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ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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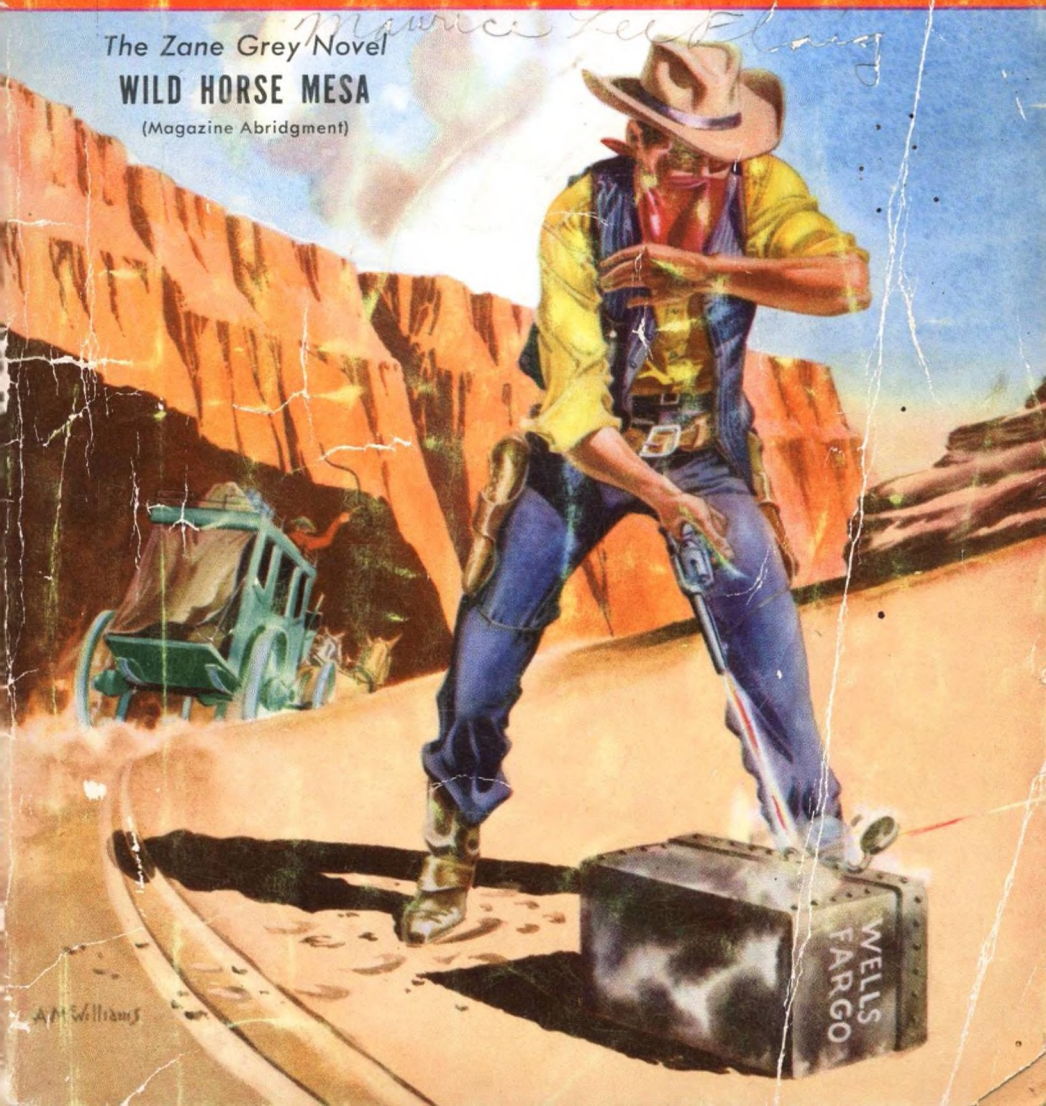
The Zane Grey Novel

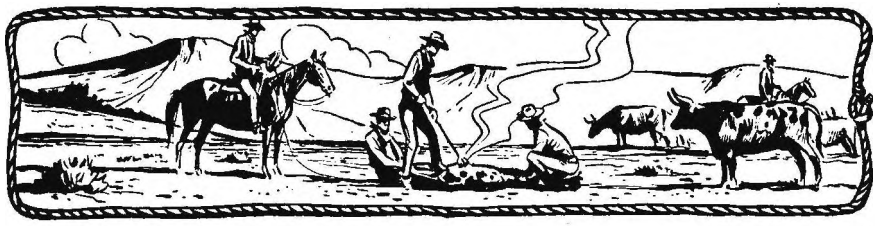
WILD HORSE MESA

(Magazine Abridgment)



"Sue, kiss me, or I'll slip and fall!"

Wild Horse Mesa, Chap. 13



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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THIS MONTH'S MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT: *WILD HORSE MESA*

SUE MELBERNE, *lovely, spirited daughter of a wild-horse hunter, finds herself both attracted and repelled by virile Chane Weymer, a lone-wolf mustanger who has thrown in with Sue's father's outfit after horse thieves have stripped him of his own catch. Smooth-talking Bent Manerube, her father's new foreman, has told Sue that Chane is notorious as a squaw man whose practice it is to seduce unsophisticated Indian girls. Chane's clean-cut appearance and honest manner seem to belie an off-color past, but when Sue sees him on obviously friendly terms with the Indian girl called Sosie Nokin, she accepts it as verification of Manerube's tales. Chane's younger brother, Chess, who cherishes Sue almost as much as he worships Chane, does his best to promote a love affair between the two, but his assiduous proxy courtship of the girl seems to get nowhere. Sue becomes interested in Chane in spite of herself, but Chane, although keenly aware of her charms, nourishes a resentment born of the knowledge that she doubts his integrity. The great mustang drive, which Chane opposes because of the brutal methods used, gets off to a start which promises rich profits, and Manerube and Melberne's greedy partner, Loughbridge, brush aside Chane's warnings. Sue, concerned for the fate of the freedom-loving animals, takes a desperate step that forces a crisis and splits the wild-horse hunters into warring camps. In the violent, gun-throwing showdown that follows, Sue Melberne's eyes are opened to the truth and Chane Weymer gives up the greatest prize that any mustang hunter could hope for—to find that thereby he has won one even greater. "Wild Horse Mesa" is a stirring novel of hair-raising action and tender romance.*

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WILD HORSE MESA

By ZANE GREY

CHAPTER ONE

Mustang Hunters

THE mystery and insurmountable nature of Wild Horse Mesa had usurped many a thoughtful hour of Chane Weymer's lonely desert life in Utah. Every wandering rider had a strange story to tell about this vast tableland. But Chane had never before seen it from so lofty and commanding a height as this to which Toddy Nokin, the Piute, had led him. The Piute claimed that it was the last refuge of the great wild stallion, Panquitch, and his band.

