to darken.

"Dearest, I know now why you are not wearing my mother's ring," said Gale steadily and low-voiced.

"Dick, I am not worthy," she replied, and held out a trembling hand with the ring lying in the palm.

Swift as light Gale caught her hand and slipped the ring back upon the third finger.

"Nell! Look at me. It is your engagement ring— Listen; I don't believe this—this thing that's been torturing you. I know it's a lie. But even if it *was* true it wouldn't make the slightest difference to me. I'd promise you on my honor I'd never think of it again. I'd love you all the more because you'd suffered. I want you all the more to be my wife—to let me make you forget—to—"

"Don't ask me, Dick. I—I won't marry you."

"Why?"

They had forgotten Belding, who stepped back into the shade.

"Dick, you give not one thought to your family. Would they receive me as your wife?"

"They surely would," replied Gale steadily.

"No! oh no!"

"You're wrong, Nell. I'm glad you said that. You give me a chance to prove something. I'll go this minute and tell them all. I'll be back here in less than—"

"Dick, you will not tell her—your mother?" cried Nell with her eyes

streaming. "You will not? Oh, I can't bear it! She's so proud! And Dick, I love her. Don't tell her! Please, please don't! She'll be going soon. She needn't ever know—about me. I want her always to think well of me. Dick, I beg of you."

"Nell, I'm sorry. I hate to hurt you. But you're wrong. You can't see things clearly. This is your happiness I'm fighting for. And it's my life—Wait here, dear. I won't be long."

Gale ran across the patio and disappeared. Nell sank to the doorstep, and as she met the question in Belding's eyes she shook her head mournfully. They waited without speaking. It seemed a long while before Gale returned. Belding thrilled at sight of him. Dick was coming swiftly, flushed, glowing, eager, erect, almost smiling.

"I told them. I swore it was a lie, but I wanted them to decide as if it were true. I didn't have to waste a minute on Elsie. She loves you, Nell. The Governor is crazy about you. I didn't have to waste two minutes on him. Mother used up the time. She wanted to know all there was to tell. She is proud, yes; but, Nell, I wish you could have seen how she took the—the story about you. Why, she never thought of me at all, until she had cried over you. Nell, she loves you, too."

"That devil Radford Chase—he'll tell my secret," panted Nell. "He swore if you ever came back and married me he'd follow us all over the world to tell it."

Belding saw Gale grow deathly white and suddenly stand stock-still.

"Chase threatened you, then?" asked Dick, and the forced naturalness of his voice struck Belding.

"Threatened me? He made my life a nightmare," replied Nell in a rush of speech. "At first I wondered how he was worrying Mother sick. But she wouldn't tell me. Then when she went away he began to hint things. I hated him all the more. But when he told me—I was frightened, shamed. Still I did not weaken. He was pretty decent when he was sober. But when he was half-drunk he was a devil. After a while he found out that your mother loved me and that I loved her. Then he began to threaten me. If I didn't give in to him he'd see she learned the truth. That made me weaken. It nearly killed me. I simply could not bear the thought of Mrs. Gale knowing. But I couldn't marry him."

She ended in a whisper, looking up wistfully and sadly at him. Belding was a raging fire within, cold without. He watched Gale, and believed he could foretell that young man's future conduct. Gale gathered Nell up into his arms and held her to his breast for a long moment.

"Nell, I'm sure the worst of your trouble is over," he said gently. "I *will not* give you up. Now, won't you lie down, try to rest and calm yourself. Don't grieve any more. This thing isn't so bad as you make it. Trust me. I'll shut Mr. Radford Chase's mouth."

As he released her she glanced quickly up at him, then lifted appealing hands. "Dick, you won't hunt for him—go after him?"

Gale laughed, and the laugh made Belding jump.

"Dick, I beg of you. Please don't make trouble. The Chases have been hard enough on us. They are rich, powerful. Dick, say you will not make matters worse. Please promise me

you'll not go to him."

"You ask me that?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"But you know it's useless. What kind of a man do you want me to be?"

"It's only that I'm afraid. Dick, he'd shoot you in the back."

"No, Nell, a man of his kind wouldn't have nerve enough even for that."

"You'll go?" she cried wildly.

Gale smiled, and the smile made Belding cold.

"Dick, I cannot keep you back?"

"No," he said.

Then the woman in her burst through instinctive fear, and with her eyes blazing black in her white face she lifted quivering lips and kissed him.

Gale left the patio, and Belding followed closely at his heels. They went through the sitting-room. Outside upon the porch sat the rangers, Mr. Gale, and Thorne. Dick went into his room without speaking.

"Shore somethin's comin' off," said Ladd sharply, and he sat up with his keen eyes narrowing.

Just then Dick came out of his door. Belding eyed him keenly. The only change he could see was that Dick had put on a hat and a pair of heavy gloves.

"Richard, where are you going?" asked his father.

"I'm going to beat a dog."

Mr. Gale looked helplessly from his strangely calm and cold son to the restless Belding. Then Dick strode off the porch.

"Hold on!" Ladd's voice would have stopped almost any man. "Dick, you wasn't goin' without me?"

"Yes, I was. But I'm thoughtless just now, Laddy."

"Shore you was. Wait a minute, Dick. I'm a sick man, but at that nobody can pull any stunts round here without me."

He hobbled along the porch and went into his room. Jim Lash knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and, humming his dance tune, he followed Ladd. In a moment the rangers appeared, and both were packing guns.

Not a little of Belding's grim excitement came from observation of Mr. Gale. At sight of the rangers with their guns the old man turned white and began to tremble.

"Better stay behind," whispered Belding. "Dick's going to beat that two-legged dog, and the rangers get excited when they're packing guns."

"I will not stay behind," replied Mr. Gale stoutly. "I'll see this affair through. Belding, I've guessed it. Richard is going to fight the Chases, those robbers who have ruined you."

"Well, I can't guarantee any fight on *their* side," returned Belding dryly. "But maybe there'll be greasers with a gun or two."

Belding stalked off to catch up with Dick, and Mr. Gale came trudging behind with Thorne.

"Where will he find these Chases?" asked Dick of Belding.

"They've got a place down the road adjoining the inn. They call it their club. At this hour Radford will be there sure. I don't know about the old man. But his office is now just across the way."

They passed several houses, turned a corner into the main street, and stopped at a wide, low adobe structure. A number of saddled horses stood haltered to posts. Mexicans lolled around the wide doorway.

"There's Ben Chase now over on the corner," said Belding to Dick.

"See, the tall man with the white hair and leather band on his hat. He sees us. He knows there's something up. He's got men with him. They'll come over. We're after the young buck, and sure he'll be in here."

They entered. The place was a hall, and needed only a bar to make it a saloon. There were two rickety pool tables. Evidently Chase had fitted up this amusement room for his laborers as well as for the use of his engineers and assistants, for the crowd contained both Mexicans and Americans. A large table near a window was surrounded by a noisy, smoking, drinking circle of card players.

"Point out this Radford Chase to me," said Gale.

"There! The big fellow with the red face. His eyes stick out a little. See! He's dropped his cards and his face isn't red any more."

Dick strode across the room.

Belding grasped Mr. Gale and whispered hoarsely, "Don't miss anything. It'll be great. Watch Dick and watch Laddy! If there's any gunplay, dodge behind me."

Dick halted beside the table. His heavy boot shot up, and with a crash the table split, and glasses, cards, chips flew everywhere. As they rattled down and the chairs of the dumfounded players began to slide Dick called out, "My name is Gale. I'm looking for Mr. Radford Chase."

A tall, heavy-shouldered fellow rose, boldly enough, even swaggeringly, and glowered at Gale. "I'm Radford Chase," he said. His voice betrayed the boldness of his action.

It was over in a few moments. The tables and chairs were tumbled into a heap; one of the pool tables had been shoved aside; a lamp lay shattered, with oil running dark upon the floor. Ladd leaned against a post with a smoking gun in his hand. A Mexican crouched close to the wall moaning over a broken arm. In the far corner upheld by comrades another wounded Mexican cried out in pain. These two had attempted to draw weapons upon Gale, and Ladd had crippled them.

In the center of the room lay Radford Chase, a limp, torn, hulking, bloody figure. He was not seriously injured. But he was helpless, a miserable, beaten wretch.

Backed against the door of the hall stood Ben Chase, for once stripped of all authority and confidence and courage. Gale confronted him, and now Gale's mien was in striking contrast to the coolness with which he had entered the place. Though sweat dripped from his face, it was white as chalk. Like dark flames his eyes seemed to leap and dance and burn. His lean jaw quivered with passion. He shook a huge gloved fist in Chase's face.

"Your gray hairs save you this time. But keep out of my way! And when that son of yours comes to, tell him every time I meet him I'll add some more to what he got today!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Secret of Forlorn River

IN THE early morning Gale, seeking solitude where he could brood over his trouble, wandered alone. It was not easy for him to elude the Yaqui, and just at the moment when he had cast himself down in a secluded shady corner the Indian ap-

peared, noiseless, shadowy, mysterious as always.

"*Malo,*" he said in his deep voice.

"Yes, Yaqui, it's bad—very bad," replied Gale.

"Go—me!" said Yaqui, with an impressive gesture toward the lofty lilac-colored steps of No Name Mountains.

"Why does my brother want me to climb the nameless mountains with him?" asked Gale.

"*Lluvia d'oro,*" replied Yaqui, and he made motions that Gale found difficult of interpretation.

"Shower of Gold," translated Gale. That was the Yaqui's name for Nell. What did he mean by using it in connection with a climb into the mountains? Were his motions intended to convey an idea of a shower of golden blossoms from that rare and beautiful tree, or a golden rain? Gale's listlessness vanished in a flash of thought. The Yaqui meant gold. Gold! He meant he could retrieve the fallen fortunes of the white brother who had saved his life that evil day at the Papago Well. Gale thrilled as he gazed into the wonderful eyes of this Indian.

"Go—me?" repeated the Indian, pointing with the singular directness that always made this action remarkable in him.

"Yes, Yaqui."

Gale ran to his room, put on hobnailed boots, filled a canteen, and hurried back to the corral. Yaqui awaited him. The Indian carried a coiled lasso and a short stout stick. Without a word he led the way down the lane, turned up the river toward the mountains. None of the Belding's household saw their departure.

What had once been only a narrow mesquite-bordered trail was now a well-trodden road. A deep irrigation ditch, full of flowing muddy water, ran parallel with the road. Gale had been curious about the operations of the Chases, but a bitterness he could not help had kept him from going out to see the work. He was not surprised to find that the engineers who had constructed the ditches and dam had anticipated him in every particular. The dammed-up gulch made a magnificent reservoir, and Gale could not look upon the long narrow lake without a feeling of gladness. That stone-walled, stone-floored gulch would never leak, and already it contained water enough to irrigate the whole of Altar Valley for two dry seasons.

Yaqui led swiftly along the lake to the upper end, where the stream roared down over unscalable walls. This point was the farthest Gale had ever penetrated into the rough foothills, and he had Belding's word for it that no white man had ever climbed No Name Mountains from the west.

But a white man was not an Indian. The former might have stolen the range and valley and mountain, even the desert, but his possession would ever remain mysteries. Gale had scarcely faced the great gray ponderous wall of cliff before the old strange interest in the Yaqui seized him again. It recalled the tie that existed between them, a tie almost as close as blood. Then he was eager and curious to see how the Indian would conquer those seemingly insurmountable steps of stone.

Yaqui tied one end of his lasso to a short, stout stick and, carefully disentangling the coils, he whirled the stick round and round and threw it

almost over the first rim of the shelf, perhaps thirty feet up. The stick did not lodge. Yaqui tried again. This time it caught in a crack. He pulled hard. Then, holding to the lasso, he walked up the steep slant, hand over hand on the rope. When he reached the shelf he motioned for Gale to follow. Gale found that method of scaling a wall both quick and easy. Yaqui pulled up the lasso, and threw the stick aloft into another crack. He climbed to another shelf, and Gale followed him.

The third effort brought them to a more rugged bench a hundred feet above the slides. The Yaqui worked round to the left, and turned into a dark fissure. Gale kept close at his heels. They came out presently into lighter space, yet one that restricted any extended view. Broken sections of cliff were on all sides.

Here the ascent became toil: infinitely slow, tedious, dangerous. On the way up several times Gale imagined he heard a dull roar of falling water. The sound seemed to be under him, over him, to this side and to that. When he was certain he could locate the direction from which it came he heard it no more until he had gone on. Gradually he forgot it in the physical sensations of the climb. He burned his hands and knees. He grew hot and wet and winded. His heart thumped so that it hurt, and there were instants when his sight was blurred. When at last he had toiled to where the Yaqui sat awaiting him upon the rim of that great wall, it was none too soon.

Gale lay back and rested for a while without note of anything except the blue sky. Then he sat up. He was amazed to find that after that wonderful climb he was only a thousand feet or so above the valley. Judged by the nature of his effort, he would have said he had climbed a mile. The village lay beneath him, with its new adobe structures and tents and buildings in bright contrast with the older habitations. He saw the green alfalfa fields, and Belding's white horses, looking very small and motionless.

Suddenly he again heard the dull roar of falling water. It seemed to have cleared itself of muffled vibrations. Yaqui mounted a little ridge and halted. The next instant Gale stood above a bottomless cleft into which a white stream leaped. His astounded gaze swept backward along this narrow swift stream to its end in a dark, round, boiling pool. It was a huge spring, a bubbling well, the outcropping of an underground river coming down from the vast plateau above.

Yaqui had brought Gale to the source of Forlorn River.

Flashing thoughts in Gale's mind were no swifter than the thrills that ran over him. He would stake out a claim here and never be cheated out of it. Ditches on the benches and troughs on the steep walls would carry water down to the valley. Ben Chase had built a great dam which would be useless if Gale chose to turn Forlorn River from its natural course. The fountain head of that mysterious desert river belonged to him.

His eagerness, his mounting passion, were checked by Yaqui's unusual action. His strange eyes surveyed this boiling well as if they could not believe the sight they saw. Gale divined that Yaqui had never before seen the source of Forlorn River. If

he had ever ascended to this plateau, probably it had been to some other part, for the water was new to him. He stood gazing aloft at peaks, at lower ramparts of the mountain, and at nearer landmarks of prominence. Yaqui seemed at fault. He was not sure of his location.

Then he strode past the whirling pool of dark water and began to ascend a little slope that led up to a shelving cliff. Another object halted the Indian. It was a pile of stones, weathered, crumbled, fallen into ruin, but still retaining shape enough to prove it had been built there by the hand of men. Round and round this the Yaqui stalked, and his curiosity attested a further uncertainty.

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian, and though his exclamation expressed no satisfaction, it surely put an end to doubt. He pointed up to the roof of the sloping yellow shelf of stone. Faintly outlined there in red were the imprints of many hands with fingers spread wide. Gale had often seen such paintings on the walls of the desert caverns. Manifestly these told Yaqui he had come to the spot for which he had aimed.

Then his actions became swift—and Yaqui seldom moved swiftly. The fact impressed Gale. The Indian searched the level floor under the shelf. He gathered up handfuls of small black stones, and he thrust them at Gale. Their weight made Gale start, and then he trembled. The Indian's next move was to pick up a piece of weathered rock and throw it against the wall. It broke. He snatched up parts, and showed the broken edges to Gale. They contained yellow streaks, dull glints, faint tracings of green. It was gold.

Gale found his legs shaking under him and he sat down, trying to take all the bits of stone into his lap. His fingers were all thumbs as with knife blade he dug into the black pieces of rock. He found gold. Then he stared down the slope, down into the valley with its river winding forlornly away into the desert. But he did not see any of that. Gale had learned enough about mineral to know that this was a rich strike. All in a second he was speechless with the joy of it. He wanted to rush down the slope, down into the valley, and tell his wonderful news.

Suddenly his eyes cleared and he saw the pile of stones. His blood turned to ice, then to fire. This was the mark of a prospector's claim. But it was old, very old. The ledge had never been worked. The slope was wild. There was not another single indication that a prospector had ever been there. Where, then, was he who had first staked this claim?

The Yaqui uttered the low, strange, involuntary cry so rare with him, a cry somehow always associated with death. Gale shuddered.

The Indian was digging in the sand and dust under the shelving wall. He threw out an object that rang against the stone. It was a belt buckle. He threw out old shrunken, withered boots. He came upon other things, and then he ceased to dig.

The grave of desert prospectors! Gale had seen more than one. Ladd had told him many a story of such gruesome finds. It was grim, hard fact.

Then the keen-eyed Yaqui reached up to a little projecting shelf of rock and took from it a small object. He showed no curiosity and gave the

thing to Gale.

The box was a tin one, and not at all rusty. Gale pried open the reluctant lid. A faint old musty odor penetrated his nostrils. Inside the box lay a packet wrapped in what once might have been oilskin. He took it out and removed this covering. A folded paper remained in his hands.

It was growing yellow with age. But he described a dim tracery of words. A crabbed scrawl, written in blood, hard to read! He held it more to the light, and slowly he deciphered its content.

We, Robert Burton and Jonas Warren, give half of this gold claim to the man who finds it and half to Nell Burton, daughter and granddaughter.

Gasping, with a bursting heart, overwhelmed by an unutterable joy of divination, Gale fumbled with the paper until he got it open.

It was a certificate twenty-one years old, and recorded the marriage of Robert Burton and Nellie Warren.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Desert Gold

A SUMMER day dawned on Forlorn River, a beautiful, still, hot, golden day with huge sail clouds of white motionless over No Name Peaks and the purple of clear air in the distance along the desert horizon.

Mrs. Belding returned that day to find her daughter happy and the past buried forever in two lonely graves. The haunting shadow left her eyes. Gale believed he would never forget the sweetness, the wonder, the passion of her embrace when she called him her boy and gave him her blessing.

The little wrinkled padre who married Gale and Nell performed the ceremony as he told his beads, without interest or penetration, and went his way, leaving happiness behind.

"Shore I *was* a sick man," Ladd said, "an' darn near a dead one, but I'm goin' to get well. Mebbe I'll be able to ride again some day. Nell, I lay it to you. An' I'm goin' to kiss you an' wish you all the joy there is in this world. An' Dick, as Yaqui says, she's shore your Shower of Gold."

Belding, once more practical, and important as never before with mining projects and water claims to manage, spoke of Gale's great good fortune in the finding of gold.

"Ah, yes. *Desert gold!*" exclaimed Dick's father softly with eyes of pride. Perhaps he was glad Dick had found the rich claim; surely he was happy that Dick had won the girl he loved. But it seemed to Dick himself that his father meant something very different from love and fortune in his allusion to desert gold.

Yaqui came to Dick to say good-by. Dick was startled, grieved, and in his impulsiveness forgot for a moment the nature of the Indian. Yaqui was not to be changed.

Belding tried to overload him with gifts. The Indian packed a bag of food, a blanket, a gun, a knife, a canteen, and no more. The whole household went out with him to the corrals and fields from which Belding bade him choose a horse—any horse, even the loved Blanco Diablo. Gale's heart was in his throat for fear the Indian might choose Blanco Sol, and Gale hated himself for a selfishness he could not help. But without a word he

would have parted with the horse.

Yaqui whistled the horses up—for the last time. Did he care for them? It would have been hard to say. He never looked at the fierce and haughty Diablo, nor at Blanco Sol as he raised his noble head and rang his piercing blast. The Indian did not choose one of Belding's whites. He caught a lean and wiry bronco, strapped a pack and blanket on him.

Then he turned to these friends, the same emotionless, inscrutable dark and silent Indian that he had always been. The parting was nothing to him. He had stayed to pay a debt, and now he was going home.

He shook hands with the men, swept a dark fleeting glance over Nell, and rested his strange eyes upon Mercedes's beautiful and agitated face. It must have been a moment of intense feeling for the Spanish girl. She owed it to him that she had life and love and happiness. She held out those speaking slender hands. But Yaqui did not touch them. Turning away, he mounted the bronco and rode down the trail toward the river.

"Thorne, Mercedes, Nell, let's climb the foothill yonder and watch him out of sight," said Dick.

They climbed while the others returned to the house. When they reached the summit of the hill Yaqui was riding up the far bank of the river.

"He will turn to look—to wave good-by?" asked Nell.

"Dear, he is an Indian," replied Gale.

From that height they watched him ride through the mesquites, up over the river bank to enter the cactus. His mount showed dark against the green and white, and for a long time he was plainly in sight. The sun hung red in a golden sky. The last the watchers saw of Yaqui was when he rode against a ridge and stood silhouetted against the gold of desert sky—a wild, lonely, beautiful picture. Then he was gone.

Strangely it came to Gale then that he was glad. Yaqui had returned to his own—the great spaces, the desolation, the solitude—to the trails he had trodden when a child, trails haunted now by ghosts of his people, and ever by his gods. Gale realized that in the Yaqui he had known the spirit of the desert, that this spirit had claimed all which was wild and primitive in him.

Tears glistened in Mercedes's magnificent black eyes, and Thorne kissed them away—kissed the fire back to them and the flame to her cheeks.

That action recalled Gale's earlier mood, the joy of the present, and he turned to Nell's sweet face. The desert was there, wonderful, constructive, ennobling, beautiful, terrible, but it was not for him as it was for the Indian. In the light of Nell's tremulous returning smile that strange, deep, clutching shadow faded, lost its hold forever; and he leaned close to her, whispering:

"Shower of Gold." THE END

Rocky Mountain Sahib

Story by BOB BEAUGRAND

Pictures by NICHOLAS S. FIRFIRES

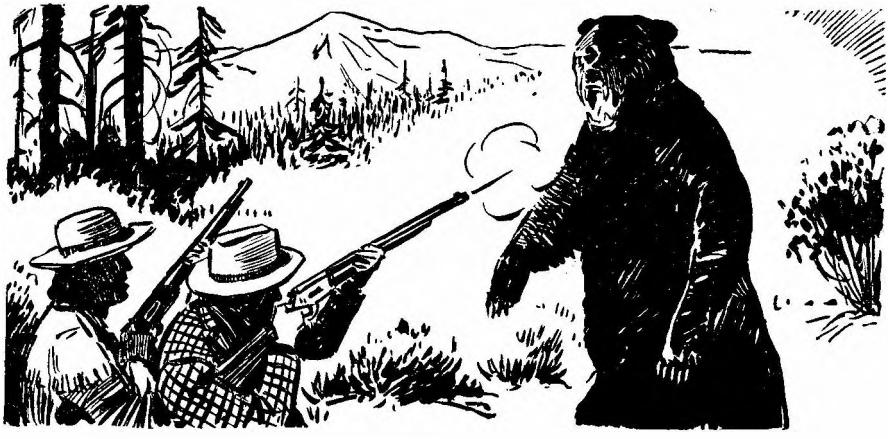
WHEN A MAN *enjoys an income of $200,000 a year and has nothing to do but spend it, he's liable to make a mighty big splash somewhere. Sir George Gore, a titled Irishman with just such an income and just such a pleasant problem, made his in the West—on the most fantastic hunting expedition ever known in that area. Before it was over, Sir George had spent a small fortune, bedazzled most of the natives, and scored a total bag that's still talked about by old-timers.*

Through Fort Laramie, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, there passed a steady stream of distinguished visitors. They came in search of sport, adventure, gold—and they must have presented amusing and sometimes ludicrous pictures to the grizzled guides and hunters of the district. Of them all, none held a candle to Sir George Gore, a fabulously wealthy Irish peer, who appeared at the fort in 1854 with a company of fifty friends and servants.

Although Sir George looked every inch the dude, his choice of guides showed he was no fool. He promptly hired the famous Jim Bridger, and the two men soon became fast friends, despite the apparent differences between them. The whole party spent the winter at Laramie, during which time Bridger met the nobleman's retinue.

When spring came they set out for the Yellowstone—secretaries, cooks, servants, hounds, and all. It was wild, rugged country, but Sir George was not the man to "go native." Dinner was served in grand style every night, complete with good wines. Bridger had the strange experience of listening to these men discuss Shakespeare around the fire.

Another habit that Sir George refused to give up was that of rising late. Seldom did he see what the sun looked like before noon. When he finally rose he treated himself to a large and leisurely breakfast. That over, the noble sportsman would prepare for a day's hunting. He usually went out alone, or with only a few companions.

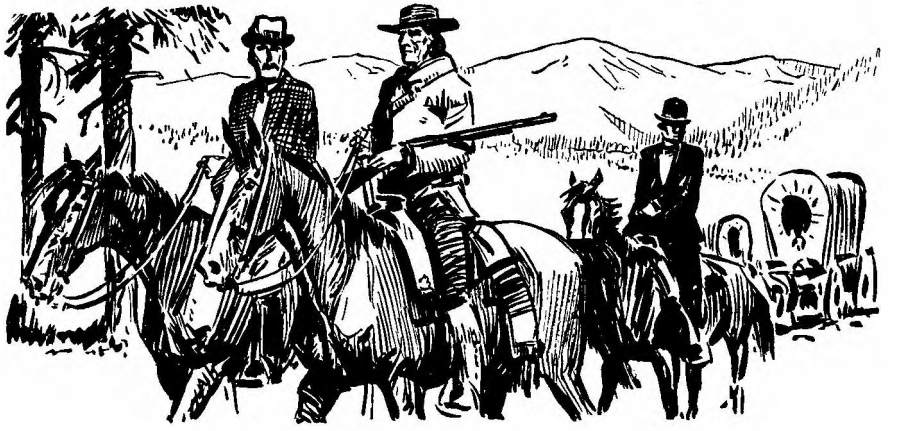


For all his evident laziness, the Irishman was no slouch as a hunter. Armed with some of the finest weapons then made for big-game hunting, Sir George collected trophies by the cartload. These he proposed to ship to friends back home, presumably as evidence of his prowess. The surprising number of forty grizzlies was included in his total bag.

While he accounted for great numbers of elk, antelope, and anything else that came before his sights, Sir George seemed to have a special passion for shooting buffalo. He did perhaps more than his share in reducing the herds of these great animals to their present sorry state, killing not less than 2500 of them.

The willful slaughter incensed the Indians, who looked upon the game as a source of food rather than sport. Finally their resentment boiled into action, and a band of Sioux swept down upon the camp and made off with many of Sir George's hard-won trophies of the hunt. Caught totally unprepared, the camp was left a shambles.

Sir George, being a nobleman, and Irish at that, refused to take what seemed to him such high-handed action lying down. He proposed to recruit a private army to wage war against the Sioux. Whether because of a lack of recruits or because of U. S. government opposition, nothing came of his ambitious plan, and George went on hunting.



When he collected enough trophies to satisfy him, Sir George decided to call it a year. The party moved on to the Rosebud River, where Gore camped among the Indians for a time, studying their way of living. Then he sent his wagons on ahead to Fort Union, while he and Jim Bridger proceeded to that trading-post by flatboat.

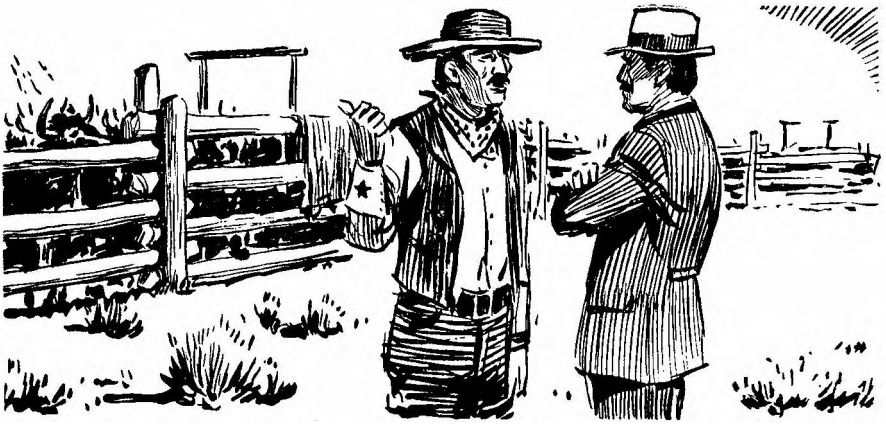
Sir George intended to dispose of his horses and wagons at the fort, for his expedition was breaking up. The only possible buyer in the area was the American Fur Company, and its agent took advantage of his fortunate position. Sir George dickered with him for some time over the disposal of his equipment, then suddenly broke off negotiations.

Rightly or wrongly, Sir George believed the trader was trying to force him into selling his wagons and livestock at ridiculously low prices because of lack of competition. Not disposed to haggle, Sir George collected his livestock, summoned all the Indians and trappers he could find, and proceeded to give it away.

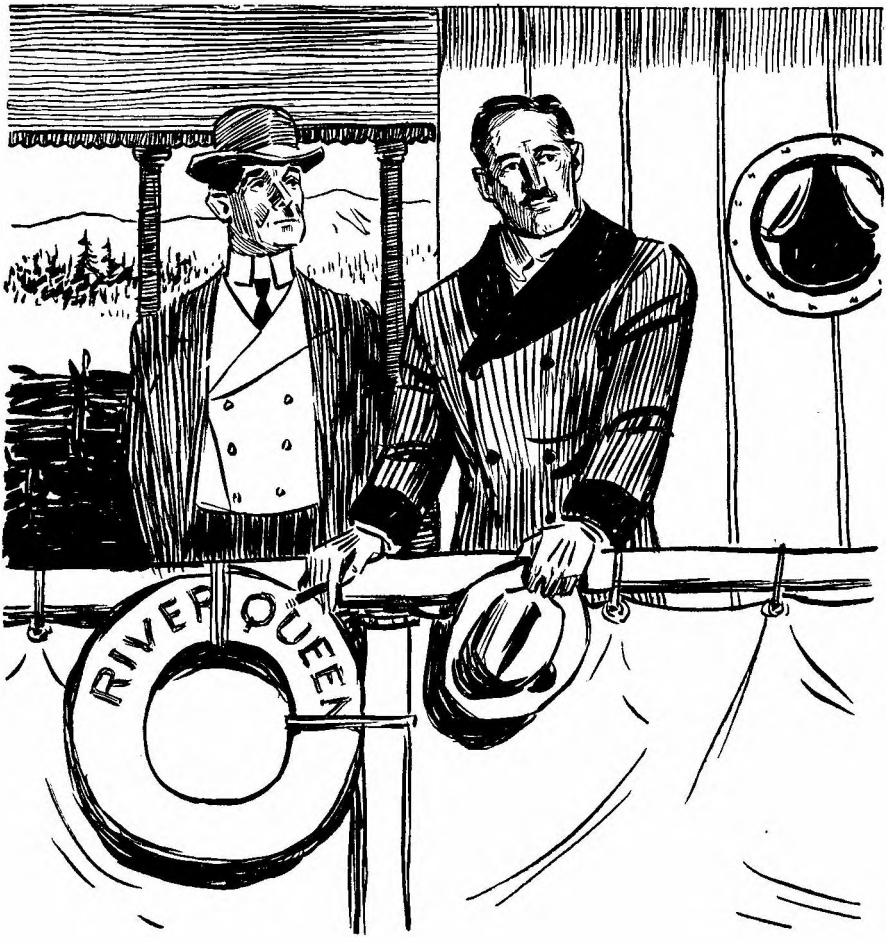
With the livestock thus disposed of, Sir George turned his attention to the wagons. These he could not even give away, since there was little demand for them in that region. Rather than surrender them to the trader at what he considered an unfair price, Sir George had the carts and wagons all burned. Guards saw to it that nothing was salvaged.

With a greatly reduced company, Sir George then flatboated down the river to Fort Berthold, a remote outpost. As winter was setting in, he decided to stay there. Jim Bridger's services were no longer needed, so the two friends made their farewells. The Irish lord prepared to spend the winter in a crude, Indian-style earthen lodge.

Even in a place like Fort Berthold, the irrepressible Irishman could not simply rest. He found himself involved in local affairs. There were two traders at the fort who had long been feuding over the native trade—not to the natives' advantages, however. The price of beef cattle had risen to an almost prohibitive level.



His sympathies aroused by the plight of the Indians, Sir George took a decisive hand in the matter. Going to one of the dealers, he all but bought the man out of beef cattle. Then he turned around and sold the cattle to the Indians at a fair price—and a big loss. Alarmed, the traders suddenly saw the light and lowered their prices.



Finally, slightly more than two years after his arrival at Fort Laramie, the incredible Irishman had had enough of "roughing it." Perhaps his stock of wine had run low—perhaps he felt a sudden yearning for a softer bed than his had been. Whatever the reason he pulled up stakes when spring arrived and headed back toward civilization. He left behind him a story that would be told over countless campfires for many years to come. Of all the titled foreigners who visited the great American West, there was none to compare with Sir George Gore, Rocky Mountain Sahib.

Long Gone—Long Buried

By W. H. Hutchinson

JOHN GLANTON, *one of that grim and colorful company of scalp hunters which the author described in an earlier article, had other means of making money besides lifting the hair of Indians and Mexicans—and fully as interesting. One of them was monopolizing the ferry business at the Yuma crossing, but it turned out that he should have given greater consideration to the Yumas' capacity for resentment and their ability to retaliate. This narrative of violence, highbinding, and buried treasure was written especially for ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE.*

MAN takes many opiates to brighten the slow procession of his days, to make the hours less tedious, to lift him out of the monotony of himself. Some turn to ritual, some to the poppy-gum, some to women, books, or alcohol; but John Glanton—Glanton the scalp hunter—turned ever toward the bright face of danger. He counted a day lost unless it saw him engaged in singeing the whiskers of death—someone else's death, by choice.

Glanton spent thirty years on the Southwestern Border, the deadliest part of the West-That-Was—thirty years as sharp as the edge of Rezan Bowie's knife, and as bloody. Ironically enough, the Yumas who dispatched him down that trail where the

pony tracks point all one way had only a minor-league rating for homicide among the Indians of North America. It happened at their ford across the Colorado River, where bridges span that turgid stream today. And there, just before he died, John Glanton buried the loot of his huntings. It is there yet!

John Glanton started his search for danger—the other man's life and purse—back in the Tennessee that produced Andrew Jackson, Sam Houston, Nollichucky Jack Sevier, and others whose tempers were ever as short as their trigger skill permitted. That he came from a good family, or at least from a family of some station in life, seems evident.

When only a boy in his teens, John was committed to the state penitentiary for life, but was released through the efforts of influential friends. No doubt the warden hung on Glanton's cell a sign that was seen rather frequently in that country in those days. The sign read GTT, which meant simply GONE TO TEXAS. It was not the only time that his friends stood between Glanton's flaming nature and the penalty for murder.

That the scalp hunter had friends —good friends even among those whose names shine brightly in our history today—is not surprising. He possessed all the virtues most highly regarded in the West-That-Was. He was a daring rider, a crack shot with rifle or short gun, a tireless endurer of discomfort, a man with an eye and an ear for a cold trail. In short, all the things that commanded respect and prolonged life on the Border he had in full measure, plus a disdain for the prosaic accumulation of money as a result of honest labor and a complete ignorance of any moral right save that which stemmed from his own superb reflexes.

It was his virtues, not his vices, that made Glanton dangerous. His vices were simple and direct: women, liquor, and cards. These he could and did control, since to lose control of them would have meant weighting the odds against himself. His virtues he could not control, for they found their true merit only in the face of danger and sudden death, and when these handmaidens deserted him John Glanton sought them out, or contrived a passable substitute.

His arrival in Texas, a few short years after the Battle of San Jacinto delivered the Texas Republic from the womb of civil conflict, was undistinguished by public celebration. He was but another of the raw-boned, hungry youths in butternut homespun who flocked to Texas from the cotton states in the quarter century before the Civil War.

His entry into Texas was, however, soon followed by his acceptance into the Texas Rangers. There he found outlet aplenty for those qualities that made him what he was, and in the crucible of combat he tempered as iron in the forge. What he learned from the Comanche he passed on to the Mexican lancers of Chico Cortinas, and by the time the Mexican War broke out he was known and sought after by such ranger captains as Jack Hays, Sam Walker of Colt's pistol fame, and John Ford—old "Rip" Ford, who acquired his nickname from his habit of signing the death reports of his command as *John S. Ford, RIP.*

General Taylor, Old Rough and Ready, had great regard for Hays's

rangers when there was fighting afoot—and an equally great distaste for them in the idleness of camp or barracks. The feeling was mutual, and Glanton, for one, could never understand why killing Mexicans lost its virtue when peace was declared.

Glanton's feelings were shared by most of those who served under Hays —witness the box score when a ranger, prowling for pleasure in the parlous days of peace through that section of Mexico City known as the "Thieves' Market," departed this life from a well-thrust knife. By next morning eighty-three dead Mexicans had been officially tallied.

What part Glanton played in that enthusiastic reprisal is not known. It is known, however, that for a purely personal fracas in which he killed one or more peaceful citizens, the commanding general, a regular-army man, had him up before a court martial—and the charge was murder.

No matter what the charge, or how violent the general's wrath, Glanton's commanding officer, who was a ranger, took his part. The upshot of the whole affair was that Glanton "escaped" and returned to San Antonio, where the rangers had been wont to spend their furloughs before they went to Mexico.

Back in San Antone, Glanton might have reflected, if such had been his nature, that his military career had been marked by other deeds than conquests among the women of Jalapa and the killing of peaceful civilians. Item: from an official document reporting on the Battle of Matamoros de Izucar, where men were killed just as dead as they ever were on Omaha Beach: *Private Glanton of the Texas Rangers distinguished himself by his extraordinary activity and daring throughout the actions both of the twenty-third and twenty-fourth.* Item: when Jack Hays organized a special spy company to serve Winfield Scott on the hard road between Vera Cruz and Mexico City—designed to be "the eyes and ears of the Ranger Force," which in turn was the eyes and ears of Scott's entire army—"Rip" Ford was made captain and John Glanton lieutenant of this *corps d'élite.* Item: when the rangers were first mustered into Taylor's army on the Rio Grande it was Glanton who quelled an incipient mutiny by a few well-chosen remarks addressed directly to the malcontents who "wanted to go home"—remarks which indicate that his vocabulary, while somewhat limited, was adequate to the purpose at hand. No matter what else he was or did, John Glanton served his country well when the bright face of danger coincided with his country's interests.

Life in San Antone in the middle 1840's had all the excitement that a man of less pungent disposition could have wished. John Glanton stayed there long enough to woo and win the daughter of a Spanish family long resident in the city, and to become the father of two children. However, the supposedly ameliorating attributes of matrimony and parenthood seemed to have no effect on him.

Shortly after his second child, a daughter named Joaquina after her mother, was born in 1849, Glanton cast off his family ties for good and all. Shaking the dust of San Antone from his feet, he headed for the North Mexican states of Chihuahua and Sonora, a high, hard land divided by the Sierra Madra range—a land that

for centuries had been the hunting-preserve of Apache, Comanche, and Yaqui.

There the inhabitants existed only by sufferance of those red-skinned fighters, who were always careful to leave enough livestock and humans in the land for seed. As for old Mangas Colorados, Red Sleeves—foremost in the long roster of Apache chieftains that ended with Geronimo—expressed it: "If we kill off all the Mexicans, there won't be anybody left to raise horses and cattle for the Americans and the Indians to steal." He might have added, too, that then there would have been no more women and children to be carried into captivity. The land and John Glanton were well met.

Glanton had acquired a group of followers as hardy and fearless as himself, one of whom was Charley Brown, part Cherokee and the rest white, a veteran of Hays's Rangers and the Mexican War. To the number of fourteen, the little band rode into Chihuahua City as the cathedral bells called the faithful to evening prayers —prayers that included one for protection against the ravages of *los barbaros,* the Indians. It would have been better if a new prayer had been said that very night against the schemes of John Glanton.

The long history of the North Mexican states is filled with accounts of desperate efforts made by their residents to stem the fury of the unceasing Indian raids—efforts that included war and bribery, peace treaties and the civilizing influences of whisky and disease. Finally and frantically they adopted a system of bounties, involving a sliding scale of payments for various classes of Indian scalps, male, female, and child, and the world was invited to protect Mexico at a profit.

Under this system there arose a class of men unparalleled in our history—for the scalp hunters of the Southwest were Americans—Americans who had been filtered through Texas, thus weeding out the weaklings. They were men like Glanton, Kirker, Chevalier, Weyman, and the Browns—men who had graduated *summa cum laude* from the fur trade or the Texas Rangers and to whom *doz onzas* of silver—$32—for an Indian scalp looked like big pay.

Spurred on by the prospect of easy money, grubstaked by several American traders resident in Chihuahua, and with the temporal blessing of the governor, Glanton and his merry men made a whirlwind campaign to the west of the city. It was short, quick, and profitable. The Indians, accustomed to the ineffectual efforts of the native soldiery, fell an easy prey to the natural skills of Glanton's men. The scalps of men, women, and children were lifted, dried, and baled like so many beaver pelts for transportation back to the treasurers' office in *Ciudad Chihuahua.*

The city went *en fête* for the victors' triumphal return. There were arches of roses across the streets, a band played martial airs, and pretty girls smiled promisingly from the overhanging balconies along the streets that led to the treasury. Each scalp was duly redeemed by the specified number of ounces of silver. Glanton paid off his grubstakers and divided the profits among his adherents. There was high carnival in Chihuahua until the money ran out.

The success of the first expedition

augured well for the future. Subsequent forays were equally productive: too much so for the good people of Chihuahua—the scalp hunters ran out of Indians! For a time the outlook was black. However, being nothing if not resourceful, Glanton or one of his men made the fruitful discovery that it was next to impossible to distinguish a Mexican scalp from an Indian one after it had been separated from its owner.

For some time thereafter the Treasurer of Chihuahua unwittingly paid out bounties in silver for the scalps of his countrymen. There was a noticeable increase in the death rate in the state, but not until the boys became careless and left a survivor or two in the smoking ruins of a ranch house did the word get out that *los barbaros* were not to blame. Before these ugly rumors led to punitive action, Glanton and his cohorts "lit a shuck" for California, where they had heard there was gold for the grabbing.

Between Mexico and California stretched the Devil's Highway, *El Camino Diablo*—a grim, sand-blown, waterless, bone-marked trail that poked a tentative finger into a land of little rain and less population. It was a battered company of scalp hunters who pulled up on the east bank of the Colorado River, the boundary between Mexico and California, and, despite a more than normal aversion to water, drank deep of its silty liquid. Having slaked their thirst as best they could, they took stock of their surroundings and found them good.

The first wave of the spring rush to California had washed as far west as the Colorado, and all around the river crossing the eager hordes were encamped, waiting their turn to cross. With all this humanity and livestock conveniently grouped within easy distance of the river, Glanton must have felt secure in his ability to make the most of things before pushing on to El Dorado. A wolf among lambs could scarcely have been happier than Glanton was at the potential bonanza of theft, murder, and intimidation spread so invitingly before him. Before he could swing into action, however, fate—in the person of Dr. A. C. Lincoln—intervened.

The good doctor rode into the Glanton camp one evening and made a most interesting proposition. He had left his medical practice in Louisiana for the gold fields of California, but the crossing of the Colorado here in the land of the Yumas had attracted his acute commercial eye. He had found the same backlog of gold seekers waiting to cross as had whetted the natural avarice of Glanton.

The Yumas had the crossing business well in hand, but their methods were primitive and conducive to loss in passage. They simply put wagons, people, and loose stock into the river and swam them over, with fifteen or more Indians swimming on the downstream side to keep the outfit pointed in the right direction. Inevitably some of the livestock would drown and float downriver, where the squaws hauled them from the water and replenished their larders.

Dr. Lincoln observed this procedure with a cold blue eye and hurried, hotfoot and post-haste, into Los Angeles, then a sleepy hamlet of dust and 'dobe. There he purchased a variety of goods, including a quantity of whipsawed planks, hired a crew of hands, and returned, hotfoot and

post-haste, to the Yuma crossing. Every day he was absent took money out of his pocket, he figured.

With his planks and other purchases, Dr. Lincoln made a flat-bottomed scow of considerable size and went into the ferry business. His prices were higher and drier than the Yumas', and he prospered until his crew quit him in an argument over their pay. They wanted a share of the profits instead of day wages. Barring mediation by Judge Colt, there was no way out of the impasse, and the doctor suspended operations until the arrival of Glanton and his men. This must have seemed a blessing from Providence and Dr. Lincoln, driven by necessity, swallowed his aversion to profit-sharing.

He showed Glanton his book of accounts, with receipts running as high as $3000 in one day, and made him a proposition. If he and his men would stay at the Yuma crossing and run the ferry, profits would be divided on a mutually satisfactory basis.

His offer was accepted and a company was formed, with Lincoln as captain, Glanton as second-in-command, and Charley Brown as treasurer. They worked out the division of the spoils and bound themselves to abide together for six months, anyone leaving before that time without permission of the company to be followed and killed when caught.

Having thus organized, they went to work and the money flowed in. From before dawn until it was too dark to see, the ferry scow crossed and re-crossed the rolling river, and each time it touched the California shore the ferry company's coffers were that much richer. Payment was not demanded in advance. There was no need for precautions that afflict more civilized communities—the well armed and truculent figure of John Glanton was warranty of payment.

Some reports have it that the ferry company treasury was enriched by certain extra-curricular activities on the part of Mr. Glanton. The crossing of the Colorado afforded ample opportunity to size up the portable wealth of the gold seekers and, determining each case on its individual merits, John utilized the skills he had developed at the expense of Comanche, Apache, and Mexican to relieve the Argonauts of their cash and sometimes of their lives. He was a pioneer in the theory that gold is where you find it.

By the end of March, 1850, the ferry company counted liquid assets of some $65,000 from one source or another, the bulk of this being in gold coin and the balance in silver. There was an additional and undetermined sum in jewelry and precious stones. This might have satisfied a reasonable man as being a fair return for a scant three months' work, but John Glanton was a stranger to considerations of reason. The Yumas were still swimming outfits across the river—outfits who could not or would not pay the charges of Lincoln, Glanton, and company for a dry crossing. The competition was trifling, but it rankled.

Over the strong protests of Charley Brown, a reasonable man and one whose implication in the substitution of Mexican scalps for Indian is to be doubted, Glanton and a chosen few paid a nocturnal visit to the Yuma camp at the *Algodones*, downstream from the present city of Yuma. When they left, competition from that par-

ticular group of Yumas was no longer a possibility.

The ferry company prospered greatly, but Charley Brown didn't like the feeling in the air—didn't like the way the short hairs on the back of his neck stirred into movement for no apparent reason. He made strong talk to the rest of the company, to the effect that they should get the hell out of there while they still had their lives and their money, but he was laughed down. Glanton and the rest had small regard for the Yumas as enemies and boasted they could take on the whole Yuma nation between ferry runs with no interruption to work or profits.