Panquitch! He had been chased out of Nevada by wild-horse wranglers, of whom Chane was not the last; Mormons had driven the stallion across Utah, where in the canyoned fastnesses south of the Henry Mountains he had disappeared.

Chane's gaze left the mesa to fall upon the swarthy lineaments of his companion.

"Toddy – you sure Panquitch – on Wild Horse Mesa?" he queried, in his labored mixture of Piute and Navajo.

Toddy Nokin made a slow, sweeping gesture toward the far northern end of Wild Horse Mesa, almost lost in dim purple distance. The motion suggested deviations of trail, deep canyons to cross, long distance to cover. Then Toddy Nokin spoke in his own tongue. Panquitch had been seen to lead his band up over the barren trailless rock benches that led to the towering wall of the unscalable mesa. These wild horses left no tracks. They had not returned. Panquitch was on top of the mesa, free with the big-horn sheep and the eagles. The fact wrung profound respect and admiration from Chane Weymer, yet fired him with passionate resolve.

"Panquitch, I've got track of you at

last!" he exclaimed, exultantly.

There awoke in Chane then something of abandon to what he had always longed for—a wild freedom without work or restraint or will other than his own wandering fancies. Indeed, his range life had been rough and hard enough, but up until the last year he had been under obligation to his father and other employers, and always there had been a powerful sense of duty and a love for his younger brother, Chess. These had acted as barriers to his natural instincts. Chess was eighteen now and resented Chane's guardianship.

"Boy Blue doesn't need his big brother any more," soliloquized Chane, half sadly.

Time, indeed, had passed swiftly. Chane reflected on his own age—thirty-four, and on those past years when this beloved brother had been a little child. Those early days in Colorado had been happy ones. Chane's father had been a ranchman, cattleman, and horse dealer. It had been on the prairie slopes of Colorado, under the eastern shadows of the Rockies, that Chane had learned what was now his calling—the hunting of wild horses. In time he sought wilder country—Nevada, Utah—and his brother Chess, true to childish worship, had followed him. There had been a couple of years in which the boy had been amenable; then had come the inevitable breaking out. Chane had left him, several weeks ago, back across the rivers and the stony brakes of that Utah wilderness, in the little Mormon town of St. George. Chess had begged to go on this expedition to the Piute country, where Chane had come to buy a bunch of Indian mustangs. Here Chane's musings were interrupted by Toddy Nokin, who said he would go down to his camp.

"No want leave daughter alone," he added significantly. Chane was reminded that one of the horse-wranglers who had fallen in with him—Manerube by name—was not a man he would care to trust.

The Indian's moccasined feet padded softly on the rocks. Presently Chane was left to himself, and his gaze and mind returned to the object that had caused him to scale the heights—Wild Horse Mesa.

Chane was at loss to understand the spell which had fascinated him since his first sight of Wild Horse Mesa. It was as if he had been arrested by a prophetic voice that bade him give heed. He could not grasp the vague intimation as a warning; it was rather a call which urged him to come, to seek, to labor, to find. Chane thought of the wild stallion, Panquitch, and he could not satisfy himself that pursuit of the great horse wholly accounted for this strange beckoning.

Chane left his lofty perch and descended rapidly over the smooth rock benches, zigzagging the curved slopes, and at last the cedared ridge above Beaver Canyon. Twilight yielded to night. Then a bright campfire lighted up the weird cedar trees and the dark forms of men standing in a half circle. Several Piutes stood grouped near the fire, wild, picturesque figures, lean, ragged, disheveled, with their high-crowned sombreros.

Chane moved on again, approaching quite closely to the campfire before his boot crunched on a stone. He saw Manerube start, and cease his earnest talk to the three men who had been listening intently. They too relaxed their attention. It struck Chane that his abrupt arrival had interrupted a colloquy not

intended for his sharing. What were these men up to?

They had all been strangers to him before three of them had ridden into his camp one night a few weeks before. They claimed to be wild-horse wranglers on the way across the rivers, and offered their services in exchange for camp rations. Chane had been glad to have them help him collect and run the mustangs he was buying to sell to the Mormons. Manerube, however, who had joined them recently, was not a man to inspire Chane's liking. He was over-bearing in manner and he was brutal to horses; and lastly he had made trouble with the Piutes.

Manerube had his back to the campfire. He had a rider's figure, long, lithe, round of limb. As Chane came up Manerube turned to disclose the sunburned face of a man under thirty, bold, striking, sardonic. Its gleaming light eyes and curling blond mustache seemed to hide much. Manerube claimed to be Mormon. Chane had rather doubted this, though the fellow was well educated and had a peculiar dominating manner.

"Well, how was the little squaw sweetheart tonight?" he drawled. One of the other men snickered.

Chane had not been above being friendly to Toddy Nokin's dusky-eyed daughter—a friendliness Manerube had misconstrued.

"See here, Manerube," replied Chane, "Sosie is not my sweetheart."

Manerube laughed derisively. "Bah! You can't fool a Mormon when it comes to women, white or red."

"I've lived a good deal among Mormons," returned Chane. "I never noticed they talked insultingly about women."

Manerube's eyes wavered for a second.

"Insult a squaw!" he ejaculated coarsely. "Say, your bluff don't work."

"It's no bluff. I don't make bluffs," replied Chane deliberately. "Sosie's nothing to me."

"Weymer, I don't believe you," returned Manerube.

Chane took a quick long stride toward the other.

"Do you call me a liar?" he demanded.

There was a moment's silence. The Piutes took note of Chane's sharp voice. Manerube's comrades backed away slowly. He made a quick angry gesture that was wholly instinctive. Then he controlled his natural feeling.

"If Sosie's nothing to you, why'd you tell her father to keep her away from me?" demanded Manerube, avoiding Chane's direct question. "She's only a squaw, and one white man's the same as another to her."

"Sosie likes white men. So do all these Indian girls," said Chane. "They're simple, primitive children of the desert. That's why so many of them are degraded by such men as you, Manerube."

Manerube evidently held himself under strong control because of some feeling other than fear. The red faded out of his face and his eyes glared.

"Chane, I heard about you over in Bluff," he burst out in scorn. "And now I'm not wondering whether it's true or not."

"What'd you hear?" queried Chane calmly.

"That you'd been a Navajo squaw man."

Chane laughed and replied, "No, I never married a Navajo. But I'll tell you what. I'd sooner marry a girl like Sosie and be decent to her than treat

her as you would."

Manerube eyed Chane guardedly. "Well," he said finally, "I'll treat Sosie as I like."

"Not while you're in my camp," flashed Chane. "I didn't ask your help or your company. I don't like either. You take your horses and pack, and get out, pronto."

"I'll think it over tonight," replied Manerube.

His impudent assurance irritated Chane more than his insults. Moreover, the intent faces of the three comrades were not lost upon Chane. There was something wrong here. It did not need to be voiced aloud that these four men understood one another. At the same time he grasped the subtle fact that they were not unaware of his reputation. Chane's hard fist and swift gun forced respect on the wild-horse ranges of Utah and Nevada.

"Manerube, I reckon you don't want any advice from me," declared Chane. "But I'll tell you—don't let me run into you with Sosie."

Chane looked into Manerube's eyes with the same deliberate intent that had characterized his speech. It was the moment which fixed hatred between him and this self-called Mormon. Sooner or later the issue would be forced. Chane did not care how soon that would come. He had lived a good many years among hard men of the open ranges, and it was not likely that he would be surprised. Nevertheless, as he turned away from the group he watched them out of the tail of his eye. He carried his roll of bedding away from the camp, out under a thick cedar tree.

Snug in his blankets, he stretched his long limbs and felt grateful that slumber would soon come. But he was too sanguine, for sleep held aloof.

Chane pondered over the other men who had attached themselves to him. Day by day, and especially since the arrival of Manerube, they had grown less welcome in his camp. They called themselves Jim Horn, Hod Slack, and Bud McPherson—names that in this wilderness did not mean anything.

The Piutes did not know these men well, and that in itself was thought-provoking. Horn and Slack had not appeared to exhibit any force of character, but McPherson had showed himself to be a man of tremendous energy and spirit.

Chane brought all his observation and deduction to bear on the quartet, and came to the conclusion that the most definite thing he could grasp was their attitude of watchful waiting. Waiting for what! It could only be for him to get together all the horses he meant to buy from the Piutes. Wild-horse hunting had not developed into a profitable business, yet it had sustained a few straggling bands of horse thieves. Chane almost convinced himself that these unwelcome wranglers in his camp belonged to such evil fraternity, and that aroused his resentment to anger.

"Pretty mess I'm in," he muttered to himself disparagingly. "This horse-hunting is no good." And he reflected that years of it had made him what he was—only a wild-horse wrangler, poor and with no prospects of any profit. Long he had dreamed of a ranch where he could breed great horses, of a home and perhaps a family. Vain, idle dreams! The romance, the thrilling adventure, the constant change of scene and action, characteristic of the hard life of a wild-horse hunter, had called to him in his youth and fastened upon

him in his manhood. What else could he do now? He had become a lone hunter, a wanderer of the wild range, and it was not likely that he could settle down to the humdrum toil of a farmer or cattleman.

"I might—if—if—" he whispered, and looked up through the dark foliage of the cedar to the white blinking stars. In the pale starlight, there seemed to hover a vague sweet face that sometimes haunted his inner vision. Bitterly he shut his eyes. He was no longer a boy. The best in his life seemed past, gone, useless. What folly to dream of a woman! And suddenly into his mind flashed Manerube's scathing repetition of gossip spoken in Bluff. Squaw man!

"All because I befriended a Navajo girl—as I've done here for Sosie!" he muttered. It galled Chane. Suppose that rumor got to the ears of his father and mother, still living at the old home in Colorado! What would his little brother Chess think? Few people in that wild country would rightly interpret attention or succor to an Indian girl.

Chane had never cared in the least what had been said about him or his ways. He had been blunt in speech and forceful in action toward those brutes who betrayed the simple-hearted, primitive Indian maidens. And these cowards had retaliated by spreading poisonous rumor. What little justice there was in it! He knew deep in his soul how honest and fair he had been. But he had befriended more than one little Indian girl like Sosie, and ridden with them and talked with them, interested, amused, and sometimes in his lonely moods grateful even for their feminine company. Chane could not see how that had been wrong. Yet these Indian girls were only too quick to care for a white man—good or bad. They were little savages of the desert. Chane realized where he had given wrong impression of himself, perhaps to them, certainly to the white men who had run across him among the Indians.

Chane awoke at dawn. The September air held a nipping edge of frost. Chane found that something new, a spirit or strength, had seemed to awaken with him; stronger faith! He lay there until he heard the men round the campfire and the crack of unshod hoofs on the stones. Then he arose, and pulling on his boots and taking up his coat, he strode toward the camp. His saddle and packs lay under a cedar. From a pack he lifted his gun belt, containing a Colt and shells, which he buckled round his waist. This he had not been in the habit of wearing.

Two Piutes had ridden in and sat on their mustangs, waiting to be invited to eat. Three of the men were busy—Slack rolling biscuit dough, Horn coming up with water, and McPherson cutting slices from a haunch of sheep meat. Chane's quick eye caught sight of Manerube washing down at the brook.

"Say, Weymer, your Injun pards hev rustled in for *chineago*, as usual," remarked Slack dryly.

"So I see. Seems a habit of riders—rustling in on my camp to eat," replied Chane.

"Wal, them Piutes are pretty white. They'd never let any feller go hungry," said Horn.

McPherson looked up at Chane with a curious little gleam in his sharp eyes.

"Ahuh! Packin' your hardware," he said, with a glance at Chane's gun.

"Yep. These September days are getting chilly," replied Chane.

Slack burst into a loud guffaw and Horn's dark, still visage wrinkled with a grin.

"What's eatin' you, pards?" queried McPherson, as he shifted his penetrating gaze to his comrades. "It shore ain't funny—Weymer struttin' out hyar, waggin' a gun."

"Wal, it was what he said that hit my funny bone," returned Horn.