Now the Yumas were indeed small potatoes at homicide when compared to Apache or Comanche, but the difference lay chiefly in the fact that the Yumas were intermittent practicers of the art. It seems almost certain that Charley Brown, who kept up his warning and received more ridicule for his pains, had inside information about the Yumas' plans. He was part Indian himself and had always treated the Yumas with the utmost personal kindness, giving them presents from his own pocket. Since he, at least, took his own advice seriously, he finally got permission to leave the ferry company—remember the six-months clause—and with several thousand dollars, his share of the loot, he cut stick for California.

Before he had reached Los Angeles the Yumas from upriver, aided by some Mojaves and a Pima or two, had avenged the slaughter of their kinsmen at the *Algodones*. Glanton, Lincoln, and the rest were clubbed to death as they slept or as they stumbled through the river thickets. Their bodies were carefully collected by the Yumas, thrown on a huge pile of brush, and burned. For good measure, they tied Glanton's dog to his body and burned him too.

Having thus satisfied their tribal honor, the Yumas took over the ferry scow and resumed business at the same old stand. There is no record that they charged any lower prices for a dry crossing than had their predecessors.

In Los Angeles, Charley Brown heard the news and cast about for a suitable place to invest his working capital. He found it in the little town of Fresno, then a ranching community and stage station on the way to the southern mines of the Mother Lode. Here he opened a saloon and prospered by keeping his pores open and his mouth shut. Charley Brown was a savvy hombre.

For seven years after he quit the Yuma crossing in such timely fashion he tended his bar and his bank roll with equal solicitude. Then, on a spring morning in 1857, a ghost from the past walked into his life, in the person of Felipe Valenzuela, one of the members of the defunct ferry company.

On that fateful April night seven years before, Felipe, Dave Brown, and one other had been sleeping in a willow thicket a short distance from the main camp of Glanton's men. They had jumped for the river, made it, and floated downstream with the Yumas shooting at them from the bank with their captured guns, until either the sport palled or they ran out of cartridges. The three then made their way overland on foot to Los Angeles, each then going his separate way. Dave Brown had been

hanged, the third escapee had died of natural causes, and now he, Felipe, was the last survivor.

Charley Brown had heard many a similar tale in the course of his life, but what followed was new and different. First swearing him to deepest secrecy, Felipe told him that his departure from the ferry company had caused more concern than had all his preachments. The less iron-boweled members of the company, after trying in vain to persuade Glanton to quit the ferry business, had managed to get him to bury the contents of the company treasury under the big mesquite tree that shaded the camp on the river Bank. Charley Brown was to remember that "beeg mesquit" for the rest of his life.

As Felipe told it, the entire treasury had been placed in a large earthenware jar, an *olla ciega;* a filigree crucifix was placed on top and that jar was buried deep beneath the tree's roots. If *los Indios* hadn't got it, it was there yet. Would Charlee Brown, his *buen amigo,* help Felipe dig it up? Then they would share the profits feefty-feefty—

Brown gave Felipe some money for a grubstake and sent him back to Los Angeles until he could join him. This was not as trusting as it may seem: Felipe had had enough of the Yumas to last him a long, long time, and he would return to their country only in the backbone-stiffening company of Charley Brown or someone like him —and Felipe didn't know anyone else like Charley Brown.

Brown sold his saloon, converted his livestock and his town lots into cash, and made his way to Los Angeles. He found that Felipe had died of a fever. Now Charley Brown was, in a way of speaking, the sole residual legatee of the ferry-company treasure.

Without haste, exciting no suspicion, Charley Brown assembled an outfit adequate to his needs and pulled out for the Yuma crossing he had not seen for years. When he reached his destination he found the "beeg mesquit" standing right where it had stood seven years before—but underneath its spreading branches was pitched the tent of the army officer commanding the garrison at Fort Yuma. Charley, who couldn't see the percentage in requesting the army to move its camp so he could dig for buried treasure, kept his counsel and moved on.

He went to Tucson, the Old Pueblo, and entered the saloon business again, operating the world-famed Congress Hall Saloon, where the floor was paved with a mixture of cactus and sand, cemented with fresh bulls' blood and trodden into hardness. He made one more try to raise the scalp hunters' loot.

Along toward the close of 1865, Charley went back to Yuma. The "beeg mesquit" had been cut down, and the camp site of John Glanton and his men was now a part of the Yuma Indian Reservation. The Indian Agent there proved most unco-operative, as far as giving anyone permission to prospect on government land was concerned.

Returning to Tucson, Charley Brown ended his days as a prominent and respected member of the community. The *olla ciega,* the jar that contains the ill-gotten treasure of John Glanton and his fellow scalp hunters, is still buried deep in the land and legend of the Southwest.

GREEK GEORGE HAD FUN AT THE PICNIC

GOLD RUSHES bring "bad men" in flocks, and "Greek George," an emigrant who drifted west in the 1860's, as the original "heller from Helldorado." A remorseless killer who seemed fairly to revel in homicide, he was the terror of California's Holcomb Valley mining-camps.

The towns of Dobie and Big Bear in the Holcomb Valley, having sprung up as the result of the gold discoveries, soon acquired formidable reputations for unbridled lawlessness, vice, and violence. In fact, things got so tough in these boom towns that the sheriff, powerless to cope with the outlaw element, appealed to U. S. troops for help.

In the summer of 1864 the citizens of Dobie and Big Bear decided to throw a patriotic celebration and picnic. Entering into the spirit of things, the dance-hall gals used bits of their petticoats to make an American flag for the gala occasion.

At the picnic liquor and argument flowed unchecked. Greek George and a runner-up badman from Dobie disagreed as to the exact number of states in the Union. Greek George ended the dispute with a slug from his Colt's .45, killing his opponent.

Following this diverting episode, there was a horse race in which Greek George had entered Ergo, his filly. One "Blackbird" Johnson had also entered a horse in the race. Ergo and Johnson's horse made a neck-and-neck finish, but the judge decided in favor of the Johnson entry. Greek George again pulled his .45, blasted the judge into eternity, and then chased Blackbird Johnson and his horse from the picnic grounds.

The next event on the program was a bear-and-bull fight. Greek George placed a substantial bet on the bull. A man called "Whitey," who was betting on the bear, sneaked into the bull corral before the fight and sawed several inches off the bull's horns.

In the ensuing battle, the partly dehorned bull was at a decided disadvantage, and the bear won easily, mauling and tearing the bull to shreds. Greek George, on the losing end, found out what Whitey had done; again his Colt's went into action, and Whitey died with his boots on. George's score for the day was now "three down."

Later George was invited to deliver an address from atop a whisky barrel. He had imbibed so heavily that he had to be h'isted back on the barrel time after time. Whooping and bellowing, George and his admirers then drew their guns and shot the stars out of the petticoat-flag contributed by the patriotic dance-hall gals.

When the shooting ended, one horse and six cock-fighting roosters lay dead on the grounds, and 17 people were nursing wounds inflicted by flying bullets. Luckily no one was mortally injured.

Not only did Greek George escape punishment for his orgy of bloodletting at the Holcomb Valley picnic—he was not even arrested. However, a kind of justice was to catch up with him, much later, in Deadwood, South Dakota.

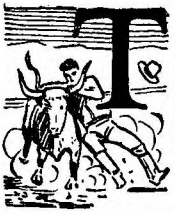
Overconfident as to his shooting-skill, he recklessly unlimbered his many-notched .45 to "smoke" the famous peace-officer-gunman, Wild Bill Hickok. He was too slow on the trigger. Wild Bill cooled him off, permanently, and Greek George was planted in Deadwood's Boot Hill.

—JAMES E. HUNGERFORD

IT'S BAD ENOUGH *to have a foreman fresh out of cow college take over a ranch you've run for three years, but when the new ramrod of the Lazy K starts introducing new fangled ideas like substituting branding-fluid for hot irons and breaking broncs on a threshing machine, it's bound to cocklebur the old-timers. And to Mary Kitchel, remembering how Easy Bill Allen said good-by before going off to Ag school, it's more than enough to put her on the peck. The story is published here for the first time.*

Cowgal on the Peck

By S. OMAR BARKER



THERE it was, as Mary saw it—a gap as wide as the gorge of Mile-Across Canyon. Easy Bill Allen had gone off to college and she hadn't. Old Mike Kitchel's fair-haired daughter cockleburred this around in her mind with what might have been called ill temper, because that's what it was. She reached out from the saddle and slammed the metal flag of Mailbox No. 16, Route 2, down with a bang.

Two letters for Bill this morning, and both of them put her on the peck. One was from John C. McCreary, President of the Low Crossing Stockman's Bank. Old Crack-Knuckle McCreary had become her father's partner in the Lazy K Ranch via the mortgage route, and Mary had a touchy idea that he blamed her own poor management for its recent failure to pay dividends.

Phooey on him. Easy enough to say, but you couldn't make it stick. Not as long as the Lazy K partnership was a 60-40 set-up with McCreary riding the heavy end. If he chose arbitrarily to replace her with a new foreman fresh out of cow college, who happened also to be his own limber-tongued nephew named Bill Allen, there was nothing you could do about it.

Except, of course, to turn up your short, maybe-sort-of-pretty nose at him on every possible occasion. Why she didn't leave his darned mail in the

box and let him come after it himself she didn't know, unless maybe she wanted to see what sort of look he got on his darned handsome face when she handed him this other letter.

It was in a dainty, pale-lavender envelope, addressed in dainty, feminine handwriting and postmarked *State College*. It was the second one in the few days since Bill had planted his stocky, muscular figure in the ramrod's saddle on the Lazy K.

That was what happened when a perfectly usable cowboy went off to college—even a cow college: he came home with a trick black mustache under his shamefully handsome nose, creases in his dude-gray pants, a lot of newfangled ideas under his hat, and lavender envelopes in his mail.

Mary's ineffably blue eyes viewed even the number 16 on the mailbox with disfavor. That was how old she had been when Bill Allen buckarooed off to Ag school, while she stayed here to punch cows, take care of a widowered, invalid father with a wilful weakness for whisky—and to grow old ignorant and uneducated.

Ignorant my foot. Old Mike Kitchel, who wasn't so much old as he was stove-up and shiftless, had complained during these past three years that if just half the lamp oil Mary burned up reading books all hours of the night were good rye whisky, maybe he wouldn't have to go around feeling so droop-tailed all the time. Mary had hastily stowed all those books in her own bedroom out of sight when Bill Allen arrived to take hold of the ranch. If Bill thought she was going to let on that she gave a hoot for education, he could go soak a prune.

Sixteen—golden-haired, a golden-dreamed sweet sixteen, still a bit stringy-legged, and never yet kissed —until the day Easy Bill rode by on his way to the train that was to haul him off to college. Then he had stopped just long enough to say, in that easy, bantering way of his which in those days had seemed to her so rosily romantic:

"So long, Snub-Nose. Don't grow up an' marry some two-bit buckaroo while I'm gone!"

Then he had pinched the pink lobe of her left ear between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, and the equally pink lobe of her right ear in the same manner with his left hand, pulled her face abruptly up toward his, and smacked her a good one right on the lips. Even at sixteen Mary had rather expected him to put a couple of arms around her for an encore—just to prove, if nothing else, that the first had not been an accident; but instead Easy Bill had added only a brief, one-armed, sidewise, practically brotherly hug, then restraddled his saddle and ridden away.

Not being obliged to confess her thoughts to anybody, Mary had thought then what a marvelous chunk of dark-haired horseback man he was to risk losing to some college cutie who wouldn't know calf slobbers from wild honey.

Bill had written her often enough—if his communications had only been love letters. But mostly they had been picture postcards: *This is the Chemistry Building where we study stinks —We call this Date Ranch—Girls' Dormitory—This is me winning the 100 yard dash.*

The idea of a born cowboy off somewhere running *foot* races, with a whole corral full of Lazy K broncs

just a-faunchin' to be ridden—and nobody but a couple of old stove-up cowhands and a girl to ride them!

Ordinarily you might expect a college to have vacations, but this Aggie outfit had it fixed so students who wanted to grind out the course in three years could stay right there the year around. Besides, old Crack-Knuckle McCreary evidently didn't believe in any nephew of his having it too easy. Mary knew the stingy old coot could well afford to pay for Easy Bill's education, yet Bill had worked a good share of his way—mainly jerking soda in a drugstore.

So Bill had holidayed home for only one week in three years. Then, doggone him, he had brought along his roommate, and though the two boys were around some, Bill never did manage to be alone with Mary Kitchel. Probably didn't even try—the dope.

This roommate was a lank, blond, non-cowboy geology student, named Darley Brooks, and plenty good-looking. Mary had batted her eyes at him shamelessly. She had made "Darley" sound like "darling" whenever she spoke to him, and it was fun when he flirted right back at her. But if all this had boiled Easy Bill's teakettle any, he certainly knew how to keep the lid on.

"Your winsome wiles are wasted on ol' Darley, Snub-Nose," he had hurrawed her. "There's a growed-up gal at college already got him hog-tied!"

"I suppose some campus cutie's got her brand on you, too, by this time?"

"Sure," Bill had drawled, with his wide, easy grin. "Four or five of 'em!"

"Goody!" Mary had laughed. "I was afraid you'd be coming back here some of these days expecting *me* to take a shine to you!"

Now Easy Bill had not only come home, but turned up right here to manage the Lazy K—as much as to say that both he and his uncle considered her ramrodding of the ranch while Bill was away as a total failure.

Whatever she felt inside, Mary's greeting upon Bill's arrival had been much more breezy and impertinent than sentimental.

"Welcome to the cocklebur patch, Drugstore," she had drawled, aiming her barb at the most visible symbol of his collegiate modernity. "Pardon my rustic queeriosity, but is that something on your lip on purpose?"

For an instant Bill's grin had faded out, then slowly widened again. "Hi, Snub-Nose! Want to see if it tickles?"

He pinched the lobe of her left ear between the thumb and finger of his right hand, evidently aiming to repeat the technique of helping himself to a kiss that had worked all right three years ago. But Mary was no longer a sixteen-year-old floating around in a lavender haze of imaginative romance. It was barely possible that even at nineteen she could have been interested in being kissed, but as sure as it takes warm water to lather soap, breezing in after a three-year absence without a single love letter and expecting to yank her up by the ears like lifting a dogie into a calf-wagon was one heck of a way to go about it.

With cool firmness and dignity, she removed Easy Bill's grasp from her ear and herself from his reach. What she was thinking was that if Mr. William Allen thought a poor lonesome little ranch girl would be that easy just because he was fresh from college—and had done it before—he was

as foolish as that darn little mustache made him look. What she had said, in a properly bored, matter-of-fact tone, was:

"Be your age, Bill. Dad's in the office trying to rig the books so Mr. McCreary's college-boy manager won't find out how much money the Lazy K has been losing. You better go in there and start using your education."

Bill gave her a puzzled look, but didn't say anything, and went on into Mike Kitchel's office.

Noting that Bill's well-groomed, dark head was still as good-looking from the back as ever, Mary's mind had given her misbehaving heart a good sound whack with the stiff stick of pride that had practically left it quivering.

Take me for granted, will he? Phooey!

On her way back from the mailbox, Mary Kitchel picked up a bunch of twenty unbroken broncs and ran them into the main corral. "Manager" Bill hadn't told her to, but what of it?

She found Bill sitting on the edge of the kitchen porch, reading some kind of a leaflet to Singlefoot Lang and Bee-Hunter Hays, the two stove-up old cowhands who comprised the rest of the Lazy K outfit. Singlefoot's name merely meant that he was always trying to teach horses a fancy gait. Bee-Hunter was so called because a crick in his neck made him go around with his head cocked sideways, as if he were looking for a bee tree.

On the porch stood several small cans bearing fiery red labels: *Marcotte's Marvel Branding Fluid.* Evidently Bill was discussing with Singlefoot and Bee-Hunter the instructions for its use.

"Come here a minute, Snub-Nose," Bill called to her pleasantly. "You want to hear this?"

"No," said Mary. She eyed the cans with hostility. "What the heck is that stuff—hair oil?"

Easy Bill grinned. "Excuse me," he said. "I thought you could read."

"Also between the lines," shrugged Mary. "Here's a couple of letters for you."

Bill glanced at them and stuck them in his back pocket. He gave an almost imaginary little twist to his mustache. "This is what we're going to use from now on instead of branding irons, Snub-Nose. Easier, more efficient, more humane, more up-to-date."

"You mix it like mush, put it on with a brush," said Bee-Hunter Hays dryly. "Stainless and painless. No more bellerin' by steers an' their sisters from the scorchin' pain of hot-iron blisters!"

"Looks like soapy syrup an' smells like a drugstore," added Singlefoot.

"Just right for a drugstore cowboy, isn't it?" observed Mary sweetly. "But we'll still have to gather cattle, won't we? So what are we going to ride?"

"Huh?" said Bill. "Has somebody passed a law against horses?"

"No, but—"

"Fact is, Bill," broke in Bee-Hunter, "Mary an' Singlefoot an' me ain't been bustin' broncs much the past two, three years. We're kinder low on saddle horses."

"Then maybe we better start breaking a few," said Bill.

"I suppose," smiled Mary sweetly, "you've got a new modern method for bustin' broncs, too?"

"Sure I have," said Bill, easy and unruffled. "That old horsepower threshing-machine Mike bought the year he tried to raise wheat is still out back of the sheds, isn't it?"

"Sure," said Singlefoot, "but—"

"You and Bee-Hunter go grease it up. If the sweep poles aren't still strong enough, rig up some new ones. Never mind about the threshing screens and snakers—just so the go-around works."

"Looky here, Bill," protested Bee-Hunter, "I ain't never been to college, but—"

"I have," broke in Easy Bill pleasantly. "But that's not the point. The point is—"

"That you're drawin' wages to boss a ranch—an' you aim to earn your pay!" broke in Singlefoot with a shrug. "Come on, Bee-Hunter. We got our powders."

"Thanks, boys," said Easy Bill. "I'll be out there directly. Wait, Snub-Nose. Have you got a few minutes to spare? Hey—Mary, didn't you hear me?"

Mary had started in the house. Now she came back. "At your service, Mr. Manager," she said pertly, "whenever you call me by my right name."

"Hell, I always have called you Snub-Nose, haven't I?"

"Yes, but is it modern and up-to-date?"

Bill shrugged. "O. K., *Mary*. For such a little cowgal you sure wear big spurs."

"You haven't read your mail yet," said Mary.

"Huh? Yeah, maybe I'd better." He glanced through Crack-Knuckle McCreary's letter hurriedly.

"Uncle John just wants to know if I'm making any headway," he said. "Also he gave Jeff Milligan a bottle of medicine for your dad, first time any of us rides over that way."

A troubled look came in Mary's blue eyes. "Medicine," she knew, meant a bottle of good rye whisky, to be doled out to her father sparingly, since he seemed unable to live without it. Tightwad John C. McCreary might be, but in their younger days he and her father had, as Mike Kitchel put it, "et the same dust an' drunk out of the same cow tracks"; and Mary was grateful that for years McCreary's kindness had seen to it that she never had to buy her father's whisky ration herself.

She saw a warm look of pleasure come over Bill's face as he read the other letter. She knew it wasn't exactly her turn, but she couldn't help twitting him a little.

"From the look on your face," she said, "somebody must be going to send you a bag of peanuts."

Bill held out the letter. "Read it," he said.

"No thanks," said Mary with what she considered just the right amount of sisterly sweetness. "Just show me where it says 'love and kisses'."

Bill stuffed the letter back in his pocket. "Snub-Nose on the peck!" he sighed. "And you used to be such a sweet kid!"

"I used to be range boss of a little ranch, too—while you were learning to make strawberry sundaes—remember?"

"Don't be that way, Mary," said Easy Bill, sounding like a man uncertain just how much of his long-handled exasperation to let show. "All I'm trying to do is get the Lazy K on its feet. But I'll take to the tules any time you holler boo."

He sounded like he meant it, and Mary hoped he wouldn't glimpse the alarm in her eyes. Maybe it was a poor time for further flippancy, but it was a course to which she somehow seemed to find herself committed.

"At least don't leave, Bill," she smiled, "until you have showed us how to break broncs with a threshing machine."

Easy Bill ignored it. "About that letter," he said. "The girl Darley Brooks is engaged to wants to find some hide-out for them to live in while Darley writes a book on geology. You reckon the old rock house could be fixed up?"

"I don't see why not." Mary hid her silly feeling of relief behind the words like a range cow hides her calf behind a bush. "Shall we go look at it?"

The old two-room rock house had been the original structure on the Lazy K, until in an expansive moment the year Mary was born, Mike Kitchel had built a fancy new frame "bull's mansion" farther down the draw, with a hydrant in the kitchen—and a mortgage on the roof that had finally resulted in his having to take Crack-Knuckle McCreary in as part owner.

Since then the old rock house had been little used except for occasional storage, but they found its walls as solid as ever, and the slate-rock roof looked fixable.

The windows were boarded up, and the cool half-darkness gave Mary an intimate feeling of farawayness from the dusty cow-ranch world outside. She caught herself thinking that if a man urgently wanted to take a girl in his arms—unexpectedly of course—this might be a good time and place. But Bill was already at the door, on his way out.

"Comin', Snub-Nose? I want to go see how the boys are makin' out with my bronc-bustin' machine."

Mary's fingers fiddled with a loose rock in a window ledge. *For two cents,* she thought, *I'd crack him on the head with it.*

Perversely, Mary joined Singlefoot and Bee-Hunter in poking fun at Easy Bill's novel system of sweating rebellion out of raw broncs. The old thresher rig was like a huge wagon wheel with only four spokes, its hub stuck in the ground, each spoke being a long pole rigged so that a team could be hitched to it near the outer end. Thus, walking a big circle, four teams would turn the crude power wheel like a slow merry-go-round.

Bill borrowed extra work horses from Jeff Milligan that afternoon when he rode over after Mike Kitchel's "medicine." The next morning, with the two old cowboys' help, he hitched a raw bronc in one of the spans, on the inner side toward the hub. A stout rope around the bronc's neck was tied short to the sweep ahead of him. Even old Bee-Hunter had to admit this wasn't much more work than a job of saddling.

When the seven steady, harness-broke horses were started on their circle there wasn't a darn thing the bronc could do but go along. If he set back the rope held him. If he lunged forward, the tug on his trace chains merely helped turn the big wheel. Hemmed in by a workhorse on the outside, by a sweep pole ahead and behind, and by a walking man between him and the hub, the bronc soon found out that he had to march

the circle whether he liked it or not.

In about an hour, when the first bronc was well sweated down, Easy Bill hitched up another in the same manner. By mid-afternoon he had four broncs and four gentle work-horses plodding around the treadmill —and nobody had had any dinner.

Mary helped Agapita, the Mexican *cocinera,* bring out hot coffee and cold biscuits—chuck the men could handle during brief rests without leaving their posts in the bronc-busting machine. Old Mike Kitchel had come cane-thumping out to watch "the damn foolishness," but stayed to approve.

"Look, Mary, how docile he's got them broncs behavin' already!" he chuckled. "That Easy Bill, he's got brains!"

"So have I," complained Singlefoot, "but they're gittin' awful dizzy marchin' around this maypole!"

"Anyhow," grunted Bee-Hunter, vainly trying to keep brow sweat from dripping into his coffee, "what the hell good is a cow hoss that don't know nothin' but to push a pole around in a circle?"

Easy Bill said nothing. He looked at Mary inquiringly. The girl shrugged.

"Run this merry-go-round till kingdom-come," she observed sweetly, "and the broncs will still have to be saddled and ridden—if there's anybody man enough around here to do it!"

Easy Bill flushed a little. "Hold your 'tater, Snub-Nose," he advised. "They'll be rode in due time."