"Weymer," went on McPherson slowly, "I reckon you ain't feelin' none too friendly toward Manerube. An' I'm sayin' as I don't blame you. What he said last night wasn't easy to swaller. I told him so. He didn't show up much of a gentleman, seein' he's been eatin' at your campfire. Wal, I reckon he's sorry an' ain't achin' to start trouble with you."

One casual glance at McPherson's calm face was enough to convince Chane that the man was as deep as the sea. A less keen observer than Chane would have been won to charitableness.

"McPherson, I never look for trouble—except in front of me, and especially behind," replied Chane sarcastically. "I just woke up feeling uncomfortable without my gun."

"Ahuh!" ejaculated the other soberly.

Presently Manerube came up the slope from the brook, wiping his clean-shaven face with a scarf. Chane conceded that the man was a handsome devil, calculated to stir the pulse of a white woman, let alone an Indian girl.

"Good morning, Weymer," he said, not without effort. "Hope you'll overlook the way I shot off my mouth last night. I was sore."

"Sure. Glad to forget it," replied Chane cheerfully. Manifestly Manerube had been talked to.

At this juncture Slack called out, "Come an' git it."

Whereupon the five men attended to the business of breakfast. They ate in silence until all the food and drink had been consumed.

"Bud, what're you doing today?" inquired Manerube, as he rose, wiping his mouth.

"Wal, thet depends on the boss of this hyar outfit," answered McPherson slowly, and he stared hard at Manerube. But this worthy did not take the hint, if there really was one.

"Weymer, you said once you'd be hitting the trail for the Hole in the Wall," went on Manerube, "soon as the Piutes rounded up the rest of the mustangs you bought."

"Why, yes. What's it to you?" asked Chane easily.

"You're going to sell in Wund, so you said. Well, that's where we're bound for, and we'll help you drive through. But let's rustle along. It's been raining up at the head of the San Juan. There'll be high water."

"The San Juan is up now, so Toddy told me yesterday. I reckon I'll wait for it to go down," replied Chane.

"But that might take weeks," declared Manerube.

"I don't care how long it takes," retorted Chane. "You fellows don't need to wait for me. I'll take some Piutes. I'd rather have them, anyhow."

"The hell you say!" burst out Manerube, suddenly flaming.

At that McPherson violently struck Manerube in the chest and thrust him backward.

"See hyar, Bent Manerube," he said, "we ain't goin' to have you talk for *us*. Me an' Jim an' Hod are shore glad to wait on Weymer. We're out of grub, an' we don't aim to let you make him

sore on us."

The sullen amazement with which Manerube took this action and speech convinced Chane that he had no authority over these three men, and a break was imminent.

Chapter Two

Broken Promise

WITH rifle in hand, and his bridle, Chane left camp to hunt for his horses. Glancing back from the edge of the slope, he was pleased to observe that the four unwelcome guests were engaged in a hot argument.

"I'd sure like to know just what and who they are," muttered Chane. "I'll bet they're going to steal my mustangs. Well, that'd be no great loss. But they've all taken a shine to Brutus. They'll have to take him over my dead body."

Brutus was Chane's new horse, an acquisition of this last trip through the Mormon country. Chane still had not ridden him and had not yet seen him go through any kind of test.

Chane left the trail where it crossed Beaver Brook, and followed the watercourse up the canyon, through willow and cedar thickets, under a looming yellow wall of stone. Chane had three pack horses, and two saddle horses besides Brutus; these had been herded by Toddy Nokin up Beaver Canyon.

Presently the canyon opened into a narrow park, purple with sage, dotted by red rocks, and bordered by a wander line of green where grass and willows lined the brook. Here Chane found his horses. He had been riding an animal called Andy, which was white, except for a few black markings, lean, rangy, tough, and of nervous disposition.

Chane approached the horses with the usual caution of a wrangler, and all of them, except Brutus, moved out of his reach. Brutus gave his superb head a quick uplift and regarded Chane with keen, distrustful eyes.

"Brutus, I reckon we've got horse thieves in camp, so I'm going to look you over," said Chane. "You and I must get acquainted."

Brutus was not exactly a giant of a horse, though he was much higher and heavier than the average. His chest was massive, broad, deep, a wonderful storehouse of energy. Such powerful, perfectly proportioned, and sound legs Chane had seldom seen, and his great hoofs matched them. His body was large, round, smooth, showing no bones. He had a broad arched neck and a fine head, which he held high. There was an oval white spot on his face, just below the wide space between his eyes. His color was a dark mottled brown, almost black, and his coat glistened in the sunlight.

At the last Chane always judged horses as he judged men—by the look in their eyes. Horses had as much character as men, and similar emotions and instincts.

Brutus had large dark eyes, soft yet full of spirit, just now questioning and uncertain. They showed his intelligence. Chane made sure that the horse had not been spurred and jerked and jammed around as had most horses six years old. He had not been hurt. The way he threw up his head appealed strongly to Chane. There was pride and fire in his look.

"Brutus, I had—a horse once," said Chane, faltering a little, "and I haven't

cared for one since– But you and I are going to be friends."

With the words Chane's old gentle and confident way of handling horses came back to him. He approached Brutus, placing a slow sure strong hand on the glossy neck. Brutus quivered, but did not jerk away. He snorted, and turned his head to look at Chane. It pleased Chane to find that he did not need a rope or halter. Brutus stood to be bridled, not altogether satisfied about it. Then he followed Chane willingly. Before Chane reached camp he decided that Brutus had missed the attention and company of a rider.

Chane discovered McPherson and his two comrades in camp, but Manerube was not in sight. While Chane saddled the horse McPherson strode up.

"Wal, Manerube helped hisself to your grub, packed, an' rode off," announced McPherson.

"Where'd he head for?" queried Chane.

"He said Bluff, but I reckon thet's a bluff, all right," returned the other. "He took the main trail out of Beaver. I climbed the stone over thar an' watched him. I seen him turn off the trail in the cedars."

McPherson pointed across the canyon toward the foot of a cedared ridge. A trail branched off there, leading to the camp of the Piutes.

"I savvy, Bud," rejoined Chane laconically. "You're giving me a hunch."

"Man, shore as you're a hoss wrangler he'll rustle off with your little Piute squaw."

Chane's good humor gave place to irritation. "She's not my squaw," he said sharply.

"Wal, I meant no offense. But she belongs to somebody. Toddy Nokin shore. An' I'm sayin' thet if Toddy or you hit Manerube's trail–"

"I'll beat him to Toddy's hogan," interrupted Chane, leaping on Brutus.

Toddy Nokin's hogan, and that of his relatives, stood at the base of a slope, on the edge of the bare upland. These mounds of earth plastered over framework of cedar were no different from the Navajo structures. The one door faced the east. Blue smoke curled from the circular holes in the roofs; white and black puppies played with half-naked, dusky-skinned children; mustangs with crude Indian saddles and blankets of bright colors stood bridles down; in a round corral, made of cedar branches planted in the ground, a flock of sheep and goats *baa-baaed* at Chane's approach, and the shepherd dogs barked viciously.

As Chane rode down to the first hogan, one of Toddy Nokin's squaws came out. Inquiry for Toddy elicited the information that he was out hunting horses. Chane then asked for Sosie, assured that, if Manerube really had designs upon her, there was time to outwit him. The squaw pointed toward a clump of cedars on the rise of slope just beyond the corral.

Chane rode thither, to find Sosie in the shade of the trees, beside an older squaw who was weaving a blanket. Chane dismounted. His greeting was answered in good English. The Indian maiden, though only sixteen years old, had spent the latter nine of these in the government school. She was very pretty, slight in build, with small oval face, a golden-bronze complexion, and hair black as the wing of a raven. Her eyes were too large for her face, but they were beautiful. She wore a dark velveteen blouse and necklaces of silver, and her skirt was long, full, and of a bright color. Her little feet were

incased in silver-buttoned moccasins.

Her somber face changed at Chane's arrival. He was used to finding her moody, and thought that indeed she had reason to be. It appeared that this morning her father, Toddy Nokin, wanted her to marry a young Piute who already had a wife, and he could not understand her objection. Chane sympathized with her and advised her not to marry any Indian she could not love.

"I couldn't love an Indian," replied Sosie in disgust.

"Why not?" queried Chane.

"Because Indian boys who are educated go back to the dirty habits of their people. We girls learn the white people's way of living. We learn to like clean bodies, clean clothes, clean food. When we try to correct our mothers and fathers we're accused of being too good for our own people. My father says to me, 'You're my blood. Why aren't my ways right for you?' Then when I tell him, he can't understand."

"Why don't you leave them and live among white people?" asked Chane.

"I'd have to be a servant. Only a few Indian girls find good places. If I could help my family I'd be glad. But I can't. And when I look at a white man they are angry."

"Sosie, most white men—out here, anyway—are not fit for you to look at," replied Chane earnestly.

"Why? I like them better than Indians," she said bluntly.

After deliberating a moment, Chane talked to her as plainly and kindly as if she had been his sister, explaining why Manerube or one of his class meant nothing but evil toward her. Chane exhausted his argument, at the conclusion of which Sosie said:

"You preach like our missionary at school. I'd rather be made love to."

"But, Sosie," exclaimed Chane, aghast at her simplicity, "I never made love to you!"

"No. You're different from other white men out here," she replied, in a tone that did not indicate that she respected him for it.

"If I make love to you I'd ask you to marry me," continued Chane.

Her reception of this was a shy surprise, a hint of coquetry and response singularly appealing. It made Chane pity her. At the same time he divined that other white men, in their attention to her, had never touched the chord of fineness and sweetness that lay deep in her. Suddenly he realized the fatality of her position, and it distressed him. He did not love her, but almost he wished he did. In his anxious perturbation he launched into an emphatic declaration against Manerube.

"But Manerube says he will take me away," she replied when Chane had concluded his tirade.

Chane was shocked. "Surely he will. But you mustn't let him."

"I'll run off with him," the girl replied.

"No, you won't Sosie. I'll stop you. I told Manerube he'd better not let me see him with you again."

"What would you do, Mr. Chane?" she asked, a curious dark flash in her eyes.

"Well—that depends on what *he* did," rejoined Chane. "I'd beat him good and hard, at least."

"I thought you said you weren't in love with me," cried Sosie, in a sort of wild gladness.

Chane threw up his hands. He had a momentary desire to tell her he did care for her and thus save her from Manerube; but he reconsidered the

hasty thought because, once acted upon, that would involve a greater sacrifice than he could offer.

"Sosie, can't you understand?" asked Chane, striving for patience. "I don't love you as a man of my kind must love a girl to want her—to marry her, you know. But I like you. I'm sorry for you. I want to help you. Manerube means bad by you. He'll destroy your soul. Promise me you'll not see him again."

"Yes, I promise—if you'll come sometimes," she replied, won by his spirit. There were tears in her big dusky eyes.

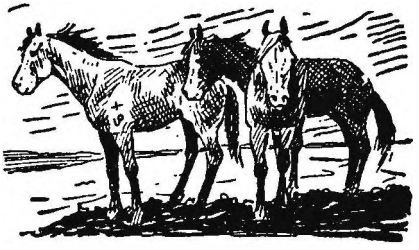
"Of course I'll come—as long—" he said, breaking off suddenly. He had meant to say he would come as long as he stayed in camp there, but he thought it best to hide from her that he was leaving soon. "I'll be back in an hour. You stay here."

"*Adios*, señor," she murmured gladly.

Chane rode across the rolling upland, keeping sharp lookout along the ridge that Manerube would cross if he had ventured toward the Indian camp.

Circling to the south, Chane at length reached the rise of ground running along a shallow league-wide valley, gray and purple with sage, spotted with rocks and cedars, and animated by moving horses. Toddy Nokin and his braves were driving in the last of the mustangs Chane had bargained for.

Down in the center of an oval bowl lay a natural corral, a long narrow space of the best pasture land, barred on two sides by low stone walls that came to an apex at the head of the depression, and shut off at its mouth and widest part by a cedar fence. Even at dry seasons there was always water in the deep hole in the rocks where the walls met. Chane arrived as Toddy and



his Indians were driving a bunch of mustangs into this corral.

Toddy held up his hands to Chane and counted with fingers to the number of twenty-six, and informed Chane he would not sell more.

He motioned to Toddy to dismount, and, getting off himself, he went among the mustangs. Then, following a habit that was pleasure to him as well as business, he leisurely examined them one by one.

Presently he repaired to the shade of a cedar, where Toddy squatted, making a flat wisp of a cigarette.

"Toddy, they're worth more than I offered and you agreed to take," said Chane frankly.

The Piute made a gesture that signified a bargain was a bargain. Then he asked, "How much Mormons pay you?"

"Twenty-five dollars for most of them and more for the best," replied Chane.