"I sure hope nobody don't come by an' see what's goin' on here," complained Bee-Hunter. "I been laughed at before—but never that hard!"

Easy Bill wound up the show for that day by lacing saddles on all four broncs for a while, then riding each one for about five minutes. Mary felt chagrined that only one of the four even tried to buck, and that one not very hard.

"The modern way is to use your head, Snub-Nose," smiled Easy Bill. "While tiring down, they learn they're under control. Chances are they never will buck."

"Phooey!" sniffed Mary. "Machine-busted broncs! You'll be the laughing-stock of the whole darn country!"

Bill put a hand on her arm. "Do you care if I am, Snub-Nose?"

"Not a rap!" said Mary, and went to the house.

On the third day Bill rode each of the four broncs without the treadmill, and still no bucking. On the fifth day he rode one of them to start gathering in cattle for the branding. Mary rode with him as far as Lobo Hill, where they would split for the day's circle.

It seemed so nice riding out that way together that Mary caught herself wishing she had let Bill go ahead and kiss her that first day, even if it wasn't preceded by the romantic build-up she felt a girl was entitled to. Now it had begun to look as if Easy Bill had no more interest in courting than he had in rough-busting broncs the old rawhide way. Well, all right—phooey on him and his crazy bronc machine, his new-fangled branding goo, and his darned little college-born mustache.

She saw Easy Bill watching her as they rode along.

"Snub-Nose," he observed, with that never-failing, easy, good-humored widening of the lips inadequately called a grin, "I wonder how you'd

look all spiffed up in a dress instead of those levis?"

Instead of answering, Mary chose that moment to lope off for a look-see over the rim of the hill, and Bill didn't follow. He spoke soberly when she rejoined him:

"Mary, the Lazy K hasn't been making you and your dad any money, has it?"

"You mean because I've been such a poor manager?"

"No, damn it! I mean—look! What if I made a deal to take over Uncle John's share of the partnership?"

Something in Mary's heart wanted her to say: "Oh, Bill, I wish you'd take over all of it—and me with it!" But even with those lavender letters out of the way, there was still some gravel in her craw. What she did say was:

"It's a free country, cowboy! Well, here's where we split the ridin'." Then back over her shoulder as she loped away: "Look out that machine-busted bronc don't slip a gear with you."

The four of them made a fair gather of cattle that day. Easy Bill was last in with the fewest, but Mary didn't josh him.

"We'll brand some in the morning," he said.

"Hot iron or syrup?" inquired Singlefoot.

"Make it hot ir'n!" grinned Bee-Hunter. "I'm savin' that long sweet-enin' to lather my pancakes!"

"Careful, Bee-Hunter," laughed Easy Bill. "A dribble of that stuff on those hairy handlebars of yours would sure make you hard to catch!"

"Bill's an expert on mustaches, aren't you, Bill?" said Mary.

Easy Bill's grin was not very wide.

"I see you're still wearin' your gigs, Snub-Nose. What ails you, anyhow?"

"Nothing a good night's sleep won't cure," yawned the girl, and went off to bed.

The house was dark when she tip-toed downstairs hours later to stop a kitchen screen from banging in the wind. She paused to listen to rhythmic but unromantic noises in Easy Bill's room. There was certainly nothing collegiate about his snoring!

On the back porch a sliver of moonlight gleamed on tin cans. Mary picked one up, took it inside, lit a lamp, and thoughtfully read the instructions for using Marcotte's Marvel Branding Fluid.

Next morning in the big corral Mary watched Easy Bill miss three loops, then nonchalantly rode after the same calf, flicked down a little loop, and yanked its heels up snug with one throw.

"Never mind, Drugstore," she ribbed him. "Maybe you can invent a roping machine, too!"

"That's right," said Bill a little sharply. "I plan to build a modern branding-chute and save all this messing around."

"Phooey!" sniffed the girl. "You and your modern plans!"

"Look, Mary," said Bill, "the way you keep ripping it into me—don't you even like me at all?"

"Sure," shrugged Mary. "I love you plumb to death!"

"Thanks for the sarcasm," said Bill dryly,

"Keep the change," said Mary.

She watched Easy Bill paint a dribbly Lazy K on the hip of the calf Singlefoot and Bee-Hunter held down for him.

"Do you really think that drugstore

stuff will make a brand?"

"Certainly. Don't you?"

"Personally," smiled Mary, "I'm still a hot-iron gal!"

"Painless, stainless, plumb complainless!" crooned old Bee-Hunter. "To fix it you mix it! To use it you ooze it! To—"

"Shut up!" said Easy Bill, and sounded like he meant it.

Mary went on deftly heeling calves, with rarely a miss. She made no comment even when Bill swore a little because the branding stuff was sticky and inclined to smear.

When they had finished, Easy Bill followed her over to the gate. "Nice job of heeling, Snub-Nose," he said. "But maybe when I get a chute built you won't have to get out and help with the branding this way."

"I'd like to know what else I'm good for," said Mary, then hated herself for sounding so babyish. She thought the way Easy Bill looked at her then could have meant anything—or nothing.

"Bill," she said hesitatingly. "I didn't aim to be mean, hurrawing you about your roping. I know you're out of practice."

"Think nothing of it," said Bill, but without the grin. He turned to Bee-Hunter. "Hold 'em overnight in the *ciénega* trap, boys. I want to see tomorrow how these brands come out."

Out in the pasture the next morning, what was supposed to be a Lazy K on the calves was a mere messy smear. Silently Bill roped one of the calves—with his first throw. Mary stayed on her horse, while the men examined the brand.

"Don't seem to have took holt," said Singlefoot.

"Maybe," grinned Bee-Hunter, "we'll have to warm up the old ir'ns after all!"

Easy Bill scratched his head ruefully. "Maybe," he said. "I'm goin' to have another look at the directions on that stuff!"

He rode back to the house in stiff-backed silence which neither of the old cowhands nor Mary ventured to break, though they did swap a few grins.

Easy Bill dismounted at the kitchen porch, picked up a can, shook it, and frowned at the slightly smeared label. "Mary," he said shortly, "fetch me some kind of a pan. I want to look at this stuff."

"An' a couple of spoons," added Bee-Hunter. "Maybe it's bean soup!"

Mary brought the pan. Easy Bill poured a little of the liquid into it and stirred it with a stick.

On a sudden impulse, before Bill could realize what she was up to, Mary stuck a finger in the stuff and swiped a smear of it across the short-cropped mustache of his upper lip, then fled into the house. A swift look back showed her the cowboy wiping his lip with a red bandanna hardly redder than his face. It also showed her that he was mad—damned mad.

In something like panic she fled upstairs to her bedroom and shut the door. She couldn't find a key, but she propped a chair under the knob. When she heard Easy Bill's determined tread coming up the stairs her heart began turning crazy, frightened flipflops.

"Mary," said Bill's stern voice outside the door, "you come out here!"

Mary gulped, but she couldn't quite gulp the scared quaver out of her voice. "Gosh, Bill! Honest, I didn't mean—"

"Mary—" Bill still sounded plenty mad— "you knew that stuff in the pan wasn't sure-'nough branding fluid, didn't you?"

Mary couldn't seem to think of a good quick answer, flippant or otherwise. She heard Bill put his shoulder to the door, but the chair prop held.

"Mary—" the tone was deliberate, but still angry— "you poured out my branding fluid and filled the cans with syrup and soapy water, and I'm going to paddle you for it, as sure as hell's an inch wide!"

"Go away!" said Mary. She tried to sound angry herself. "Go—go on back to your darned college!"

"Mary!"

"A fine one you are to talk about paddling somebody," she called out sweetly. "You haven't even got nerve enough to bust a bronc without hitching him to an old threshing machine!"

Suddenly the chair skidded from under the knob before the forced opening of the door. Mary squealed and made a dive for a closet, but tripped over a pile of books.

Easy Bill didn't say anything. He stood wide-legged, staring curiously at the tumbled volumes, many of which were familiar college textbooks. Then he seized the girl's hands, crossed her slender wrists in the grip of his good right hand, and led her, willy-nilly, downstairs.

Old Mike Kitchel came hobbling from his room to see what was up, but only grinned as Easy Bill led his kicking captive firmly outside. The Mexican *cocinera* came at Bill with a broom, but failed to use it when Mary said sharply:

"Never mind, Agapita! I can handle this!"

She handled it by finding herself led out to the corral for all the world like a calf dragged up to a branding-fire.

Singlefoot and Bee-Hunter stared in astonishment and some concern.

"What's goin' on here, Bill?" asked Singlefoot sharply. "You cain't—"

"Go run in the wild bunch, boys," said Easy Bill firmly but pleasantly. "This cowgal wants to see me ride one!"

"But gosh, Bill, I didn't mean—"

"Young lady," said Easy Bill, abruptly freeing her wrists, "this is a free country, so take your choice: either climb up on that top rail and watch a drugstore cowboy trying to get his neck busted in the good old-fashioned way—or let the Lazy K hunt a new manager!"

"But gee, Bill! You're all out of practice bronc-riding! I don't want you to get your neck busted! I just want—"

"That's right," said Easy Bill, as Singlefoot and Bee-Hunter rode doubtfully away after the broncs. "All you want to bust is my heart!"

Oh, gosh, thought Mary in a moment of strange but not unhappy panic, *here it comes—and what'll I do?*

As Bill reached for her hand she dodged away and squirreled quickly to the top rail of the tall corral fence. It wasn't easy to make herself laugh now, but she managed it, neatly and merrily.

"Don't be silly, Bill! Just because I had a crazy pigtail crush on you when I was a kid, is no sign—"

"You aren't a kid any more, Snub-Nose, and I—I—" For once Easy Bill's tongue seemed to stiffen up on him, like a foundered bronc. "I'm sorry I got rough with you, Mary."

"I'm not! I guess I made you mad on purpose!"

"Snub-Nose—remember when I kissed you good-by that time? That's why I got Uncle John to give me this job. So I could—"

"Kiss me good-by again?"

"Keep quiet, damn it! I've always been crazy about you, and I still am. But you never gave me a chance. I thought maybe if I waited till I sort of got the Lazy K on its feet for you—"

"Bill," broke in the girl with a sigh, "aren't you wasting a lot of wind? Or can't you climb a fence?"

Easy Bill's foot reached the second rail, then abruptly stepped down again.

"I love you like hell, Snub-Nose," he grinned cheerfully, "but I've got a bronc to ride first—just to show you! They'll be back with the wild bunch in a minute, and—hey, hold it!"

Up on the top rail the faraway look in Mary Kitchel's blue eyes were seeing a gap that had once seemed as wide as Mile Across Canyon swiftly narrowed down to no more than the mere height of a corral fence.

"Bill!" she cried, tottering perilously but prettily. "I—I'm dizzy!"

And so she was—just dizzy enough to fall off a high pole fence where a college cowboy's arms couldn't help catching her.

Hunters, Traders, Scouts, Explorers

A Quiz

MANY OF THE MEN who made important contributions to the making of the West have never received the recognition due them; few of the great traders, hunters, and scouts have had their names and deeds immortalized in the written word. Still, there were some whose records are so bright that their names are fairly well known today. In this quiz, you should be able to identify six of the ten to pass; a score of 7 or 8 correct is good work; and more than that qualifies you as something of an authority on Western Americana. Simply match the clues in the left-hand column below with the names on the right. Answers on page 159.

1. He discovered Great Salt Lake. ___Kit Carson
2. He guided the man who discovered Pike's Peak. ___Tom Horn
3. Called The Pathfinder, his explorations opened the trail to Oregon. ___Frederick Burnham
4. This missionary explorer answered the call of the Nez Perces for teaching. ___John Frémont
5. This fellow is best remembered for his buffalo-hunting exploits. ___Jim Bridger
6. A great dam is named after this near-legendary Oregon adventurer. ___Joe Meek
7. He crossed the Mohave Desert to blaze a trail to California. ___William Cody
8. His cross-country trip to Washington, D. C., led to the creation of Oregon Territory. ___Samuel Parker
9. He learned his scouting in the West, later put it to use in South Africa. ___Captain Bonneville
10. A scout during the Indian Wars, he became a hired killer. ___Jedediah Smith

OUT OF THE PAST *comes riding the fabled figure of Don Reata Larga—or a reasonable facsimile thereof—to prey on horse rancher Tom Dwyer's herd. Dwyer, however, is made of too stern stuff to be daunted by vaqueros' tales of "half-things" risen from the grave. He sets a trap—and discovers that traps, as well as tables, are sometimes turned. This story now appears in print for the first time.*

The Long Rope

By EDWIN L. SABIN

THE high-wheeled, four-cylinder roadster had been jetting steam for some time. Just as the rough trail, pursued at a venture, gave sight of a green bottom land in the draw that opened ahead, the car began to buck. Jouncing down the rutted grade, with McDermott now braking, now pushing on the throttle, it clanked to a stop a little short of a ranch yard signaled by a cluster of poplars shading a low adobe house.

McDermott shut off. Burned and dusty, he was arrived somewhere at last. The place might have been a settled outpost of the far Southwest of Apache and staging days. Surely no railway whistle ever echoed in here. No rubber-tired prints had preceded his own. He clambered stiffly from the seat. Feeling like a trespasser in his modern rig of laced boots, natty khaki, and flat-brimmed Stetson, he trudged on for the double gateway in the pole fence. The bars were down; barking dogs challenged him; the man sitting composedly upon the *ramada,* or brush-covered veranda porch, rose to receive him.

He was a tall, straight-up, leaned, and ready man, sheathed in flannel and belted jeans, with long legs shaped to the saddle; a weathered and graying man, with bleached, heavy mustache and hawk nose and the narrowed, far-seeing eyes (they were hazeled-blue eyes) of plainsman and mountaineer.

The welcome was matter-of-fact. The pioneering car evoked small comment, only the mild disdain of the

horseman for a metal contraption which had shown its limits on first appearance.

His name was Dwyer—Tom Dwyer. Yes, let the machine cool. Water for it? Plenty. Even a horse needed water. Better stop the night, before trying the back trail out. The road was the ranch road; it ended here. He was alone, but his two Mexican hands would be in shortly, at sundown, from their day of riding the valley after cows.

How long had he been down here in this part of Arizona? Something like thirty years. Had located himself when the 'Paches seemed to have been quieted and new country was open for stock-raising. Had started in raising horses for cavalry mounts. Thieves? Oh, with the Injuns corralled and his grazing range tucked away in this valley pretty well on the outer edge of things, he had not 'lowed for horse thieves.

The furnishings of the porch tied in with the old days: cowhide-bottomed chairs framed of mesquite branches bound together with rawhide, a settee of the same material, carelessly flung Navajo weaves of standard old designs— A blackened reata, hung in a coil beside the doorway, invited attention. McDermott, with an eye for all these things (he ran a curio shop in Los Angeles) stepped to examine it.

It was of four-ply rawhide, scarcely larger than the butt of his little finger, round and smooth and firm of braid, and flexible as if kept preserved against time and weather.

"About sixty feet, there, is all," Dwyer remarked. "Was about seventy feet in the throw. I didn't keep the ten or so feet it lacks. You don't often see a rawhide as good as that one. It's as slick as a snake."

"Unusually long?" McDermott hazarded.

"The grass rope—that's the manila twist—used nowadays is thirty-five to forty feet, and that's the throwing-limit. The McCarty, the hair rope, is pretty, but it's too light for a long throw. There's nothing equal to a hard-braided rawhide; it's smooth and heavy and travels like a bullet. It will hold a bull if you give it a little play at fust by letting the wrap smoke your horn."

"I don't happen to have come across many," McDermott said.

"Hides are valuable and grass rope by the bale is cheaper. Fifty-foot rawhides, Mexican-made, were common enough in this southern country when I came in. But this is the only seventy-foot rope—or was—I can swear to."

"An old one? You've kept it well."

"I rub it down occasionally and I don't chance busting it. It goes back to a time when I was at one end of it and a horse thief at the other." Dwyer added grimly: "I was at the noose end."

"His rope, was it?"

"Um-m, not mine yet, anyhow. Might call it the rawhide of Don Reata Larga—Long Rope, that is. Seems to be right good evidence. Seeing is believing. I'll tell you the story after supper."

He was Thomas Jefferson Dwyer by his Virginia christening, and had been a boy of sixteen with Mosby's hard-riding rangers in the Confederate service. At the close of the war between the States he had headed West, worked on the new Union Pacific grade across the plains, driven

stage on the California southern route through Arizona; and pushing out for independence, he had located in this unclaimed valley abandoned to its piñon slopes.

Here where there were grazing and water he proceeded to build up a horse herd. This adobe, gone to ruins, and traces of a brush corral would say that the precincts had been ranched before, but that made no difference to him.

He had little fear of the animals straying. They would stay by the feed and water. He and a helper, to divide day and night herd duty and gentle the animals to voice and rope, would be outfit enough. So he put in his breeding stock, stallion and mares, and waited for the increase.

He had marked and branded his first crop of youngsters, when he began to miss animals. The tally, made at large after a fashion from the saddle, came out short. A lion might have been attracted in from the higher country and be at work, but there were no carcasses, no sign of dragging, and the herd was not panicky. The losses were slight. Pedro, the herder, believed that a wild stallion must be tolling out-ranging mares away in spite of *el caballo padre,* the herd father. *Quién sabe?* Or else somebody with six legs was cutting out singles—somebody as clever as Don Reata Larga.

"Don Long Rope? Who is that, *hombre?*" Dwyer queried.

"Of many years ago, señor. I heard of him in California, where I was born. He was of the high family but he could outdo any vaquero. He threw a rope very long. He could catch an animal at over twenty *varas,* señor; yes, at more than sixty English feet. This made it easy for him when he entered the games and would throw the bull in a race. Besides, he rode a swift black mare, a very witch."

"Don Reata Larga, you say? He had another name?" Dwyer asked.

"Don Francisco de Vargas, señor. That is a name from early times in what is now New Mexico and Arizona. From the times of the conquistadores."

"Do you think he is around stealing horses?"

Pedro crossed himself. "He is dead, señor. He was not young in the day of my father, who told me of him. God forbid that I should call him a thief. It is said he traded with only the Americans, who took the country and made him poor in horses and lands. Why should he not use a trick of the wrist and rope to get himself a horse or two for the market in Sonora? He had to live while he lived, and that was a sure way. An animal on the range soon learns the length of a rope, señor. He knows when to dodge. But a rope like that of Don Francisco fools him."

"The thief who plays a long rope in here will end with a short rope," Dwyer said.

"Or with a bullet. We will watch," Pedro declared.

It was early in a morning when Pedro plied in on sweated mount, from herd guard down the valley. "The thief! I have seen him, señor! He is away with the young stallion, the *caballo castaño,* the fine chestnut!"

"How so? Tell me!" Dwyer ordered.

"Another Reata Larga, or the same risen from the grave," Pedro babbled. "Just at dawn, when I was making my last circle—across where the val-

ley narrows, señor, I saw him. It was done very quickly as I rode for him. A man on a black mare. The mare was a witch. The stallion sidled for her. He shied when the *lazo* opened, but he was not as smart as he thought. Right over his head, señor, swift as an arrow! Then they all were away, like the wind, up the slope."

"You followed?"

"My hot lead followed, señor. Twice I fired this rifle. I think my second ball got him, whether he was ghost or flesh. He jerked up an arm at that shot, and then was over the top. I could not have caught him, and there was the herd to look to until I had rounded them in for *el padre* to guard. I found where his mare had stood, and where the chestnut had wheeled from the noose. A cast of over sixty feet, señor. I will show you."

"Where could he have come from?"

"God or the devil knows," and Pedro signed the cross. "If he is Don Long Rope he has taken human shape again. There is no accounting for habits. He may have been visiting us before."

Dwyer rode down to examine the place of action. Here, tracks out were plain in the brush, until a short distance on they faded in a stretch of hard-baked sod. Nothing moved on the rough mesa. He was not prepared to scout about at random.

"I see no blood. I don't think you hit the fellow, Pedro."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Pedro wagged. "I hurried him, or his witch mare would have left no tracks. Now I understand what has been going on. Maybe it takes a silver bullet. If I did not harm him he will be back, señor. I will cut a cross on a bullet and try him with that. Of course he may come in the night. That is the trouble. If he is a half-thing in the shape of the Long Rope, he sees in the dark. This last time he was a little late."

"We will corral the herd at sundown and both go on night guard," Dwyer said.

That was done. The herd submitted for night guard in the rebuilt brush corral, with the gap opening barred by a rope. Nothing unusual occurred to break the watches. A week, ten days passed. Pedro's rifle may have served sufficient notice, after all. And then, when care had relaxed, the break came.

The night had lightened to a misty gray. The ghost moon in its last quarter was vague overhead. Dwyer had eased himself off the saddle, at a proper distance from the corral, for a figure afoot might disturb the herd, used to man and horse as one. Where Pedro was, he did not know—probably nodding, heavy-eyed, huddled beside his drowsy mount. The corralled animals stirred. The father stallion snorted. Dwyer pricked with a start of alarm, and sharpened to the view a little below his post.

The action there was amazingly quick. A horseman appeared out of the misty void, with never a sound as if the animal he rode had velvet hoofs. Right at the corral gap they were, the herd bunched to the farther side; a reata, thin like a black streak uncoiling, shot its noose clear across the space. Instantly the man's mount, small and nimble, whirled catlike, stole on with silent tread, and the caught animal obediently followed, through the gap, where the barring rope had been slacked down. At increasing pace they were away—

Dwyer had lunged up, his rifle to his shoulder, to get either man or mount. The hammer clicked with a misfire. Furiously, he ejected the cartridge and tried for another sight. The mist had closed upon the mark. He sprang to his horse, gathered the dropped reins, and swung into the saddle; he had a last glimpse of the fugitives, the rider and the two horses, careering up the other flank of the valley, and lifting his bay, he set after by the shortest route.

The distant thud of hoofs amid the dew-moist brush died to his ear, and when he topped the valley rim he had missed the trail. By skirting the edge he cut the sign, where the glisten had been swept from leaves and twigs by the passage of the two horses in single file. Leaving the herd to Pedro, he turned his gelding upon the slightly darkened path.

The mist upon the mesa was heavier, in a drift of fog wafted toward the lower ground. But the air up here would clear first with the morning breeze and the sun. He rode at a steady canter, which his deep-chested, leggy bay could maintain hour after hour. The sign telling him across the rough, arid plateau grew no fresher. The sun rose, the fog vanished, the drying air blotted up the moisture on soil and shrubs, but he needed no trail laid for him. There well ahead, rapidly threading those scraggly piñons flooded by the sunshine from the blue, the rider with led horse in tow plainly showed in flight for sanctuary.

Dwyer was not to be lost now. He spoke to the bay gelding, whose ears pointed forward as if he sensed his mission. The sun floated higher. The chase suddenly disappeared. Another draw opened, with the chase about to cross the bottom of it. Dwyer plunged down in pursuit. All he asked was to close within rifle shot. In the tangle of cactus and other chaparral of the bottoms he was held for a moment by a whinny. It was the stolen horse—a blown mare heavy with foal and loosed by a flick of the rope.

He was not to be stayed by the gift—a token that he was pressing hard. The quarry, bent low in the saddle, was breasting up the next slope, and signaled defiance with a lifted arm.

The range was too long for a wavering sight. Dwyer spoke to his bay, did not force him on the uphill stint. Endurance would tell. The race bore on, across the next level and down into a sandy flat brightened by a willowed, apparently shallow stream.