Toddy nodded his grizzled old head as if that was something to consider. "Why good horse trade now?"

Chane explained that a St. Louis horse-dealing company had recently stimulated the wild-horse hunting in Nevada and Utah, which business had stirred the Mormons to more activity.

"Ugh!" grunted Toddy, and then he told Chane he would round up more mustangs of his own, and buy from the Navajos, and drive them across the

rivers next moon.

"Next moon," repeated Chane. "That'll be after the middle of October. Fine. Will you sell to me or the Mormons?"

"Sell Mormons," replied Toddy shrewdly, adding he would pay Chane for finding purchasers.

"Maybe I can get a better price from the wranglers," replied Chane. "Now, Toddy, where will we meet?"

Whereupon the Piute brushed clear a place in the dust, and taking up a bit of stick he began to draw a map. Toddy Nokin drew lines to represent the San Juan and Colorado Rivers; he made a dot to mark the Hole in the Wall, an outlet from the canyoned wilderness made notorious by outlaws a few years before; he drew the Henry Mountains to the right and Wild Horse Mesa to the left, and between these he laid down a trail he would follow. Somewhere beyond Wild Horse Mesa, at a place he called Nightwatch Spring, he would hold the mustangs to fatten up after that long hard journey over the barren rocks.

"Nightwatch Spring," said Chane. "I've heard of that place. Toddy, mark out where this water lies."

Toddy showed Chane where to branch off the main Piute trail, north and west of the low end of Wild Horse Mesa, and he gave Chane the impression that this spring had never been known by whites and lay in a beautiful wide canyon where grass was abundant.

"You want have horse ranch sometime," concluded Toddy, nodding with great vehemence. "Toddy show you place."

"Toddy Nokin, you're a good fellow," said Chane as he took out his worn wallet. "Here's your money for twenty-six horses." He counted it out, and placed the sum in Toddy's wrinkled hand. The Indian did not recount it, and slowly rolling it up he put it in an inside pocket of his coat, after the manner of a white man.

"Grass gone here," he said, waving his hand to indicate the long pasture-corral. "You go now."

To leave at once with his newly purchased mustangs had scarcely been in Chane's calculations. But a moment's study told him how necessary that was. If the mustangs were turned loose again to feed they would wander in one night back to their regular haunts. It had taken two weeks to collect the band. Chane saw it the same as Toddy—the mustangs should be driven at once on the way across the rivers, and herded at night or hobbled on the best available grass. It had been his intention to postpone leaving the Piute range, owing to his distrust of McPherson, but this now was obviously impracticable. Chane decided to break camp that very day, and he told Toddy Nokin so. Whereupon the Piute said he and his sons would ride with him a couple of days, until the mustangs were off their range.

Leaving his sons to follow with the mustangs, Toddy accompanied Chane up the sage slope toward the canyon country. Toddy's hogans lay somewhat south and west of where the mustangs had been kept. So that upon his return Chane rode in a direction which would cross Manerube's trail, if the man had approached Toddy's camp. The fact of such possibility reminded Chane of his promise to Sosie. He would see her, to bid her good-by, and then he must hurry to his camp.

Riding along at a brisk trot, Chane, with Toddy loping behind on his shag-

gy little mustang, approached a zone of gray and yellow wind-worn rocks, as high as hills, and with both sloping and abrupt walls. Cedars grew thickly around them and in the winding lanes that separated them.

Turning a corner of wall, Chane's quick eye sighted a pack horse trotting toward him, and then part of another horse, mostly concealed by an intervening cedar. They were in line with Chane. Quick as a flash he leaped off, and motioning Toddy Nokin to do likewise he led Brutus behind a thick low-branched cedar. Toddy slipped close behind him.

Chane saw Manerube ride into sight, coming at a good trot and leading a pack horse. Behind Manerube bobbed a black head.

"Sosie! Well, I'm a son-of-a-gun!" Chane ejaculated.

The Indian girl was riding behind Manerube, and she had both arms round him. Chane watched intently, standing motionless until Manerube had ridden within one hundred feet of the cedar that concealed Chane and Toddy. Sosie's face bobbed out to the side of Manerube's shoulder. Most assuredly it was not the face of an unwillingly abducted girl. It wore a smile.

Chane's rush of anger was almost as much against her as Manerube. Jerking his rifle from its saddle sheath, he cocked it and stepped out to level it at Manerube.

"Stop! Quick! Hands up!" he ordered.

The approaching horse snorted and jumped. Manerube hauled it to a halt. Then as his hands shot aloft his ruddy face paled.

"Up they are!" he said hoarsely.

Chane strode forward. "Sosie—get off that horse," he called sharply.

The Indian girl almost fell off in the hurry that actuated her. There was no radiance now on her face. Her big eyes were distended.

"Manerube, I've a mind to shoot you," declared Chane, with the rifle steadily leveled.

"What for? I've not done you any dirt," replied the other thickly. "You've no call to kill me on this little hussy's account."

"I'm not so sure. You've made her run off with you," retorted Chane.

"Made nothing. She wants to go."

Toddy Nokin shuffled round to the side of Chane and approached his daughter. He swung his quirt. Chane saw Sosie shrink and her eyes dilate.

"Hold on, Toddy!" called Chane, and then, stepping aside so that he had the girl in line with Manerube, he addressed her: "Sosie, were you willing to go with him?"

"Yes," she answered sullenly. "But it was because he says he'll marry me."

"Manerube, you hear what Sosie said. Is it true?"

"No, you damn fool!" shouted Manerube. "I wouldn't marry a squaw."

Chane eyed Manerube in silence for a moment. The man had no sense of guilt, and he was not afraid to tell the truth.

"Well, I reckon you'd better sit tight and keep your hands high," went on Chane. "Toddy, you take his gun."

The Piute advanced upon Manerube, and quickly jerking his gun from its holster, he stepped back. Then Chane strode round Manerube to see if he had another weapon.

"Get off your horse," ordered Chane, and handed both his rifle and his short gun to the Indian.

Manerube stared, without complying.

Chane wasted no more words. Laying a powerful hold on Manerube, he jerked him from the saddle to the ground, where he sprawled hard.

"Get up, before I kick you!" went on Chane, yielding to an anger that grew hot.

Manerube got to his feet, with astonishment giving way to fury. Chane rushed him and knocked him flat. He raised on his elbow, then on his hand, while he extended the other, now shaking with passion. A reddening lump appeared on his face.