The rider and his mount—Pedro's Don Long Rope and the black mare—plashed out from the willows fringe to continue on through the other sparsely brushed level, the man with head occasionally turned. Now upon the tracks, Dwyer took to the ford as indicated by them. The stream rippled in a wide eddy, fetlocks-deep, knees-deep; his bay floundered, staggered, lurched aside, tried to rear; he flung off, sank ankles deep in the bottom ooze, was bogged; the bay, relieved of his weight, tore free with a sucking sound, wrenched the lines from his grasp, and plunging on gained the opposite margin and galloped for distance, while he stayed anchored, with the liquid sand gradually swallowing his leather-clad legs.

Quicksand! He knew better than to struggle and churn the grains. By flattening forward he might pull himself loose, inch by inch, while buoyed by the slow current.

No, not in these shallows! His first

try only buried his hands to his wrists. He was trapped! A false trail—one way into the stream, and a safe way out while fording, under the screen of the willows!

At a distance the rider had turned about, to canter back with jaunty seat. The bay gelding was paused, his ears pricked with interest, out there a little to the side.

The rider drew down, to halt for a survey, sideways, well clear of the stream edge, which here at the deceptive ford was invitingly free of the border willows. His rig was thoroughly Spanish: the peaked, silver-banded sombrero; the silver-buttoned, open velvet jacket; the soft-leather, close-fitting *botas* or boots of a *caballero,* not the *chaparajos* or chaps of a vaquero, and reaching like leggings to the thighs; the huge roweled spurs; the deep-seated, high-pommel, high-cantle saddle, with wide *bastos* or skirts; the large wooden stirrups with trailing eagle-wind *tapaderas* or leather hoods; the bridle with rosettes and with long reins, of ends plaited to serve as a quirt; other significant horse furniture. He was a figure out of the past—a handsome slim fellow, smooth of face, upon that nimble black mare.

With wrathful eyes Dwyer saw white teeth flash in the shadowed dark face. He heard the mocking hail:

"You are in trouble, señor?"

"Yes, thanks to you. Now throw me a rope."

The fellow laughed. "Not so easy out as in, señor. You ask a miracle. See? My Felicia knows. She once was in that place. She prefers to come no nearer." And the mare braced against the touch of rein and spur. "From here it is too long a cast, señor. Supposing I did edge her nearer, even to sure distance. Then what?"

"You ask me to bargain with a horse thief?" Dwyer answered. His rifle in its scabbard was with the bay, but he whipped out his Colt and thumbed it to the cock with barrel leveled. "All right; your life or mine. Which shall it be?"

The laughed retort: "What good to shoot me, señor?" stung him to fury. He was slowly sinking. He gave a great struggle with his body and thighs, and in his tightened grip the gun exploded, almost jumping from his hand.

He heard a loud cry. The mare was down, stiff-legged upon her side, as if struck by a lightning bolt. The rider squirmed free, and bent over her with sobbed words. He straightened up.

"You have killed her! You have killed my Felicia! I might have persuaded her to help you, for she was a woman. But now—! Very well. What matters? I think you have destroyed yourself, señor. Shoot me if you like. Call your own horse. Let him bring you the rope that can get you out."

The bay gelding, beginning to nose in for the mare, had wheeled from the revolver shot. With lines trailing, he whinnied impatiently. The black mare, as Pedro had vowed, was a witch. And then Dwyer, held fast and helpless, gasped astonishment. The Spanish fellow cried out again—with a writhe, the mare scrambled up, to stand straddled and trembling, her neck stained red.

Not dead! Only creased! The chance ball had scored the crest of the neck, had grazed the upper vertebrae; the blow had stunned the animal until the nerve shock had passed. The wild-horse hunter who tried for

a shot like this risked a miss or a kill. Success lay within a fraction of an inch.

Her master was fondling her with words and hands. She nuzzled for comfort like a dog. But time sped, the liquid sand, although slowed by the baggy chaps, was creeping up Dwyer's legs, and the pretty picture out there did not relieve the relentless suck.

Dwyer heard the utterance: "She says it must be, señor."

What now? He was to be left? He called: "Have a care! You see that I can shoot. You stay as long as I do."

But the fellow took down the coil of rope from the saddle. He moved in, shaking out the noose with his right hand. He spoke over his shoulder and the mare followed him, doglike, only to falter, snort, and brace to a stop.

"Too far, too far, man!" Dwyer warned. "On with her. You'll need her on the rope. I'm in above my knees."

"Save your breath, señor. What she will do, she will do. But she remembers your bullet. And why should she risk sharing those sands with you? If I were in there she would even offer me her stirrup leather."

He came on with the coil and noose; measured with eye backward, eye forward, and halted. Twenty paces? More than twenty paces!

"I could bring her no nearer than this. Hold quiet. I will reach you."

He stood erect and slim, advanced a booted leg, swung the noose, and cast, full length of arm. The noose came whistling, with hiss of uncoiled rawhide in its wake. Dwyer hunched his shoulders as it checked its flight, centered above him, and dropped upon the water in a circle about him. His thought was to save his arms and neck. He instantly slipped the noose up and it tightened below his armpits.

The end of the rope was in the fellow's grip. His judge of distance had been perfect. He spoke to his mare. She moved in, step by step, suspicious but obedient; came on to the outstretched hand, and for the wrap of the rope end about the high pommel. At a word she turned. The rope tautened. Treading precisely, she moved away, with her master, looking backward, at even pace by her flank.

The long rope, a match for that of Pedro's Don Reata Larga, quivered to the strain, but the braided tough hide held. Dwyer, with hands clutched to it to ease the pull on his body, fought for breath. The sands were yielding. He felt his legs sliding with him.

He was out with a gurgle and went ploughing the water until at the stream edge he hauled himself to his knees, to his feet; lunged forward to gain slack and throw off the noose. The mare halted. The man laughed, and with a sudden flick sent a half-hitch traveling down the slack and pinioned his elbows.

"Not so fast, señor. You are out, thanks to my Felicia and my good rope. Are we quits?"

Dwyer swore at the bribe. He ran forward upon the rope. Before the slack could be taken up he loosed an arm while still in motion. He fished his stock knife from a pocket, opened it with his teeth, and with a swipe slashed through the rawhide. His gun leaped to the level again. Shaking off the lax half-hitch and noose, he walked in.

"I will take your mare and rope, *hombre*," he said. "And when I have caught my horse we will go back, you and I. You are too careless with your

rope to be at large."

"You have hurt my Felicia; you would take her. You have ruined my rope; you would take that. I held your life in my hands and it is yours again. I have nothing left."

"You should have thought of that before you turned horse thief."

"Look, señor! What do you see?" The silvered hat was swept aside, glossy black hair came tumbling down. The out-stretched arms parted the velvet jacket and an unmistakable curve rounded the fine cambric shirt.

Dwyer exclaimed, "A woman—a girl?"

"Si," she said. "At your mercy, but not at your will." She flashed a small dagger from a secret sheath. She went on, speaking hotly:

"I knew I should better leave you in the sands where I had led you. You killed my Francisco, my husband—"

"No!" Dwyer said. "I never laid sights on your husband."

"Felicia brought him to me, wounded by a bullet; he died in five days; I myself buried him. What had he done? He had done very little. All that valley, and more, were once De Vargas lands by grant of the king of Spain and the governor of Mexico."

"That was many years ago, señora."

"True, señor. Americans seized Spanish lands; your *gringo* horses are eating the Vargas grass. My Francisco was the last of the Vargas family. He was poor, as his Don Francisco father had been."

"You would say it was he who set out to play Don Reata Larga?" Dwyer made guess.

"You have heard the name? Yes," she answered. "Why should he not? He had been raised with horse and rope. With his black mare and the long rope of his *caballero* father he thought also to collect a little grazing-rent."

"And how about you?"

"I took to the trail with Felicia and the rope. I am clever, as you have seen, señor, and someone was to pay for that shot. Felicia carried me true. She enjoyed those little trips. I found your corral, I was not to return alone, I invited pursuit. You were easy game, señor. It was your life, not your horses, that I wanted. I gave you to the sands, but Felicia had pity, and at heart I too am only a woman. You can go to look for the horses you have missed. They are in the Canyon Diablo. What more do you want of me? I am now poor."

"A good story!" Dwyer scoffed. "Your Francisco! I've yet to find him, and those horses in the canyon. They can wait. I only know that somebody has been too free with horse and rope. And you can wait here till I catch my own horse. You and I will take a little ride together."

"Where, señor?" she demanded. "Not back with you! You don't believe me? You think to hold me and Felicia? Never, señor!"

"That's for me to say," he answered.

The mare was trembling with nervousness and discomfort from her stiffened, bloody scar. He fisted the reins short, put foot in stirrup, and vaulted into the great saddle. The mare cringed under the strange weight of him in his sandy chaps, but started forward at the touch of his spurs. While he rode he retrieved the trailing rawhide and tied a *honda* knot in the end of the noose. The woman left afoot had set about tucking her hair

back under the sombrero. She acted with decision.

The bay gelding stood with head high and edged away at his approach, as if offended by the scent of blood on the slight breeze. Dwyer got off, loosed the rope in his hands, and advanced at a cautious shamble. The bay, restive, kept just beyond casting-distance as he knew it. Dwyer figured chances. The rawhide as gathered in had still been long beyond ordinary. The bay was about to wheel once more. Dwyer heard a shrill whistle. He looked. The black mare, quick to the signal, was at a glad canter for the woman.

The gelding had poised, staring. It was the chance. With a run and a sudden twitch of noose Dwyer cast, full power. The coils straightened; the noose settled over the animal's head. Dwyer ran stumbling on, following up the taut rope. The mare with the woman was in rapid course, again like the wind.

Dwyer reached his plunging horse and snatched at his rifle. No, not that, nor another chase—one leading where? His bay whinnied after the mare as he mounted, but turned to the rein, and they forded the stream above the quicksands, where the mare's tracks out indicated a safe passage.

"Did you find the stolen animals?" McDermott asked.

"In the canyon? I didn't care to scout around there alone. Pedro and I went in the next day. There was a trail, a natural corral, but every head had been run out. The tracks were nearly a day old. No use."

"You found nothing else?"

"Signs of a camp. A scattering of cook-fire ashes, a little bedding, some woman stuff. A grave heaped with rocks to keep the coyotes off."

"What became of the woman?"

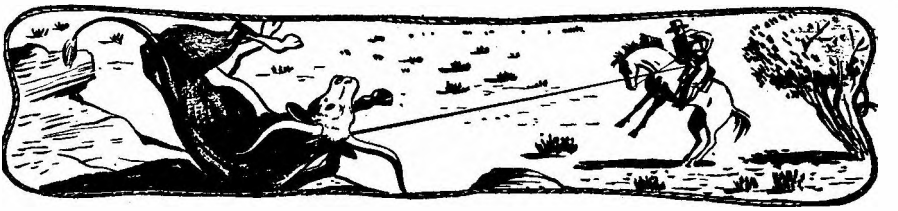
"*Quién sabe?* Never heard of her again, or the horses either. She saw I didn't trust her. That put her on her own again. So she gave me the slip, had leeway to get to the canyon, and took the liberty of clearing out with the few head, to pass them on to a market. That's what Pedro and I figgered. We had no more trouble.

"Well," Dwyer added, with a laugh, "it was an even enough break. I owed something to her and that rope. Those quicksands certainly had no bottom."

Answers to "Hunters, Traders, Scouts, Explorers"

Quiz on page 150

1. Jim Bridger
2. Kit Carson
3. John Frémont
4. Samuel Parker
5. William Cody
6. Captain Bonneville
7. Jedediah Smith
8. Joe Meek
9. Frederick Burnham
10. Tom Horn



Just Bein' a Buckaroo

By C. Wiles Hallock

A buckaroo is a feller which
Is singin'-happy an' roarin'-rich
To pack a skillet, canned beans, an' sich
  Aboard of a tough cayuse;
"An' sich" includin' a coffee pot,
A slab of bacon an' quite a lot
Of flapjack flour, an' like as not
  A guitar which can stand abuse.

A buckaroo, with a yippin' jest
Kin fork a furious quadrupest
An' buck him tame as a lamb, unlest
  The heller's too tough to bust;
And in regard to sich tryin' chores
As ridin' herd when a blizzard roars,
An' trailin' strays over all outdoors,
  And inhalin' hot roundup dust—

The art of bein' a buckaroo
And cow convoyin', 'twixt I an' you,
Ain't a meek or sissified job to do,
  When ever'thing's said an' done.
But whether weather is fine or foul,
When payday's purser is on the prowl,
Stampedin' town on yore night to howl
  Is rewardin'—an' bang-up fun!

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

Gun Justice at Good Water

AFTER HIS FATHER is ambushed and killed, young Joe Clayton bides his time for ten years—humble, quiet, hard-working, and determined. He minds his own business, impresses local residents and travelers alike as being somewhat slow-witted—and when the right time comes a .44 repeater speaks with authority. This story has not been published before.

JOE CLAYTON was ten years old when his father was ambushed and killed on the road between Good Water and the Clayton homestead section. Come to find out, nobody knew anything about the family. There were no relations.

The boy inherited the six hundred and forty acres of "grazing land," and went to town Saturdays and Sundays, where he odd-jobbed, ran errands, and minded his own business with tight-lipped, precocious industry. He took care of himself. When taxes came due, he paid them. A fence across the mouth of a well watered, lush-grassed canyon kept a few head of stock and several horses held safe enough.

Buck Clayton had built a stone cabin where he could pipe a spring of water into it. He had begun teaching the boy to shoot with a .22-caliber single-shot pistol, and before fate overtook his father Joe had killed an antelope and several deer, using a .40-.60 single-shot black-powder rifle. Joe said nothing about his shooting—like many other things he could do, he didn't feel it was necessary to bring it up.

Good Water was a trail town where Texas cattle bound for Montana or northern Wyoming stopped. Good water, fair pasture out around, and a

river crossing just naturally developed a small, precarious settlement that served liquor, supplies, and temporary accommodations. Four or five commercial establishments, plus a few cabins, enabled Joe to make a living from coins handed him for running errands, sweeping floors, carrying sandwiches to card players, taking horses to the livery, and helping in the kitchens of the restaurant and the hotel.

His week-end work done, Joe rode out to his homestead on the north trail. As he rode his eyes watched the trail, and luck favored him unusually well. Men leaving Good Water, leaning over their saddles, careless, befuddled, indifferent, sometimes lost rifles when boot-straps broke. Loosened belts let go and a variety of scabbard and sheath weapons fell to the ground. During the years through boyhood, Joe Clayton picked up a dozen or so of varied short and long guns, which he took to his homestead cabin, cleaned, and cared for. Thus he had a .44-caliber Winchester with a brass-slide top-receiver—a new weapon, just on the market.

Joe bought ammunition, from loose black powder and lead that he molded into cap-and-ball revolver charges to the fancy Winchester shells. Part of running his homestead was learning to shoot. In town he was just a young swamper; at home he was doing a man's work. At the beck and call of tinhorns, cowboys, outlaws, he caught many a dime or two-bit piece, even occasional halves, flipped at him for some task done. He accepted the humiliations, but studied the passers-by, like Wild Bill, the Youngers, Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, the owners and riders of great outfits with their herds. He spotted the tinhorns and the bluffers—and the real men.

Just a slapped-around, lanky, active handy-boy, Joe Clayton practiced with all his weapons, throw-knives and fast-draw scabbard guns. He saw gunplay in Good Water, and knew the hip, the shoulder, the belly-band, and hidden-gun draws. He shot his meat. He carried bought supplies from town, and every week-end he managed to cache a few coins to show for his menial industry. His father had taught him to save, and his bank was an earthenware jug in a clump of piñons up the canyon.

No one ever knew how much Joe got for the furs he trapped: marten, wildcats, coyotes, foxes, otter, beaver, mink. All winter he "homesteaded," hunting and trapping. He sold a few beeves, and from his horses he obtained colts which he raised and broke and sold for better than range-stock prices. He saved the income from his side lines.

Many of those who passed through Good Water excited Joe Clayton's intense admiration. Great buffalo hunters, short-gun quick-shots, superb horsemen, ox-team long-whip drivers, famed card sharps, Indian fighters, old-time beaver trappers, the experts in every line of Western work and play passed in review for the lad who ran the errands and did the bidding of those travelers of the trails that crossed at Good Water.

Over the hill from the river crossing, out of sight, Joe practiced all the little tricks of gunplay and horsemanship and sleight-o'-hand. He had no idea of equaling the work of the men he imitated. Each expert was in a class by himself, the product of experience, opportunity, practice. The

boy just wanted to know how those big timers felt, the joy they had in excelling. A great many of the spectacular feats of the "good ones" came of supreme courage, utter fearlessness in the face of death.

Joe saw fights over card tables, guns drawn in deadly combat. He helped carry out wounded; he cleaned up the floor after dead men had been removed; he saw victors in gun and knife fights acclaimed for their speed and nerve—their survival. He saw men who drank liquor in anticipation of peril and he saw others who stayed sober—and rode out over a ridge to practice, speeding up to obtain a split-second advantage over an enemy. Joe spent his spare time watching, learning the things that gave men the tiny margin of advantage to be had only by combining every element of skill, alertness, and equipment.

Joe tried to feel as the good ones felt, enduring hardship, facing peril, experiencing the ultimate issue of death or life. In the loneliness of his canyon cabin, by light of a homemade candle, he rolled dice, shuffled cards, turned dominoes, played checkers, gave or took faro, and in imaginary critical emergencies, he snatched his gun, right or left or both, to shoot it out with a fancied opponent he had caught cheating or who challenged luck as if it were a crime.

Joe had seen men shot under a table as well as over it; he had seen death win when a gun muzzle, coming up, was stopped by hitting the table. He knew and practiced stepping back to clear his gun as well as side stepping, ducking, feinting. No matter how often he drew the gun or guns he wore hidden in his loose shirt, under his arm, from his hips, Joe shook his head. He'd never be as fast, as good, as those killers of the range, or those marksmen who engaged in shooting matches for fun. But there was one exception to all the self-deprecation Joe Clayton practiced.

Who was the man who had killed and robbed his father of the price of the prime beef steers he had sold to the drover in Good Water? His father had been paid $1200 in gold for his small herd of beef. The gold had been carried in a horsehide pocket belt. The killer had taken belt and gold and the homesteader's cartridge belt, scabbard, and gun. The killing had been done with a single-shot rifle, and an empty .45-.70-.550 shell had been found where the assassin had lain in wait in a clump of piñons.

No matter who was the killer, Joe Clayton knew he would go for him, the day he identified him. The sheriff and a posse had followed the tracks of the horse into the badlands toward the east down the river. The murderer had covered his trail, wading in the river, vanishing amid the streams and washes. A dozen or so scoundrels were suspected, but Joe could not be sure which one was really guilty.

Good Water developed into much more than a way-stop. The old buffalo river crossing became a stop-over ford, and trappers came down out of the mountains, covered-wagon transports came up through the badlands, and horsemen rode in from all directions. Trappers, Indian traders, gold seekers, and other specialists came in to trade, as well as the runners of cattle and horses, wagon-peddlers, seekers of better business; and fugitives from enemies, the law, and the accusation of conscience. Men came

on foot, in buckboards, driving oxen, mules, horses.

Joe Clayton, handy lad, watched the passers-by more carefully and with increasing familiarity. He recognized the loose gaits and toughened figures of the Texas riders. He could tell an Englishman on horseback, the way he sat, as far as he could see his face. He knew the fugitives who watched their back tracks and he knew the pursuers, whose eyes restlessly searched the horizon ahead. He could be sure of those who were going somewhere and those who were leaving something behind them; Easterners, Southerners, Union soldiers, Californians, New Englanders, city men, farm boys, banjo-pickers and fiddlers —Joe himself had a banjo and a fiddle back at his stone cabin, and there in his lonely modesty he played pieces he remembered, wishing that he could play like the wandering minstrels and dance musicians.

Now and then men remembered Joe by name. Joe frankly didn't like liquor, so he was reliable. He'd take money to the hotel safe, horses to the livery, buy supplies while patrons slept, bring buckboard or saddle horse called for by celebrants, visitors, or local men. Successful winners would give him a small gold piece for a handy bit. Bullies would crack a quirt or bullwhip at him, demanding free service.

Joe seldom talked. Asked questions, he knew the answers, gave them in few words. Man hunters got no information from him and he ignored the outlaws—except to find out about them. Whenever one of those twelve or fourteen suspects who had been in Good Water when his father was bushwhacked appeared, Joe watched, biding his time. He studied the dodgers offering rewards for bandits, desperadoes, robbers, cattle and horse thieves.

His coin jug filled up and he buried another. He lost track of the silver and gold. He looked after horses for hire, pasturing them in his blind canyon. He traded fresh horses for tired ones, taking boot. Outlaws took advantage of his homestead, and sheriff's posses, stage and express detectives, miscellaneous travelers stopped at Good Water and took advantage of Joe Clayton's willingness to purvey horses for emergencies. And Joe never thought of his own opportunities, catching men in predicaments, taking advantage of their needs. Quite the contrary—he was humble and square-dealing; he took no advantages.

But for his homestead, that big, profitable canyon, Joe would have long since ridden away with cattle herds, perhaps joined a robber band, gone wandering hither and yon like innumerable other homeless riders. He was on the edge of disputed sections—townships, government lands. A few poles on stakes protected his little canyon pasture from trespass by cattle, horses, or men.

If passers-by took advantage of his absence to trade horses or to claim shelter of his cabin, that was all right with Joe. He'd bring out a pack-horse load of grub for his own use, so even if he found his supplies depleted, he always had plenty till his next week in town. Of course, he was provoked when visitors tore a book to pieces to build a fire on his hearth. When a party of men came along from Good Water, carrying jugs of liquor and rowdying Joe's hospitality, he took their roistering, fed them, gave them

hospitality, and was glad when they rode on their way and he could clean up after them.

The habit of taking orders, submitting to everyone's whim and need, accepting what was given him, stayed with Joe Clayton through the years. At twenty, he jumped to orders as he had done when a timid lad of ten or twelve; he continued to earn his living waiting on gamblers, taking messages to and from dance halls, and the other menial tasks he had grown used to.

Yet when he was alone up his canyon, or following his trap line through winter snows, or going to and fro about his affairs in the big open, he recalled the bearing of the real men he knew. When he was alone in the mountains or out in the badlands or down in the hollows, he would try to feel like the great, the noted, and the famous. He squared his shoulders, he held his head up, he pretended jack rabbits, coyotes, and wildcats were the men who cursed him, ordered him about as if it was their right, sometimes cuffed him for the fun of it. That way, Joe Clayton popped them over right and left—then skinned the hides, hunter-handling them, and thus added two-bits, a half dollar, or a dollar or two to his savings. Old-time trappers had showed him how to cook a coyote's legs, and even to make savory dishes out of wildcats!

Joe avoided trouble. When some scamp came along and abused him for expecting pay, Joe shrugged and never again did anything for that transient scoundrel. But when a brutal fool came in and left a sweaty horse standing in the raw winter wind, Joe would take a chance and blanket the horse or move it around out of the wind—even put it into a livery wind-break or stable. Even ugly rascals couldn't object to that! But it added to Joe's reputation for being soft, timid, and slow-witted.

Kindness and generosity weren't much to build a reputation on along that north-and-south trail that led from Fort Benton down to Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, with forks leading out into wide deltas along which the human and domestic-animal traffic plied. In time this famed network of cattle, horse and man trails became known as the Thief Trail, the road of the outlaws.

Killers, rustlers, horse thieves, robbers, petty-larceny riders, all the different kinds of wanderers rode up and down the Thief Trail, and over long sections cattle buyers, ranchers, fur traders, commercial travelers, gamblers with stakes, business men toting money never rode alone, except in emergencies. The stages had shotgun messengers sitting with the drivers when they carried heavy-laden iron boxes. Men occasionaly rode out along the lonesome trail—and vanished.

"That'd be the Durney gang op'ratin', I expect!" men would say, hearing the word—or perhaps they would mention Black Jack, or Jim Frett, or even hint that some famous sheriff or town marshal—a gunman down on his luck—was "recuperating." Enemies of law would accuse the law enforcers of doing robberies, masked and deadly, on the side.

No one was safe from the little killers who committed murder for a single or double gold eagle. The suspicion that a man had money would send them into ambush ahead of him —and murder would be done, "for

luck." Yet there were innumerable men following the trails who never thought they would be suspected of having money, that outlaws might hold them up on their way. Many a man taking a stake into the big country, hoping and expecting to establish a business, was shot down, robbed, his body dragged into a dry gulch, and a slide-bank pulled down over him.

Joe Clayton never thought of himself as being an easy mark. He took silver out of his first cache jug and turned it into gold. He never kept track of the money he took for selling horses he'd picked up. He had not felt much different first and last, when he was a boy of ten or a handyman of twenty-one. In fact, he almost never thought of himself, except to wish that he was swagger and big and important. He wasn't Joe Clayton the homesteader in his own mind—he was just an errand boy and handyman. The most insignificant little tinhorn business looked important to Joe Clayton—a potential two-bit tip, perhaps.

Joe rode home one Sunday night, and arrived in the canyon after dark. He had had a profitable week-end. He rode up to his corral, turned his horse in, and went on foot up the canyon where he slipped into a jug $90 in fur money, $35 in odd-job takes, and $50 due him on a horse deal.

The money meant little to Joe, except that it was his. In more than ten years, he had added to that original cache made by his father. He had never drawn on his "bank." The habit of saving had become automatic. He was wishing he could own a ranch. He had a notion of buying cows down in the Texas Salt Grass and making some real money, herding them up the line to Montana, feeding them and selling them at rail ends.

That'd take a lot of money! he thought.

As he turned from corking the jug, something hit him. He pitched down, the starry night blacked out. A little later he had the dim consciousness of eager, excited, surprised voices.

"Why, hell! this jug's damned near full of money!" he heard, and he remembered that he had left his revolvers in his saddlebags over the rail back at the cabin.

Robbers! Bushwhackers! Those scoundrels had come to his cabin, heard him arrive, and followed him up the canyon. Then they'd watched him—heard him—dropping his coins into that jug.

Joe Clayton had taken a lot from all kinds of men and women. He had done what he was paid to do. He had accepted cuffs, abuse, kicks—and never thought of hitting back. He supposed that his business in life was to take what came. But here at his homestead, he had dreamed of being something better; he had practiced squaring his shoulders and holding his head up; when he had company he never set himself up to be much; he'd cook meals, and feel good when he found a silver dollar or a gold piece under plates. If the visitors didn't pay, he didn't object. Nobody ever called Joe Clayton niggardly in his hospitality!

That jug of money was a heavy load. There were three men in the midnight robber band, and the one who carried the jug grunted and staggered, grinding the gravel of the slope under his high-heeled boots. The three men scurried down to the

cabin. They came by early. They had turned their tired, worn-out horses loose and now they took three horses from Joe's fenced pasture on a beaver flat just above the cabin. They were laughing, talking—merry!

"Why, hell, who'd'a' reckoned that damned lobby-dog had money like this?" Then Joe heard one of the men say, " 'Course his dad toted a wad!"

He knew that voice—Cougar Jack's. That meant Piute Waw-waw was with him. The other fellow might be Denver Hank, or Miner Curley, or any one of a dozen desperadoes who traveled with Cougar Jack. Time and again Joe Clayton had been cuffed by the members of that gang. Now and again one of them had tossed him a dollar or a chip, and they had often enough used his cabin as a way station on their lawless vagabondage. Now they had stolen one of his jugs. A feeling he had never before harbored surged through him—that pistol barrel laid along his skull above his right ear dimmed his senses, blacked his eyes, hurt like never before.

Numb and angry, Joe followed down the canyon to the cabin. The three men brought out their saddles. They found Joe's spare saddlebags and broke the jug, filled their pockets with coins and cursed with high delight at their "luck." They were soon mounted and riding away, yipping and yowling as they went. They had found a stake in the last place they had expected!

Joe, staggered and hurt, bleeding from the gash above his ears, washed the cut in cold brook water. The chill revived him. His mind cleared. He wrapped a big silk handkerchief around his head. From hiding-places he took a .44 repeater and wiped off the grease, loaded the magazine, strapped on a spare belt. All this he did methodically.

When he whistled at the fenced pasture, his favorite horse came romping. He carefully smoothed a blanket over the animal's back, cinched the saddle, slipped the bridle —he had warmed the bit!—over the animal's head, swung up, and rode down the canyon.

The night was nearly spent. The mountain air was dry and stinging. When he was clear of his canyon he searched the slope of the range and there, sure enough, was the alkali dust the robbers had raised as they rode carelessly down into the trail along the foot of the slope. Joe Clayton had come and gone along that trail for more than ten years—he knew the paths and short cuts, the better going—and he did not think much about anything but his anger that men he had never refused a whim or a service, meals, or a bunk to sleep in had knocked him over and robbed his coin cache.

Joe didn't race his horse over powdery alkali. He didn't throw dust into the fading darkness. And he didn't count the odds—three ill-famed outlaws that marshals, sheriffs, and blood-money reward seekers passed up, and after whom rode only the relentless detectives of the express and railroad companies.

Where the three men rode up over the long spur swell on the wagon road to Good Water, Joe Clayton ducked, short-cutting through some steep pitches of badland wash that saved him nearly three miles of the open roadway up on the spur.

Joe's horse was good, and Joe was

not a heavy load—only 145 pounds. Dawn was lifting the darkness from the vast spread of sloping prairie and revealing the crests of the mountains in sunshine crystallines. Good Water lay in early-morning quiet ahead. The three robbers were coming at a lope down the long grade into town. They saw, but did not recognize the rider coming up from the east, as though he were just another cowboy looking for a place to hang his hat.

Joe came in a few rods behind the men, who had bunched together, and were debating whether they should stop over for drinks and breakfast or keep on going. Joe came up with them, and shot a slug from his Winchester over their heads.

"Halt!" Joe shouted, and then the three astonished men saw that lobby-dog of a victim, head bandaged, rifle in hand.

They drew their short guns, and one pitched off his horse. The clatter of gunfire echoed from the walls along the quiet street. A heavy slug slashed along Joe's right forearm, but he was shooting—one—two—three! And at the third of his shots three horses with empty saddles jumped and kicked, prancing around, throwing up the loose yellow dust of Good Water's main street.

Men swarmed out of barrooms, dance halls, gambling-dens. Behind them dance-hall orchestras played along, old square-dance tunes. Excited voices called, "What's goin' on?"

Joe Clayton paid small attention to them. He shoved his Winchester down into its boot. He tended strictly to business—catching those horses carrying his money. Those damned robbers had even stolen his horses—trading to have fresh animals for their long-riding getaway.

Joe got all three animals tied to the rail in front of the marshal's office. The peace officer had just gone in to write his blotter up—nothing doing. One fight—a drunk laid out in the livery stable—and a dispute settled in the Coldspring Bar: the night's doings!

When Joe Clayton was recognized, it stopped the spectators, one after another. Joe had knocked down three men. Cougar Jack was recognized.

"Why, theh's three thousand dollars reward on him!" Marshal Claker exclaimed. "That's Denver Hank—and Pitt Digger! Joe Clayton? Why, sho-o! Joe's plumb indignant!"

Joe made sure of the contents of the saddlebags. There were pounds of yellow coins, with occasional silver. He'd never seen his money. Now he saw the contents of one jug, hundreds of gold pieces!

"Why, Joe, what the hell's goin' on?" the marshal asked. "What yo' peeved about? Gettin' those fellers—doggone, they're *bad!*"

"They welted me with a gun barrel an' raided my cache!" Joe answered. "When I come to, they'd gone away. They even stole my saddlebags an' traded horses to tote my money away!"

Joe gazed at the fallen Cougar Jack. He stiffened as he saw the belt and holster the fellow wore. He picked up the revolver, turned it over in his hands—and then unbuckled the belt and looked into the buckle and strap fastenings. There was a secret flap, and when he opened it, there was a long, narrow-folded slip of paper. The paper was a store bill:

Sold to Homesteader Clayton—

Joe Clayton blinked. He slit the

front of Cougar Jack's flannel shirt below the buttons, and there was a horsehide belt. Joe took that off, too, and studied the stitches, looked at the straps, then inside where there were a handful of gold coins and some greenbacks.

"What you found, Joe?" Banker Dryling asked.

"My father sewed that horsehide belt!" Joe answered. "That's his cartridge belt, gun holster, and gun, too! This scoundrel Cougar Jack done killed my dad!"

"Well, I 'member that—I rode with the sher'f's posse!" the marshal exclaimed. "Ho law! After ten years yo' got 'im, Joe!"

Joe Clayton looked around. He heard exclamations softly spoken: "Now that was shootin'!"—"Yassuh, Joe proved up!"—"Who'd'a' thought that lobby-dog'd face up to Cougar Jack's gang?"

The crowd was staring at the youth who had pursued and overcome the outlaw band—the boy they all had known those years of errand-running, never seeking anything different in him. Now he stood stalwart and competent. He'd fought the robbers—one against three—and killed them all, one, two, three!

"Ho law, he wasted no shots!" somebody remarked.

There was more than a hundredweight in coins Joe had recovered in his own saddlebags. There was the proof that Cougar Jack had killed and robbed Joe's father. Even more tangible was the deadly marksmanship of the man-grown youth who had kept his secret of years-long practice till the right time came.

"I better bank my money with you, Mist' Dryling," Joe said quiet-voiced, to the banker.

"We'll sure welcome your patronage!" the banker declared respectfully. "Looks like you've be'n saving, Joe?"

Joe Clayton gazed at those rawhide bags full of gold and silver. Just as peril had surprised him with his own courage, now fortune astonished him with the results of his thrift. There, too, was the proof of his gun skill. All at once, he had emerged from boyhood and service into the community's respect and admiration. Moreover, he had meted out justice to a murderer in a nearly lawless land.

Tips, earnings, fur money, boot in horse trades, money from steer and horse sales—ten years of humble work and savings were there. The reward money would pay back what had been stolen from his father's body—with interest. Joe had long figured and hoped, but never really expected to come to this day when he would be granted his standing—a prime man in his own home town and county!

"Doggone, Joe! Were that shootin' accidental or practiced for?" the marshal demanded. "Where'd you get the nerve to do it?"

Joe squared his shoulders. For years he had never made any claims. He had seen his needs, always imitating the good ones—shooting, riding, saving, keeping his lips tight-shut. He looked straight, eyes to eyes, at the marshal.

"It just happened so," he answered carefully, "I kinda wished myse'f into facing the music. When the time come—well, I'd be'n lucky, and I was lucky."

To himself he thought, *Ten years of getting ready—it sure paid!*

Tough on Texans

An Original Fact Feature

By C. WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

LISTEN, you big jingle-bobbed Texas longhorn! You ain't such an important whatever as you think you are! Git them thar cattle off my claim or I'll—"

Jack Potter looked down from his saddle at the grizzled old nester who had just come up out of his dugout. The Texan was plenty big when afoot and, on his horse, he towered over the squat, baldheaded farmer. The trail boss spat a belligerant amber stream in the general direction of the sputtering granger.

"You'll do what and to who? I don't like them personal remarks. You better take them unkind words back," the Texan said.

"No, siree! I ain't takin' nothin' back. I mean every dad-ratted word of it and I want them longhorns drove back over on the other side of that plowed furrow."

"Why, you impudent old goat! You pop right back in your sod puppy hole or I'll have to take your britches down and give you a dang good paddlin'!" Potter roared.

"I'm stayin' right here until you drive them critters off my place. And it better be did pronto. As fer you tryin' to paddle me, I kin whup twenty owlhooters your size. Jest climb down off that cayuse!"

"Got any sons or hired men around? I'd rather clean up on a younger man. I never like to hit an old mossyhorn."

The scene was on the trail near Dodge City in the late 'seventies. Jack Potter was grazing his longhorns and the sun was just coming over the horizon. There had been a fog that morning and the cattle had wandered beyond the furrow that marked the boundary line of the nester's homestead. Just as the fog cleared. the angry old man had popped out of the dugout like a gopher and ordered Potter off the place.

Due to the Texas cattle fever that threatened the Kansas cattle in the 'seventies, the settlers often were at swords' points with the trail drivers bringing their herds north for markets. Quarantine laws protected various eastern counties in the state but other sections depended on "shotgun quarantine." Many nesters could not

afford to fence their claims and simply plowed a furrow around the border to indicate the property limits.

This old granger finally became so abusive that the Texan climbed down from his horse and started for him, intending to pull the nester's short gray chin whiskers and demand an apology. What Potter didn't know was that this same old fellow had cleaned up on a number of other trail bosses. So he couldn't understand it when the old goat squared off and planted one on the button that shook the Texan's relatives as far south as Dallas.

Before Potter could recover himself, he received a jolt in the midriff, followed by a blow on the jaw that knocked him for a loop.

When the trail boss scrambled to his feet, he was plenty mad. Like most Texans, he wasn't keen for fistic encounters but he couldn't shoot down an unarmed old man. Potter charged like a *cimmarone* bull at his foe, swearing vengeance.

But the old fellow deftly stepped aside and circled the infuriated Texan, taunting him with insults. Suddenly the nester stuck out his leg and tripped Potter so that he fell flat on his face in the sand.

Then the Kansas granger jumped on the Texan's back and grabbed the bandana that encircled the neck of the trail boss. He began to twist it viciously. In a moment, the big Texan's tongue was hanging out, his eyes were bulging and he was gasping for breath.

"When you got enough, you big horned toad, you say so and I'll let you up! Jest holler ' 'Nough!' "

The old fellow forgot that he was pretty deaf and Potter could only wheeze that he had 'nough. The granger still was twisting the bandana for all he was worth. Another minute and the Texan would pass out completely.

Reaching one hand out, the trail boss managed to write *nuff* in the sand with his index finger. The sputtering granger let loose of the bandana.

Rising, he kicked Potter to his feet and roared, "Now, you son of a owlhoot, git on that cayuse and hustle them longhorns back on the other side of the furrow!"

Potter didn't waste any time. What he had written in the sand stood as surely as if it had been engraved in rock and he didn't intend to give the old nester another chance at him.

The next day, in Dodge City, the vanquished Texan learned that the old granger had been a training partner for John L. Sullivan. In fact, it was reported on one occasion he had given the champion an unofficial lacing that Sullivan never forgot.

Not all grangers were able to depend on their fists. More often, it was a Winchester or a scattergun that kept the longhorns out of their crops and protected the native cattle from the tick fever. Homesteaders usually tried to settle on claims along the streams and this made it difficult for the Texans to find water for their herds.

The ethics of butchering a stray longhorn didn't bother the settlers. "Slow elk" saved many a nester family from starvation. Finally, the Texans offered a reward of $500 for evidence against any settler who butchered a beef.

The grangers organized a protective society and made it hot for any

nester who betrayed his neighbor. Sometimes they had reason to suspect that a neighboring homesteader intended to turn in someone and they took steps to warn such a possible traitor.

He would be invited to join the association and his early initiation was such as to intimidate the most reckless. In some nester dugout, the meeting would be held with great solemnity and much secret work. The initiate would be blindfolded and bloody oaths of secrecy administered. As the conclusion of the solemn ritual, the new member would take the following oath:

"If I should ever betray a fellow granger to the cattlemen, I expect to be dealt with in this manner—"

At this instant, the blindfold would be snatched from his eyes and the initiate would find himself facing a body suspended by the neck from the ceiling. In the dim light, the hanging dummy looked enough like a genuine corpse to haunt the man's dreams ever after.

This organization spread throughout western Kansas and the various lodges equipped themselves with enough armament to stand off the state of Texas—at least, they gave that impression.

In the southeastern counties, gunslicks and unreconstructed Civil War veterans made life miserable for the Texas cattlemen who tried to pass the border with their herds. Many of these Kansans and Missourians took the law in their own hands and made a frontier racket of the situation. Despite the fact that the railroads were pushing into Kansas to take care of the cattle, these outlaws charged exorbitant toll to let the herds pass through to market.

The Texans didn't mind so much paying ten cents a head to the red men south of the Kansas border for allowing them to trail through Indian Territory. But the border racketeers wanted two dollars a head or more. If a cowman refused to pay, his herd was stampeded and the loss in cattle amounted to far more than if he had paid the unreasonable toll.

There were many gun battles between the trail drivers and the Kansans, as the only markets with money during the period were in the northern states, and the Texans were desperately hard up. They were "cattle poor" until they reached a Kansas City or Chicago market. So they were forced to fight their way across the Kansas border or take a tremendous loss.

Some of them drove their herds west, around the marauding gunswifts in the settlements. But here they soon found themselves trespassing on the property of grangers and they were but little better off than before.

The railroads developed an eastern market for longhorn beef and the state began to blossom out with towns along the right-of-way. Then came the period of cow-town booms and wildness with such characters as Wild Bill Hickok, Bear River Tom Smith, Bat Masterson and other famous lawmen in such historical towns as Abilene, Newton and Dodge City.

With the trail drivers paying fines and damage claims, they were ever being forced farther west until the trail was pushed to the Colorado border. Kansas legislation backed up the farmers and the day of the trail driver faded.

On with the Dance

By B. M. BOWER

IT ALL STARTS *when Lynn Farrow innocently expresses the wish that someone would hold a dance in the county —almost before he knows it he's been talked into giving one himself, in the vacant Jameson ranch house. He foresees trouble—but hardly all the trouble that, it turns out, can be packed into one supposedly carefree occasion. This highly entertaining rangeland story was written by the author of the widely popular "Flying U" books.*

THE tall young fellow in fringed leather chaps and big-roweled silver spurs stood still as carved granite beside the kitchen table. A holstered six-shooter hung snug at his right hip in odd contrast to the checked gingham apron tied around his neck. Above the pink cheeks his browned face was tilted, staring considerably lower than the slant of his gun belt at his right side. He was wondering what would happen if he should kiss the cute dimple in the girl's elbow. But she looked up at him and he instantly began wiping four saucers, expertly shifting the top one to the bottom of the stack as he wiped.

"My goodness! Look out or you'll break Ma's new saucers!" she cried with a breathless giggle, excited by the close presence of the best-looking cowboy in that country.

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"I ain't broke any so far," the wiper said equably. "You better look out yourself. If them soapsuds foam any higher you're liable to drowned that dimple."

"My goodness! What dimple, for pity's sake?"

"In your elbow." His tone was deceptively casual. "Soapy dimples don't taste good."

Hattie blushed furiously and pulled the dishpan six inches toward the end of the table, trying to look indignant. But the cowboy noticed that she did not remove herself any farther from him, but rather tempted him with the elbow under discussion.

So he dropped a knife. When he stooped to pick it up he paused midway and kissed the dimple daringly.

"For-ever*more!*" cried Hattie, highly affronted. But the cowboy noticed that her outcry was carefully kept within the compass of the kitchen.

So he kissed her on the mouth, the dish towel with the knife in it swathing her shoulders as his arm slid round.

"You stop! I'll tell Ma—" At least what she said had the sound of some such words. His lips were warm, tingly, interfering lips that brushed mere words aside. Then a panicky breath. "She's *coming!*"

It was Josie, the homely one, coming out of the sitting-room with a coal bucket. She did not look at either of them as she walked through the kitchen and opened the door to the shed. The cold swooshed in like a white cloud that vanished when the heat ate it. The cowboy wiped a teacup and wondered if that other girl had caught onto anything.

When she came back he remembered his manners and took long steps to meet her. He took the heavy bucket of lump coal from her hand, smiling down into her face when she looked up to protest.

"Thank you, Mr. Farrow," she said when he had filled the sitting-room heater.

"Say, I'm lonesome enough in this man's country without everybody mistering me," he objected plaintively. "Folks have always called me Lynn—to my face," he hinted, giving her another look unconsciously devastating. "Make her behave, Mrs. Baldwin, can't yuh?"

"We're neighbors, Lynn. There ain't anybody got any reason to hold you off with a mister to your name, that I know of." Mrs. Baldwin looked at him indulgently over her glasses. "You've been hunting them stray horses over this way steady for a month, now. If we ain't all friends by this time we never will be, I guess."

"Them stray horses just about saved my life," Lynn grinned shamelessly. "I expect I'll be hunting 'em over this way about all winter, if I don't get run off."

"Did you finish the dishes, Lynn?" Josie asked. And because she was the homely one Lynn hurried back to the task that had suddenly become exceedingly pleasant.

But the door had failed to close behind him, it having a habit of swinging back against the wall unless deliberately latched. Lynn lacked the nerve to go back and pull it shut, so the dishwashing proceeded with decorum.

They presently talked of dancing. Lynn wished there was a dance somewhere within riding-distance. They'd all go. He'd hitch the hay team to the wagon, throw in a few forkfuls of

hay, and take the bunch of them: Pa, Ma, Josie, and Hattie, whose red mouth set his pulse jumping.

"Well, there won't be a dance now till Washington's Birthday, maybe not then," sighed Hattie, moving her bare elbows distractingly so that the dimples showed deepest. "The school board won't let the schoolhouse be used except on legal holidays."

"Why not give one here?" Lynn rashly suggested, lifting a handful of knives and forks from the pan of hot water.

"Pa won't have dances here," Hattie pouted, dripping foam from her pink hand. "It keeps him up all night looking after the teams and saddle horses. He just hates the fussing. I—why don't you give one, Lynn?"

"Me?" Lynn dropped another knife —without intention, this time. And he did not kiss her elbow when he stooped to get it. "I never did give a dance. I wouldn't know the first thing about it. Besides—"

"Besides what? There's that great empty house over at the Jameson's, and nobody in it but you. The Jamesons used to have dances all the time before they sold out. That big long sitting-room was just *made* for dances. If you take out the stove in the middle there's room for two sets; and by putting the music up on the table right by the door, another set can dance in the kitchen without bothering the refreshment end. And it's an awfully good floor. The Jamesons had lots of money when they built the house; they lost it afterwards before they sold the stock to your outfit. Of course we can have a dance. I don't know why I didn't think of it before. We'll have lots of dances this winter, Lynn."

That was how it started. Lynn didn't want to tackle it, and said so. But Hattie went on planning and persuading while the dishwater cooled and the foamy white suds went to nothing. For a girl who had just thought of it she seemed to have a terribly clear idea of every small detail. Lynn wished it had been the homely one who had thought of a dance at a ranch where he was wintering alone. He could have thought of reasons why he couldn't go through with the scheme. With Hattie standing so close the elbow he had kissed kept touching his gun belt, he couldn't think of anything except that dimple and how her mouth had felt against his lips.

But he tried. "If it was to storm," he said, "there's all them cattle I've got to shovel hay to, and horses to feed. The Rolling M never put me on any dance committee when they sent me over here to winter the Jameson stock. I'm s'posed to feed up that hay before spring, so as not to waste it, and at the same time bring the stock through in good shape to trail 'em home next spring."

"Well," Hattie inquired archly, "and what has that got to do with having a dance?"

Lynn did not know—not in a sense that could be put into words. "I'd sure hate to make a fizzle of it," he hedged uncomfortably. "If I started a thing like that, I'd have to go through with it. I'm kinda stubborn that way."