"I'll kill you!" he hissed.

"Aw, get up and fight!" retorted Chane derisively, and he kicked Manerube, not with violence, but hard enough to elicit a solid thump.

It served to make Manerube leap erect and plunge at Chane. They fought all over the place, dealing each other blow for blow. Manerube was no match for Chane at that game, and manifestly saw it, for he tried to close in. Failing that, he maneuvered until he was near enough Toddy to snatch at one of the guns Toddy held. The Indian showed surprising agility in leaping aside.

"Manerube—you're just—what I said—you were," panted Chane hoarsely.

Rushing at Manerube and battering him down, Chane beat him soundly until he was most thoroughly whipped.

"Take your gun—and your horses—and rustle," ordered Chane, jerking the weapons from Toddy. He threw Manerube's gun at his feet.

Then with rifle leveled low Chane watched the man sit up, draw the gun to him by the barrel, and rise with his back to Chane. He shoved the gun into its holster, and strode, staggering a little, toward where his horses had moved. Chane kept close watch on him, ready for another show of treachery. But Manerube mounted and took up the halter of the pack animal, not looking back until he had started to ride off. Then his pallid discolored face expressed a passion that boded ill to Chane. He rode out of sight among the cedars.

Chane turned to the Indians. Sosie had quite recovered from what fright she had sustained, and was now regarding her champion with dusky eyes alight. Not before had the fragility of her, nor the prettiness, and something half tame, half wild, struck Chane so forcibly. But his sympathy and her appeal both went down before his anger.

"Sosie, you're no good," he declared.

Instantly she grew sullen, defiant.

"I'm what white men have made me," she responded.

Toddy Nokin yelled something in Piute at his wayward daughter, and as she whirled he aimed a swing of the quirt and likewise a kick at her, both of which fell short. Like a flash the supple figure moved out of reach. She screeched back at them. Chane could not decide whether it was the wild-cat cry of an Indian squaw or the passionate expression of her white learning. Perhaps it was both.

CHAPTER THREE

"Will You Wait for Chane?"

SUE MELBERNE'S father would never have allowed her to come on this wild-horse hunting expedition if he had not calculated on finding a new country where he could homestead. Back there at St. George she had heard her father say to Loughbridge,

his partner, "You know, Jim, I've shore got to take root in new soil."

There had been a chance for Sue to remain at St. George, teaching a school where most of the children were Mormons. She did not dislike Mormons particularly, but she had no wish to live among them. On the other hand, the prospect held out by her father had not at first struck Sue as alluring. It would be no less than hard pioneer life. But she had decided to try it. Sue's mother was dead, and her father had married again while she was attending school, a circumstance she had not hailed with joy. It had turned out, however, that her stepmother was a clever and lovable woman.

Sue found in a few weeks that she was fitting admirably and happily into this nomad life of wild-horse wrangling. She was young, healthy, strong; she could ride a horse and cook a meal over a campfire; she found in herself a surprising response to all that was characteristic of primitive life in the open.

Melberne's outfit was not a large one, as wild-horse-hunting outfits were considered, but as he and his partner, Loughbridge, had brought their womenfolk and the necessary teamsters, wagons, camp equipment, supplies, all together they made quite a party. If a desirable country were found, Loughbridge would be willing to homestead a ranch, along with Melberne. Their main idea, then, was really not alone the capturing and marketing of wild horses. In the interest, however, of that pursuit it was necessary to keep within one day's travel of the railroad. Melberne was shipping carloads of unbroken horses to St. Louis. In considerable numbers, at thirteen dollars a head, he could make money.

It was on an afternoon of September that the Melberne outfit halted at the head of Stark Valley, which was thirty miles from the railroad.

Sue saw a valley which she estimated to be twenty miles wide and eighty long. Really it seemed small, set down in a vast panorama, with a ragged black range of mountains on one side, an endless waving green rise of land sweeping to a horizon on the other. Far beyond the long length of this valley stood what appeared a flat mountain, very lofty, with red walls now sunlit, and a level black top. How far away! How isolated! It had a strange, impelling beauty.

"Dad, what's that mountain?" asked Sue, pointing.

Her father, a stalwart bearded man, had gray, penetrating, tired eyes that held a smile for her.

"Shore I don't know," he replied. "See heah, Alonzo, what's that flat mountain yonder?"

Alonzo was a half-breed Mexican *vaquero*, guide to the outfit, and reputed to be the best wrangler in Utah. He gazed a moment down the valley.

"Wild Horse Mesa," he replied briefly.

"Reckon I ought to have known," said Melberne. "Sue, that's not a mountain, but a mesa. Biggest in Utah. It's a refuge for wild horses, so the Mormons say, an' no white men have set foot on it."

"Wild Horse Mesa!" exclaimed Sue. "How beautiful—and wild! So far away. It's good there's a place where horses are safe."

"Wal, lass, there'll shore be a lot of wild horses safe for a long time," said her father as he surveyed the valley. "This country is full of them."

Many experienced hands made short

work of pitching camp. Before the sun set tents were up, fires were blazing, the fragrant steam of hot biscuits, venison, and coffee permeated the cool air.

"I refuse to call out that cowboy slogan," announced Mrs. Melberne cheerfully, "but I say come to supper."

She was a short, stout, pleasant-faced little woman. Her helper, Mrs. Loughbridge, afforded a marked contrast, in both appearance and manner.

Young Chess Weymer, who was always offering gallant little courtesies to Sue and Ora Loughbridge, lifted a seat from one of the wagons and placed it conveniently out of line of the blowing campfire smoke.

"There, girls, have a seat," he said in his rich bass voice.

Sue complied with a nod of thanks. But Ora did not get up from where she squatted on the ground. She was a dark-eyed handsome girl, and just now rather sullen of face.

"Come have a seat, Ora," called Chess.

She flashed him an illuminating look. "Chess, I wouldn't deprive you of such a chance," she said with sarcasm.

"Oh, well, if you won't, I will," replied Chess, and seated himself beside Sue.

Sue rather enjoyed the situation. Ora had been plainly captivated by this good-looking boy, who showed a preference for Sue's society. He was a clean-cut lad of eighteen, brown of face and eye, and possessed of a fine frank countenance, singularly winning. At St. George, where he had joined the caravan, he had appeared to be a wild, happy youngster, not above drinking and fighting, and utterly unable to resist the girls. Sue liked his company so long as he did not grow over-sentimental. She was two years older than Chess, and in her mind vastly more mature.