Hattie found an errand into the sitting-room. When she came out the door closed after her so that it stayed closed. Lynn might have thought that indicated experience, but he didn't. He had something else to worry about.

So, the door being closed, Hattie

managed to convince him that a dance was the simplest thing in the world to manage. She and Josie and Ma would make lots of doughnuts and sandwiches, and bring over plenty of coffee and cream. All Lynn had to do was ride around and tell everybody, and get old Bill Saunders to come and play. He would, for a collection. They'd just pass the hat before supper. It wouldn't cost Lynn a cent. All he need do was have the house ready and the heating stove moved out of the front room. They'd even bring over some corn meal to make the floor slick. There wouldn't, Hattie eagerly assured him, be any trouble at all and he needn't worry a minute.

But female prophets are nearly always inspired by their own desires rather than by an prescient knowledge of the future. Lynn did worry. Riding back across the frozen brown prairie, he surprised three gray wolves feeding off a dead colt at sundown, and he shot two of them, throwing dust around the third with the last two bullets of his gun. But even the thought of the double bounty and the thick winter pelts that made such dandy rugs could not wean his thoughts from foreboding.

Nor did the fight afterward with Seal, his brown horse, nor the victory of making Seal carry those two wolves to the Jameson place where he could skin them by lantern light. All the way home, sandwiched between the dead wolves; all through chore time when the lantern went here and there, drawing dancing bars of light across the bare brown sod; all the while he was eating supper, and afterward while he skinned the wolves down in the blacksmith shop, he kept thinking what a fool he was to make promises to a girl.

Just because she had a cute dimple in her elbow, and because her lips were for the fellow who dared, here he was now with three deep wrinkles between his fine straight eyebrows, and hot flushes of stage fright surging over his body. He even started talking to himself, a lapse he had always said was the earmark of a sheepherder going batty.

"Me give a dance to folks I don't hardly know by sight! Letting 'em lay their babies on my bed—them old sage hens cacklin' around in here where I've got it fixed up bully for the winter! Snoopin' around, criticizing my things—oh good Godfrey!"

But a promise is a promise. Lynn got up an hour earlier next morning and hauled a load of hay out to the feed ground. While the wise team walked slowly in an acre-wide circle, the lines wound round the front standard of the rack, he scattered the hay neatly in little piles. The bawling herd of weaned calves and poor cows trailed after in a long cue, thinking each forkful as it fell into the cold wind must be better than the last, but at last settling down to their breakfast when Lynn drove the empty wagon back to the corral.

When the team was unharnessed and left comfortably in their stalls he was a free man until four o'clock, when he would have to haul another ton or two out and scatter it as before. A simple life—a contented life, even though it was lonesome at times. If it wasn't for that darned dance Saturday night!

He saddled Seal then, buttoned himself into his gray wolfskin coat, buckled on his spurs and his gun, and rode over to see old Bill Saunders

about the music. Old Bill was a case. When he fiddled he chewed tobacco and stomped both feet keeping time of a sort, and called off in a high singsong whine that carried far above the shuffle of feet, the swish of skirts, and the squeal of his fiddle. He had bleak blue eyes, a red beard, and a fiery disposition.

Old Bill said all right, he'd be there with bells on. So Lynn loped on over to Squaw Creek and invited everybody along the creek, and they all said they'd come. In the teeth of a raw wind he loped home again and hauled two loads of hay because it looked as if it might take a notion to snow. And after supper he rode over to tell Hattie that Bill Saunders would come, all right, and so would all the folks from Squaw Creek.

Next day he again hurried through his work, because Hattie had told him he must ride over Wolf Butte way and invite everyone who lived within twenty miles, at least. She wanted this first dance of his to be something they'd all remember. Well, she had her wish, so far as that goes—though perhaps this is running ahead of the story.

That evening he stopped by to see Hattie, well aware that he shouldn't because it was getting past feeding-time and he knew those darned Rolling M critters would be standing around the feed ground bawling their heads off. It was a sorry stop he made, because Hattie had a wonderful idea of lights along the porch and on the gateposts and wherever a light would hang. She was sorry she hadn't thought of it before, but still, it wouldn't be so very much trouble, would it, Lynn, to ride around and tell everybody to bring their lanterns—all the lanterns they could rustle? Lynn said sure, it wouldn't be any trouble at all. Which Hattie apparently believed, because she added archly that all a cowboy ever did was ride around, anyway.

Well, he managed to get the cattle fed, though a pale moon watched him throw off the last of the load, and half the herd had given him up in disgust and gone off to the sheds to bed.

That night he ached, and he had nightmare dreams of the terrible condition of the house. He thought he was waltzing with Hattie and she kept stubbing her toe over those darned pack saddles he had brought in to mend when he got around to it. And he thought all the other women stood around and talked about the dirt.

So next day he started an uproar which he called hoeing out. It lasted until late afternoon, and he went off with wet feet to shovel hay to the cattle—wet feet caused by sloshing buckets of water on the floors and scrubbing it vigorously around with a broom, and then sweeping it out through the nearest doorway where it immediately froze and gave an icy approach to each door. He found that out when he walked hurriedly onto the porch after feeding-time, and nearly broke his neck. But the floors were clean, thank the Lord. No old hen was going to turn up her nose at *his* housekeeping.

That night it was the lanterns that haunted him. So he rode back to Squaw Creek next day between feedings, and notified everyone to bring lanterns. And the day after that he did the same by Wolf Butte folks. But he didn't see any sense in it, and on his way back by way of the Baldwin

ranch he remarked with sudden sarcasm to his brown horse Seal, "Not a *bit* of trouble to give a dance! No trouble—*hell!*"

He looked in the mood to say that to Hattie, though he was a nice-mannered young man and probably would have controlled himself. But Hattie wasn't home. Josie was frying doughnuts. She had two large milk pans as full as they would hold, and she told Lynn to help himself. Lynn helped himself to five, one after the other. The last one he pulled off the fork Josie held out to him, and burned his fingers. That tickled them both and they laughed and laughed. It was the first time Lynn had so much as smiled since Hattie thought of giving a dance.

He told Josie about the lanterns, and Josie couldn't see any sense in it either. He thought on the way home that he had kinda misread Josie's brand, thinking her homely and all. Maybe she wasn't any cigar ad, but she sure had brains in her head.

It seemed a shame that he couldn't get a decent night's sleep any more, but five hot doughnuts—not to mention the dozen which Josie had laughingly distributed through his coat pockets— No man could reasonably expect any better than he got. He went to bed haunted by the greasy flavor of those doughnuts. He tossed and he rolled until his blankets were all up around his neck, and his dreams were horrible. He awoke to Saturday morning and a gloomy conviction that trouble was headed his way. Naturally, he laid it to the doughnuts and tried to dismiss his melancholy, and drove off to feed the cattle.

He was just throwing off the last few forkfuls of hay and thinking he'd lie around all day and rest up for the dance, when here came old Bill Saunders galloping across the field, his knees drumming his horse's ribs—the way an Indian rides as a rule.

"Good Godfrey, what now!" Lynn muttered into his collar, and swung the team toward the corral to meet his visitor.

Bill Saunders wasted no words, but told his bad news around a fresh chew of tobacco. One eye was closed completely, the other looked like polished turquoise.

He held up a bandaged left hand. "Hustled right over t' tell yuh I cain't play for yore dance," was his way of announcing it. "Had me a run-in with a blank-blank-blankety-blank sheepherder. Licked 'im to a frazzle, but the damn hydrophoby skunk got m' two string fingers in his mouth an' chawed 'em up like a dog chaws a chicken bone. Come 'ere an' I'll show yuh."

Lynn stopped the team, and old Bill rode close to the rack and untied the bloody bandage with his yellowed teeth. Lynn looked and sucked in his breath. "Yep, he sure chawed you," he agreed dully.

"Well, blankety-blank-blank, I shore as hell cropped an ear for 'im," old Bill boasted. "I'd 'a' sent 'im off home with a bunch of dewlaps, but he broke away on me." And he added a string of words that sizzled the air.

Leaning over the edge of the rack, Lynn retied the bandage and said how sorry he was. "Anybody else in the country able to saw off a few tunes?" he asked worriedly.

Old Bill pondered, shaking his head. Then he spat into the trodden grass and squinted his good eye. "Feller visitin' Mullen's," he said cryptically.

"Perfessional vi'linist, they tell me. You might git him. I d'know."

Lynn was doubtful. "These perfessionals—they're the jaspers that plays classical music," he objected. "Hell, I want somebody that can *fiddle.*"

Old Bill thought the jasper over at Mullen's might be able to foller a mouth harp, anyway; and most generally these blank-blank perfessionals was tol'able fair on waltzes. Purty slow an' weepy, but Lynn might prod 'im with a pitchfork now an' then an' keep 'im ramblin'. Be better'n nothin', mebby. Old Bill would come over and do the callin' off, and if necessary he'd stomp time and kinda keep the perfessional leanin' agin' the collar. He was a kind-hearted old ruffian, was old Bill Saunders, even if he did chew the ears half off sheepherders in the heat of an argument.

So Lynn saddled Seal and headed for Mullen's in a long lope. The men were out hauling hay. Mrs. Mullen held the door open just wide enough to let her face out, and denied at first that she had a guest of any sort. But when Lynn told her about old Bill, and smiled at her in the devastating way he had—though he didn't know he had it—Mrs. Mullen blushed and let him into the warm kitchen. Fat does many things to a woman, but has never been known to make her absolutely impervious to smiles such as Lynn Farrow's.

Mrs. Mullen went upstairs to confer with the professional violinist, who was still in bed. She was gone a long time. Lynn could hear her voice raised in argument, sharpened with expostulation, lowered in pleading. Finally she returned to say that her old schoolmate, H. La Verne Churchill, thought he was coming down with grippe. He certainly could play a violin, she said. He could play *Over the Waves* to bring tears from a rock, and you just wanted to go on waltzing till you dropped. But he was awful sensitive and shy. It was just like pulling teeth to get La Verne out among strangers. She didn't know—if Lynn could promise him there wouldn't be any big crowd but just a few neighbors—

With that hint to guide him, Lynn unbuttoned his fur coat and went upstairs behind Mrs. Mullen's toiling bulk, and added all his persuasion to hers. Eventually H. La Verne Churchill yielded to the flattery of their coaxing. He even consented to get up and dress himself and come downstairs to a belated breakfast. While he was waiting for his hotcakes he condescended to play *Over the Waves* —Mrs. Mullen watching Lynn's face to see how he liked it.

Privately, Lynn thought the time was rotten. But he was no judge of professionals and he left with both H. La Verne Churchill and Mrs. Mullen promising that he would be there and bring his violin. But in spite of that Lynn rode back around by old Bill Saunders's place and told him to bring his fiddle along and to come early because he might have to kinda egg the vi'linist into speeding up his tunes. He played, said Lynn, kinda long-drawn-out, like a wolf howling before a storm. Sounded good, but nothing you could dance to.

He was still suffering from the effect of all those doughnuts, but there was no time to pet himself along. He was not afraid that H. La Verne would fail to show up, because he had shown a rare diplomacy in adding a

ten-dollar gold piece to his persuasions, and had hinted that there would be another after the dance. Not that Lynn was overstocked with gold pieces—he was just a nice young man determined to finish whatever he started, which in this case was the dance for Hattie.

That day he fed the cattle so early he had to drive out into the three-hundred-and-twenty acre field and toll the cattle in with the first load, they were so surprised that he should have hay for them at that hour. But he knew the Baldwins would be over early with the refreshments and he wanted to be all shaved and in his good clothes before they came, and have the plank benches laid around the wall in the front room. It was going to be pretty cold that night. He ought to keep the old cookstove red-hot to kinda take the chill off the other rooms. There'd be plenty to do, especially after the crowd began to roll in along about seven; a little before, some of them.

He was just trying for the seventeenth time to slick the wave out of his hair and make his cowlick lie down when the Baldwins drove into the yard. Lynn hurried out bareheaded into the wind and helped the women down from the wagon, and carried in the bundles of food. It took four trips. Then he went to show Baldwin the snuggest stall for his team. He was just leaving the stable after that was done, when here came the Mullen's covered buggy. Mrs. Mullen leaned out and beckoned him. Lynn hurried over.

"I'm awful sorry, Mr. Farrow. I made Jim hitch up and come right over. La Verne isn't coming at all. Right after supper he said he felt worse and was goin' to bed and see if he couldn't break up his cold. But I don't believe that's it, Mr. Farrow. He just can't bear to set up and face a crowd of strangers. He's just lost his nerve, is what ails him. I do wish you'd of been there, Mr. Farrow—I'm most sure you could of coaxed him into comin'."

"Yeah, well, I'll fork my horse and get right over there," Lynn promised. "Maybe I can git him to change his mind."

He left Mullen to put his team wherever he pleased, and Mrs. Mullen to waddle up the slippery path alone to the house. He had changed from button shoes to boots, and buckled on his gun and his big fur coat and his spurs and was surging out into the raw dusk before Mrs. Mullen arrived puffing at the porch. A group of horsemen were arriving, collars pulled up around their shaven jaws. But he recognized old Bill Saunders's pacing pinto and hurried over to meet him.

"You'll have to ride herd on the bunch till I get back, Bill," he announced without preface. "I'm li'ble to be a little late with the music. That buttermilk-eyed buzzard of a vi'linist broke back on me. Backed down at the last minute and wouldn't come."

"Wouldn't, eh? Why, the blank-blank-blankety-blank—"

Lynn left him warming the atmosphere with his opinion of professional violinists who broke their engagements, and saddled his horse and rode forth into the teeth of a cold north wind.

H. La Verne Churchill was in bed with the lamp on a box beside his pillow. He was reading *East Lynne* and his lip was trembling over the saddest part of all, where she came back hid-

den behind dark glasses to be governess—or was it nurse?—to her own darling—anyway, it was sad and H. La Verne's pale blue eyes were moist and his lip was trembling. It trembled worse when Lynn burst into the room and yanked him out of bed.

Lynn was not a bad man, but he acted bad. He thought that was the way to handle pasty-faced runts like H. La Verne Churchill, and perhaps he was right. He jerked out his gun and fired one shot. It left a burned hole almost in the exact center of the braided rag rug. H. La Verne Churchill's feet were near its edge. It was not a big rug, either.

"Git into your pants," Lynn ordered with a deadly calm. "You're due at that dance right now, so don't waste any time."

H. La Verne dressed himself in less time that you would believe possible—almost as quickly, in fact, as Lynn saddled the horse he found in the stable. He did not think a professional violinist would be likely to know much about horseback-riding, and he was right. But this one rode that night.

They arrived just in time to start the music before the milling crowd began to lose its temper. Hattie was sulking a little because Lynn had gone off without telling her where he was going, and there were not enough lanterns to make the porch look pretty. Josie gave him a smile, beckoned him to her, and led him into the pantry where she had a cup of hot coffee, a sandwich, and two kinds of cake all nicely spread out on a fringed napkin.

"Old Bill Saunders told me about the violinist," she said. "I just knew you had to go off without your supper. You stand there and eat that, and I'll keep watch."

Lynn hesitated, heard the twanging of the violin and the plunk of a guitar being tuned, and relaxed. Old Bill was getting things started, all right While he bit into a beef-tongue sandwich he heard Bill's high rasping voice: *"Git yer pardners fer a square dance!"* Josie looked over her shoulder and smiled at him, and Lynn smiled back.

"Let's dance this," he suggested, chewing fast so he might swallow the last mouthful and be ready to make merry with the crowd.

"Oh, but this is Hattie's dance," Josie reminded him loyally. "She'll expect the first one with you. You're the host, you know. You have to see that everyone else is having a good time before you think about enjoying yourself."

"Yeah, that's right. I'm starting in with you." Lynn gave her a look.

"Well, you needn't worry about me," said Josie with a toss of her head (though her heart must have been beating furiously). "You better get out there and see if everybody has found partners. And you want to keep an eye on those Wolf Butte cowboys. If they brought bottles with them as they generally do they'll pick a fight. They just love to break up dances. I can't see why Hattie wanted you to invite them, anyway. She knows they're rowdies."

"All right, I'll ride herd awhile," Lynn promised, drinking the last of his coffee. "But you save a dance for me, Josie. A waltz. Will you do that?"

"Maybe—after you've danced with Hattie." She pushed him out of the pantry, her cheeks red as if she had painted them so, which of course she had not—only the bold hussies used

paint on their faces in those simple times.

Lynn went off to keep cases on the crowd. Already three sets had formed. Hattie stood in the first set. She couldn't have waited more than half a minute for Lynn, and he chalked that up against her as he slipped along the wall toward the front door. Through the window he had seen vague figures out there on the unused porch and he thought he'd just see what they were hanging around out there for.

Half a dozen Wolf Butte men stood just beyond the light from the window. A round, ribbed bottle was making the rounds—a little early, but they'd had a long, cold ride. Lynn paused in the doorway sizing up the situation and trying to see who they were before he went among them. But at the moment a loud voice behind him rose in raucous dispute above the first notes of the music. Lynn whirled about, closing the door behind him.

A tall ungainly fellow with a red bandanna draped around his neck was trying to push a man out of the quadrille set nearest the door. One of these mouthy gazabos, Lynn tagged him. Claimed that was his place, he had it first, and he and his partner had just sat down a minute to wait till the music started.

"You ain't supposed to dance setting down," Lynn told him reasonably. "Stand up if you aim to dance, brother. Folks ain't going to read your mind." He looked across at old Bill Saunders standing on a box beside the table where the musicians had their chairs. Old Bill turned and ejected his tobacco cud delicately into the corner. H. La Verne drew his bow cannily across the strings of the violin cuddled beneath his weak chin.

"S'lute yer pardners! Corners the same!
Gran' right 'n' left—an' don't—go—lame!"

The half-grown boy with the guitar was half a beat behind and didn't remember just when the chord should change, but the violin twanged right merrily along. The beat and shuffle, the swish of starched petticoats, the high nasal singsong of old Bill Saunders calling the changes, all proclaimed that the dance was on. But near the door rose a dissonant note.

" 'S my dance an' I'm goin' to dance it!"

"You seddown, brother."

"I will like hell! I come here to dance and no this and that—"

So Lynn got him by the ear and led him outside where a laugh greeted them and a little knot of men parted to let them through.

"Paste 'im one, Bob! Don't let him run any whizzer on yuh!"

Thus encouraged, Bob swung half around and did his pasting. The blow landed on Lynn's cheek, scraping off skin.

"You would, hunh? Come on down to the blacksmith shop and lemme show yuh something." And Lynn rushed the Wolf Butte man down there at a trot.

The group followed, one man snatching a lantern off the gatepost as they went through. And after that Lynn was probably busy for half an hour or more, fighting Wolf Butte men who rashly attempted to take Bob's part. It seemed to him that they all piled in at once, though actually four of the bunch were trying to pacify Bob and pull the other two off Lynn. They were practically sober

and not aching for a fight, as they would be later. Had Bob been a Squaw Creek man they would have laughed him out of it. But Wolf Butte boys had to stick together and do their fighting amongst themselves.

Down in the blacksmith shop with the door closed and the one lantern dimly lighting the scene, Lynn set himself grimly to the task. He polished Bob off, saw him let himself out to do something for his nose which was bleeding on his store clothes. He exchanged blows and hard words with two of Bob's friends, smashing their bottle which happened to be nearly empty, and saw them go off somewhere after another. He then brushed himself off, slicked his hair with his hands, took off his coat, and sorrowfully inspected an alarming rip in the right armhole, put it back on, and returned to the house. Maybe Josie could pin it up or something.

How long he had been away he did not know—not over half an hour, he was sure. But in that short time a sinister change had come over the crowd. He went in through the kitchen, looking for Josie. What he saw was a hushed, whispering group of women. The men were standing in uneasy groups near the doors, and beside the table where the musicians had sat perched upon kitchen chairs the young guitar player was pushing his instrument into a green denim bag as Lynn approached.

Lynn stared, astonished. Two women came out of the bedroom putting on their wraps, whispering together. Even at two o'clock in the morning one would not expect such definite evidence that the dance was over, and yet it was only a little after ten. Then Mrs. Mullen saw him and came waddling toward him like a flustered duck. Tears were dripping from her eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Farrow! What shall we do?" she cried distractedly. "They've got La Verne! They came and took him right off the table! Right in the middle of a two-step!"

Lynn led her to one side and got the story. She had known H. La Verne was having some kinda trouble with his wife. That's why he hated to get out among people. But she never dreamed it was two wives he was hiding from. Poor La Verne was so sensitive and so kinda innocent, she didn't much believe he realized how serious it was to marry two women—

"Who's got him? The sheriff?" Lynn's eyes were beginning to blaze.

"No, a deputy. A new one. He had a warrant and he wouldn't wait, but walked right up and served it on La Verne, right in the middle of the dance. He made him put down his fiddle and go, and he wouldn't listen to nobody!"

"I see," said Lynn, and left her standing there. He went to old Bill Saunders. "Bill," he said with a snap in his voice, "see if you can't dig up somebody that can play a mouth harp for this kid to chord by. And you call off some good old square dances. Keep 'em hoeing 'er down fer a while, till I get back."

Old Bill pried the corner off a plug, eyeing Lynn curiously. "What yuh figure on doin', Lynn?"

"Who, me? I'm going to scare up a fiddler. I know where I can get one. You tell 'em. I'll be back in an hour or so, and the dance'll go right on. Tell 'em that."

In the extra room where he had moved his personal belongings, Lynn

was buckling on his gun when Hattie looked in. Her eyes were full of tears and her mouth was trembling. "They-'ve spoiled my lovely dance!" she wailed. "Lynn, can't you *do* something?"

"I can sure try," Lynn told her, reaching for his coat. "Don't you worry a minute. You go on back and dance."

But it was Josie's face he remembered, her eyes questioning him over Hattie' shoulder. He did not speak to Josie at all, but he thought of her all the while he was saddling Seal. Without a word between them he felt sure that Josie understood and would ride herd on the crowd till he got back. There was a lot of *sabe* in that girl, even if she wasn't what you could rightly call pretty.

With the moon dodging in and out of gray clouds that carried snow in their folds, Lynn rode out away from the corral and down the creek. When he swung into the beaten cow trail through the willows he lifted Seal into a lope with his spurs. The road to the county seat led up along the ridge, and on it somewhere H. La Verne Churchill was riding with the deputy sheriff to the town, which was nearly forty miles off. They had, Lynn judged, more than half an hour start on him, and he could not hope to overtake them with Seal already leg-weary from the errands he had run that day. But the main road swung back and crossed this creek about four miles farther down, and Lynn was taking a chance on meeting them somewhere along there.

The moon served for a while, and then went under to stay. The quiet snowflakes came sifting down and the night turned a whitish-gray, with a silver spot in the clouds where the moon was swimming deep. Lynn knew to a hair what Seal could stand, and kept him just safely under his limit until he reached the main road where it crossed the creek. There he dismounted and made sure, by the skim of unbroken ice, that no one had passed that way within the hour. So then he turned back along the road and took it easy, letting his horse walk up the gentle slope of the prairie.

Topping the rise, he saw the two horsemen riding toward him through the white blur. They were coming along at a lope, so he touched Seal up with his spurs and galloped to meet them.

Ten jumps away he pulled his gun and rode at them, setting Seal up in the trail before their horses.

"Hold on," he gave crisp command. "I've got you covered. Get your hands up, both of you."

H. La Verne's arms shot straight up alongside his hat crown. The officer's lifted more slowly, but they went up. "If it's money you want," he called gruffly, "you've stuck up the wrong parties. I'm an officer of the law. I ain't any gold mine."

"You can keep your dough, if you've got any," Lynn said impatiently. "I want that prisoner of yourn. I hired him to play the fiddle at my dance, and by Godfrey, he's going to play it. You turn right around, H. La Verne, and amble back to my kitchen table. They're spellin' you with mouth harps and they're liable to git sore mouths and quit. So mosey right along."

The deputy made a choking sound. "This man is my prisoner," he blustered. "I've got him under arrest for bigamy and breaking jail. He's want-

ed for forgery besides."

"He's wanted a damn sight worse to play for my dance," Lynn bluntly stated. "You'd oughta waited till morning, anyhow. It ain't good manners to go and break up a dance on folks that've rode miles just to git a few hours of pleasure."

"What the hell's that to me? I come after this escaped prisoner, and I got him. I'm takin' him back to jail where he belongs."

"Not just yet, you ain't. This little squirt may be all you say. I wouldn't put it past him. But he's got to finish up the job he's been paid for." Lynn's voice eased down to a persuasive note. "I'm willing to be reasonable. You come on back with me and dance till morning. They'll be handing out some damn good grub, in a little bit now. I'll see to it you get first grab at the best there is; hot coffee with real cream and all the sugar it'll soak up, doughnuts and cake—I'll see to it you're treated like a king. Then in the morning, when the folks have danced all they want to, you can take H. La Verne and hang him for all of me. How's that strike yuh?"

"It strikes me you're headed straight for the pen," snarled the deputy. "Interfering with an officer in the performance of his duty—I'll get you five years for it! Holding me up like this—"

Lynn rode ominously closer. "Keep your hands up! If that's the way you feel about it, I'll make a damn good job of it, and if I have to feed you a bullet or two that'll be fine and dandy."

Even the murk of the thickening snow could not hide the sinister warning of the six-gun in his hand. With his knees he edged Seal closer alongside, leaned, and lifted the gun from the deputy's holster.

"You'll do time for this," snarled the officer.

"Shut up, before I crown you with this gun. La Verne, you take his bridle reins and lead out where I tell yuh. I ain't taking any chances with this jasper. He's liable to be wearing a shoulder holster or some such thing. Over to the left," he directed. "Now keep straight ahead till I tell yuh to stop. There's a claim shack over here a little ways. You'll see it."

Whatever H. La Verne Churchill thought about the affair, he said never a word but was scrupulously careful to obey Lynn's slightest command. They arrived at the claim shack, a black, lonesome spot in the snowy void.

"Git down, La Verne. You too, officer. All right. Now, La Verne, you search him thorough. Don't be afraid, 'cause he knows damn well I'll shoot if either one of you makes a mismove.

"Another gun, hunh? I thought so. Well, hold it on him till I get off. If you have to shoot him, that'll be all right with me. I've got no use for a man as mean and ornery as he is."

"Here's a knife," quavered H. La Verne. "What'll I do with it?"

"Hand it over here. Now, I'll take the gun. Slip it in my coat pocket. Shaking the way you are, you ain't safe with a gun nohow. Furthermore, you're a prisoner. Don't forget that."

"Y-You're just pilin' up trouble fer yourself," the deputy warned Lynn. But his tone was not convincing, and when he was told to get back into the shack and stay there, he went, and did his swearing through the doorway.

Lynn holstered his gun, picked up

the reins of the deputy's horse, and mounted Seal. He reined in close to the shack.

"You had your chance so you've got no kick coming," he yelled above the steady flow of language from within. "If you'd been a gentleman about it things woulda turned out more comfortable for yuh."

He listened for a moment for a reply, but nothing he heard seemed particularly pertinent. The deputy was busy describing Lynn Farrow's character and ultimate fate. Lynn waited for a pause.

"Go ahead, cuss and keep warm," he yelled. "Soon as the dance is over I'll bring back your prisoner and you can have him. He ain't going to break away from me, if that's what's worrying yuh. So try and keep your shirt on till daybreak, anyway." He wheeled his horse and waved H. La Verne forward. "Here, Don Jo-ann, you ride up here alongside. And don't try anything brave or there's liable to be a flock of brand new widows wearing black on your account."

"I—I won't," H. La Verne promised in trembling sincerity, probably remembering the bullet hole in Mrs. Mullen's braided rug.

"And shake up that old pelter, can't you? The dance of mine'll be a complete fizzle if we don't look out."

H. La Verne obediently kicked his horse in the ribs and went bouncing painfully through the night. Lynn drove him relentlessly along the short-cut trail, up to the stable, held him there by the sole power of his relentless purpose until the horses were stabled, then on to the house at a trot.

H. La Verne arrived at his post on the kitchen table with cold perspiration on his face and a hunted look in his eyes, but he caught Lynn's look and reached for his violin as a drowning man reaches for a life raft. Being a professional, he could fiddle even though his fingers did shake.

Women always had felt sorry for H. La Verne Churchill and wanted to bring a sparkle into his eyes. Now it was Josie, bringing him coffee and sandwiches and telling him there was no use starting in just now because they were going to serve refreshments the minute old Bill called *promenade home.* Which Bill, catching sight of that cup and high-piled plate, did with his next breath.

"And here's your reward, Lynn," said Josie at his elbow just as he was shucking his fur coat and thinking no one appreciated his efforts anyway. "I won't ask how you performed the miracle, but you certainly saved Hattie's dance. Folks were just beginning to growl about the music, so I hurried up the refreshments to keep them in a good humor and give you a little more time. I suppose you want to eat with Hattie. She's over there near the stairs, I think."

Josie probably did not mean a thing except kindness, but as it happened Lynn found Hattie sitting on the bottom step of the stairs with a cowboy from Wolf Butte. They had their sandwiches and cake piled on one plate which the cowboy held on his knees, and they were dividing the services of one teaspoon in their coffee. Lynn saw that much before he marched over and roosted on a corner of the table where he could keep an eye on H. La Verne while he ate.

He was still sitting there when Josie came up and whispered to him that the sleeve was half ripped out of

his coat, and if he could dig up a needle and thread they could sneak into the pantry while she sewed it up. And she added that he wouldn't want Hattie to see him going around looking like that.

Lynn turned and looked at her oddly. "She ain't liable to notice," he said. But he went off and got a needle big enough to sew grain sacks and a spool of shiny No. 10 black linen thread, which made Josie laugh, it was so like a man. However, she made it do—though it took at least twice as long as one would think was necessary.

Two-step, waltz, quadrille, schottische, the dance went merrily on through the long hours after midnight. Lynn danced indefatigably until dawn, but he did not dance with Hattie. Josie was a mighty smooth waltzer, he discovered. He'd bet she could carry a full glass of water on her head all through a waltz and never spill a drop. And when he tried her out with a polka it was like dancing with a cottonwood fluff in a spring breeze. Sure light on her feet, that girl. They shottisched together with a military precision that had the whole crowd watching before they were through. Quadrilles and such he danced with the women who didn't get a good partner very often. After all, there were the obligations of a host, he didn't forget that.

An hour after sunrise he was back at the claim shack with H. La Verne and the deputy's horse all nicely rested and fed good Rolling M oats for his breakfast. He shouted for the deputy sheriff before he noticed the boot tracks leading away from the shack through the new-fallen snow. He rode about six miles farther toward town before he overtook the deputy plodding sullenly along with wet feet and his big overcoat unbuttoned and flapping as he walked. He turned a red and scowling face over his shoulder as Lynn came loping down the road driving H. La Verne before him.

"Good Godfrey but you're an impatient cuss," Lynn grinned as the three horses dropped to a walk just behind the deputy. "Everybody was having such a good time I didn't like to drag your bigamy shark off'n the table till sunup, anyway. Here he is, right side up with care. And I sure am much obliged for the loan of him."

"You're under arrest!" the deputy spluttered. "You give me my horse and—"

"Come along to jail? Not so you could notice." Lynn slid sidewise in the saddle and grinned down at the deputy with unquenchable good humor. "You couldn't take me in and you know it—not even if you wanted to, which you don't, and I'd bet money on it."

"I'll come back with a posse and a bench warrant!" stormed the deputy. "I'll make you sweat blood for this!"

"Why, say! You old walrus, if you was to arrest me I'd make you the joke of Choteau county. I'd tell everybody how you glommed the only violin player in twenty miles, and took him away from a dance before it had hardly got started. I'd tell 'em where you spent most of the night, and why. Why, everybody in the hull state of Montana'd give yuh the horselaugh, and you know it."

"And when I see you behind the bars I'll laugh louder'n any of 'em."

"I ain't there yet, you notice."

"Don't let that worry yuh. You will be, about tomorrow night."

Lynn slid back straight in the sad-

dle, untied a small bundle wrapped in a grain sack, and tossed it in the snow thirty feet from the road.

"Them's your guns and knife," he volunteered cheerfully. "The shells are loose in the bag, but they're all there. Take your horse and beat it. And don't ever try and bust up a dance of mine again, 'cause next time I'm liable to git mad and do something about it."

He dropped the reins of the deputy's horse, wheeled and galloped back the way he had come.

"I'll be back—and don't you forgit it!" bawled the deputy. "You're under arrest right now! You're an escaped prisoner and will be treated accordin'!"

If Lynn heard he gave no sign that he did. He was a furred figure riding across new snow in the dazzle of a brilliant morning sun, and presently he dipped out of sight in a hollow and was seen no more by the two who watched him go.

The cattle were wandering disconsolately around over the snow-blanketed feed ground bawling for their breakfast when he arrived. Lynn hitched up the team, threw off the jag of hay that was left after his guests had lavishly helped themselves for their horses, hauled another big load and scattered it, stabled his team, and went to the house.

The place was cold, dismal as a haunted house. Ghosts of gaily fiddled dance tunes wove intricate garlands of remembered melody within the empty rooms. Wraith of Hattie taking pickles and sandwiches daintly from the plate of the Wolf Butte cowboy sitting on the bottom step of the stairs. In the pantry when he went foraging for leftovers for his breakfast, there stood a phantom Josie smiling at him, her fine eyes shining with laughter over their simple secret of the mended coat.

Lynn's head ached. His eyes felt as if someone had thrown sand in his face. Two knuckles skinned on Wolf Butte cowboys had turned blue and stiff. He paused in the process of lighting a fire in the kitchen stove and inspected them sourly with gentle massaging, using his other thumb.

It was when he pulled the big coffee boiler off the shelf where it did not belong that he found Josie's note, written on a piece of wrapping paper with a piece of charcoal and hidden away where he would be sure to discover it.

It was a fine dance. Hattie and I will come over and help clean up if Pa will let us have the team.

No use banking on that, Lynn thought as he crumpled the paper and thrust it in amongst the blazing kindling. Pa Baldwin was an old crank. But it was nice of Josie to want to do it, just the same. Pity Hattie wouldn't have written a word. It was her dance.

He dragged the kitchen table back where it belonged, washed off the marks of H. La Verne's feet, and ate warped sandwiches for his breakfast. He wrestled with the heater and its diabolical pipe, got in it place with more skinned knuckles to show for the job, and started a fire to make the place less like a tomb. After that he swept and dragged ungainly pieces of furniture back where they belonged.

At noon he ate again, wound the clock and set the alarm for four o'clock, and went to bed. No use looking for the girls—it was a cinch they wouldn't come. Lynn wasn't at all

sure he wanted them to. Not even Josie.

That evening he fed the cattle early, and when they had trailed off to the shed he hauled four more loads and scattered them on the feed ground in the dark. He hauled a fifth and piled it in a corner of the corral for the team.

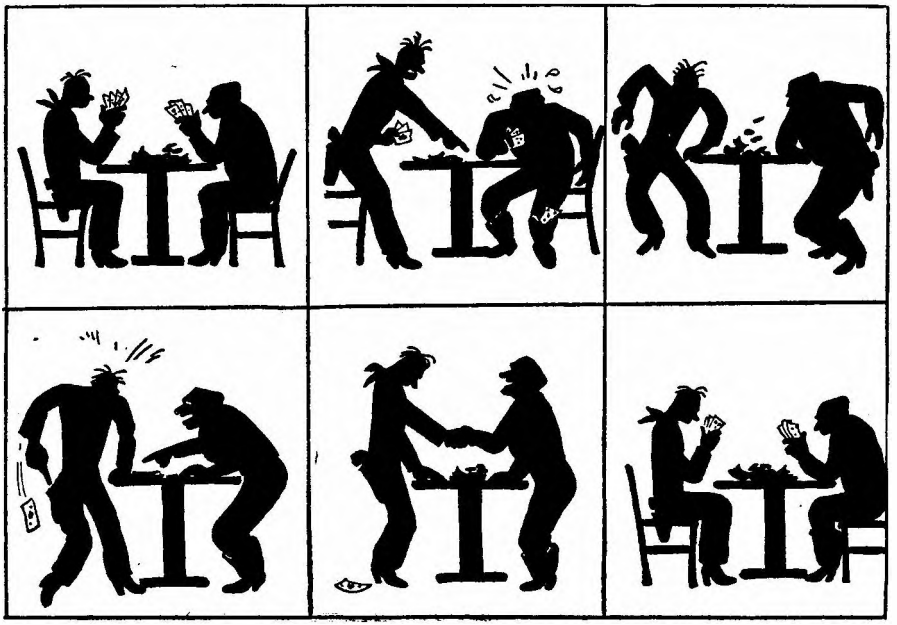
When that was done he cooked and ate a prodigious meal, packed what food there was left, rolled his blankets, and stuffed his war bag full of his belongings. A little later he rode away from there, careful to follow the beaten trail left in the snow by the dance crowd. Where the trail divided, hoofprints branching out in various directions, he chose a set headed toward the Sweet Grass hills.

On a far ridge he pulled in his horse Seal and let the pack horse come up alongside while he stared back toward the quiet valley, lighted now by the late-rising moon. Just along there where the creek made a bend lay the Jameson ranch and the snug winter's job he was leaving behind. He had no illusions concerning the malignant purpose of that deputy sheriff.

But that was not the thing that pulled his eyebrows together now beneath his cap of muskrat fur. It was another thought that sent his breath in a white mist between his clenched teeth.

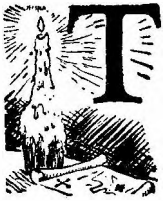
"Darn girls!" he gritted, "and dances too. I hope I never see another one."

He turned and rode on, boring patiently into the white enfolded hills of the Sweet Grass.



—CARL HAMMOND

Free-for-All



THE border country that serves as the locale of "Desert Gold," the Zane Grey story featured this month, has seen more than its share of action through the years. Smugglers, bandits, and cattle rustlers used to drift back and forth across it with unwelcome regularity, and more than a few times U.S.-Mexican relations were strained close to the breaking-point by these violations of the boundary.

The period which Zane Grey describes in "Desert Gold" was the border's last heyday—early in the 1900's. Although omens of the coming of a new and more peaceful order were pretty plain to see, the lawless elements had their one last, gigantic fling. But the end was in sight; even the seemingly interminable Yaqui-Mexican wars came to an end in 1901.

This hostility between the Yaquis and the Mexicans lasted longer and was more bitter than anything comparable in the history of the Indian wars in the United States. The Yaquis had lived long in the Sonora region when, early in the eighteenth century, the first encroachments were made by the Mexicans. When fighting broke out in 1740, the Indians were easily defeated. In 1825 it began again, and this time the Yaquis, under Juzucana, an able leader who flew a banner supposedly once used by Montezuma, won some concessions.

However, further encroachments by miners interested in the great mineral wealth of the province provoked more trouble, and there followed wars in 1832, 1884, and 1900. An episode mentioned in "Desert Gold" occurred in the last conflict: the capture by the Mexicans of a large number of Yaquis and their subsequent enslavement in Yucatan. It is easy enough to understand the Yaqui's hatred for the Mexicans—it was simply more intense than, say, the feeling of the Sioux toward the American settlers.

● The eternal conflict between old and new comes in for a light touch and a romantic twist in "Cowgal on

the Peck," Omar Barker's contribution to our pages in this issue. The moral of the story, we suppose, is that there's no use trying to impress an "old" girl with new tricks—or a new mustache. One thing still bothers us —did that darn' branding-fluid ever work?

● Edwin L. Sabin, a regular and always welcome contributor to ZGWM, appears in this issue with a fiction piece, "The Long Rope." Don Reata Larga is probably the patron saint of all rustlers, who used to throw pretty long ropes themselves. This story has such a legendary quality—a sort of blending of possible fact with fancy —that it won't surprise us a bit if in the years to come it will be seriously advanced as an explanation of the term "long rope."

● That apparently inexhaustible source of Western facts is in again— we mean W. H. Hutchinson. This time Hutch gives us in "Long Gone—Long Buried," a case history of the redoubtable John Glanton—a study of the psychology of an adventurer. To such men there seems to be a fatal attraction in "the bright face of danger" that leads them to the heights—or to the depths. Today the breed may be dying out—perhaps there is no room left for it. But it played an important rôle in our past, and richly deserves our attention.

● Another and far different type comes in for some close study in Ray Spears's story this month, "Gun Justice at Good Water." Joe Clayton, hero of the yarn, is the embodiment of at least one good American quality— he can be pushed just so far, and then watch out!

● "On with the Dance" is the first story by the late B. M. Bower that ZGWM has reprinted, but it won't be the last. Like most top-ranking Western authors, B. M. Bower had plenty of first-hand experience in ranching, but—unlike most of them—author Bower was a woman. Her output of Western books was prodigious, numbering sixty-odd volumes, and her style noteworthy for its clear, crisp quality. She died in 1940.

● The picture story, "Rocky Mountain Sahib," deals with one of the most colorful characters in Western history, Sir George Gore. It is probably safe to say that never before, or since, has any comparable pleasure-seeking expedition been undertaken in America. And Sir George goes down in our book as the kind of fellow we'd like to have known!

● Letters from ZGWM readers continue coming in, containing much praise and some criticism. Both are welcome. This month three-dollar checks are being sent to Mr. J. P. Wallace of Santa Monica, California, and Mr. J. W. Rodgers, Jr. of Los Angeles for outstanding letters.

Mr. Wallace sets us straight on a bit of Western history: "In the story 'War on Powder River' Carl Smith states 'Colonel Van Horn proclaimed a truce, and the invaders agreed to surrender to him.' Colonel Van Horn was not at the KC ranch. Major Edward Fichet, Captains Scott and Wallace were the officers. One Rodman gun comprised the artillery. The 'invaders' did not rush out and surrender. We placed a couple of shots with the Rodman and they sent out a messenger. Fichet gave them 'ten minutes to get ready to ride—those who are not ready will be dragged behind the horses.' I rode through the entire 'war' on detached duty as special in-

vestigator for a former army officer, and was attached to the command of Major Fichet when he went to the relief of the invaders. The invaders were a sad and sorry lot—the 'flower of western gunmen' [not our phrase; we just said they were 'hand-picked'] were a trifle withered; they were a far from romantic crew."

ZGWM is glad to be corrected by a man who should know. Sometimes it's hard to get these stories absolutely straight, as even eye-witness reports often conflict, but we want to give them to you as accurately as we can and so appreciate such letters as this.

Mr. Rodgers's are words of praise: "I recently purchased a copy of your magazine and was agreeably surprised at the quality of the stories and articles. They were interesting, well written, and factual. Particularly interesting was the article, 'For Scalps: Pesos' by W. H. Hutchinson. Covering, as it does, a generally unknown phase of our Western history, it is a valuable contribution to the literature on the development of one of the most interesting sections of our country. I hope you will continue to carry articles of this sort." Reader Rodgers should enjoy author Hutchinson's article in this issue.

The editors of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE have developed a plan for giving special recognition to Western stories of outstanding merit. Details will be announced soon.

Next month's Zane Grey novel abridgment will be "Knights of the Range," and it will as usual be accompanied by ZGWM's regular features and departments, plus three new shorts: "The Sodbuster and the Mountain Man," by Joe Hook; "The Horseless Headman," a Paintin' Pistoleer yarn by Walker Tompkins; and Stephen Payne's "Under His Hat"—an issue not to be missed!

—THE EDITORS.

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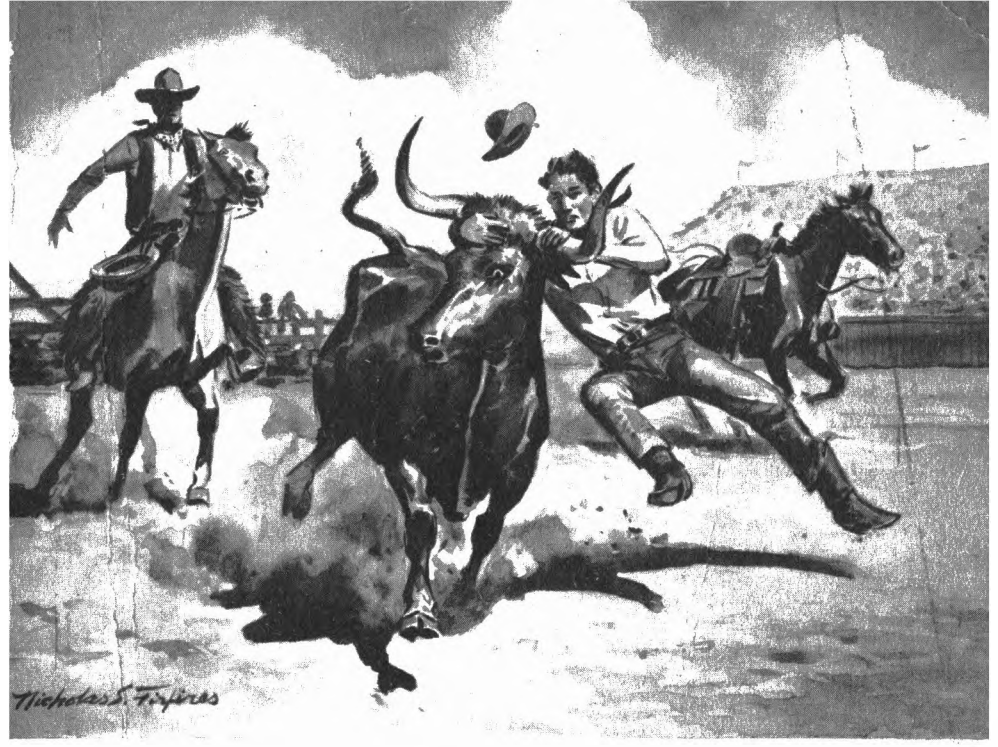

THROW 'IM, COWBOY!

BULLDOGGING a steer is rugged rodeo sport and strictly a man's game. Throwing a fighting steer in good time takes strength and a lot of 'doing. The bulldogger rides at breakneck speed up along the left side of the steer. His pardner hazes the critter on the right to keep him running straight. Leaning over, the bulldogger makes a dive for the steer's horns as he leaves his horse. Using the horns as levers, he twists the critter's nose skyward, which throws him off balance and down. At least, that's the way it's supposed to come off, but usually it's a turmoil of hoofs, horns, and man—a knock-down and drag-about.

While bulldogging did not originate from ranch work, it has found its place in the rodeo as a novel and nervy feat. A variation of bulldogging is called "hoolihaning." In this the bulldogger forces the steer's horns into the ground while he is running at top speed, and both make a complete somersault. It's pretty dangerous for both man and animal—the cowboy may be crushed under the steer or the steer's horns or neck may be broken. Most rodeos do not allow hoolihaning.

NICK FIRFIRES

LINE-CAMP POWWOW Painted by Dan Muller