The wranglers of the outfit were a continual source of delight to her. There were six of these employed by her father, and they worked in every capacity that such travel and strenuous activity demanded.

Alonzo, the half-breed, was the most fascinating, by reason of the knowledge he could impart. Utah, a wild-horse wrangler, was a sharp-featured, stone-faced young man, long, slim, bowlegged, hard as rock, and awkward on his feet. Tway Miller was a tough, wiry little rider, dusty always, ragged and shiny, and he had a face like the bark of a tree. He got his name Tway from a habit he had of stuttering, something his comrades took fiendish glee in making him do.

Bonny was a stalwart Irishman, freckle-faced, with sandy beard and hair. He possessed a wonderful deep bass voice, the solemnity of which suited his big light-blue eyes. Jake, a man of years and experience, possessed a heavy square frame. He was bald. His round brown face was a wrinkled record of all the vicissitudes of life, not one of which had embittered him. Jake had been engaged, as had the others, to chase wild horses, and betweentimes help at all jobs. But it turned out that it tortured him, racked his bones, to ride all day. As teamster, however, cook, and handy man around camp he was incomparable.

The last of this sextet was a tenderfoot they had named Captain Bunk. The sea to him had been what the desert was to the riders. His talk about boats, engines, ships, his bunk-mates, had earned him the sobriquet of Captain Bunk.

After supper had long passed Sue strolled to the edge of the cottonwood grove, where she found a seat on a log.

The sun had set. The valley was full of purple shadows, and far beyond them rose the dim strange bulk of Wild Horse Mesa. How vast and open this Utah wilderness!

A footfall on the leaves roused Sue. Turning, she saw Chess coming, a smile on his frank face.

"Sue, may I sit with you?" he asked.

"Yes—if you'll be a good boy and fetch my coat. It's on the wagon tongue."

"Sue, I'd get anything for you," he said, and turned away. Presently he returned with it and held it for her.

"Sue, you take me for such a boy!" he expostulated as he flopped down before her and sat Indian-fashion with his legs crossed.

"Of course I do. You're only eighteen."

"Sure. But I'm a man. Sue, I'm sure old enough to—to be in love with you."

She regarded him disapprovingly. "Chess, when did you say the same thing to Ora?"

"I—I never said it," he denied stoutly, but a flush tinged his healthy cheek.

"Don't fib. You know you did," retorted Sue, shaking her finger at him. "You've made love to Ora."

"Yes, I did, at first—same as I have to all the girls. I reckon I just couldn't help that. I always liked girls. Ora, now, she's pretty and clever, but she—I—I don't like to say anything about a girl, but, Sue, she's catty." Chess was laboring under some stress. "Ora's spiteful. She says things about you I don't like, Sue. That's about settled her with me."

"Any jealous girl is that way, you know. Jealousy is the hatefulest feeling. Don't be hard on Ora. She—"

"Ahuh! All right, but she can't talk to me about you," he declared. "And you didn't let me say what—what I wanted to."

"No? Well, get it over, then, if it will relieve you."

"I can prove I wasn't in earnest with Ora—and all the girls you hint of," he said manfully. "I never asked Ora—or *any* of them—to marry me."

This made Sue laugh. "You never asked *me*, either," she retorted.

"No, but I'm asking you now," he flashed back at her.

"Chess!" exclaimed Sue, aghast. His clean brown face had turned white. "I'm sorry I teased you—didn't take you seriously. But—Chess, I feel like—like a mother to you. I can't marry you, boy."

"Why—not?" he asked, swallowing hard.

"Because I don't love you."

Sue saw Chess fight down his cherished dream. Then it seemed he turned to her with a stranger earnestness, with more eloquent eyes and lips.

"All right, Sue. I'll take my medicine," he said hurriedly. "But I want to ask you something just as important."

"What is it?" she asked curiously.

"If you won't marry me, will you wait for my brother Chane? You can't help but love *him!*"

"Why, Chess!" Sue had never been quite so astounded in her life.

"Chane has gone to the Indian reservation—over the canyons," went on Chess. "He went to buy horses to sell to the Mormons. I wanted to go, but he wouldn't let me. Now Chane, as soon as he gets rid of those horses, he'll be hitting my trail. He thinks I'm still a boy. He still calls me Boy Blue. He's

afraid I'm going to the bad. Well, when he finds me he'll see you, and he'll fall in love with you. You're the sweetest, wonderfulest girl in the world. He just can't help himself. And then I could have you for a sister."

The swift words rushed out in a torrent, and the simplicity of them touched Sue to the heart.

"I-I'll be your sister, anyhow," she said, trying to think of something to say that would not hurt him.

"Sue, you just can't help but love Chane," began Chess, his face lighting. "I've watched you. I've studied you. I know what you care about. But any girl would love Chane. I've never been anywhere with him where there was a girl—that she didn't fall in love with him. Without his even looking at her!"

"Indeed! Well, this brother of yours must be a—quite a fellow," replied Sue. "Is he a wild-horse hunter?"

"Chane's been everything, but he loves horses best. They don't have to be wild. They just have to be *horses*, tame or wild, good or bad, young or old. But I reckon lately the wild-horse wrangling has gotten more into Chane. Two years ago he saw that great wild stallion, Panquitch. You've heard of him. Well, Chane was actually dotty over that wild horse."

"I can understand the thrill of chasing wild horses. But I can't bear to see horses hurt, whether wild or tame."

"Chane's the same way, Sue," rejoined Chess. "Oh, you and he are a lot alike. Just wait 'til you meet him. Just wait 'til you see *him* handle horses."

"Very well, Chess, I'll try to possess my soul in peace—until Chane trails you up," replied Sue, laughing gayly. "Good night now. I'm sorry if I hurt you—yet, I'm glad you told me about yourself—and Chane."

Chapter Four

Campfire Challenge

"WAL, men, we're heah," announced Melberne cheerfully, after breakfast that first morning at Stark Valley. "An' now let's rustle. I'm not goin' to drive this valley till I've a plan mapped out. Some way to trap a lot of horses. I'll ride with Alonzo an' Jim down into the valley an' get the lay of the land. Reckon I can give you all plenty to do. Jake, you keep charge of camp an' help the womenfolks. Captain, saddle your horse an' snake in a lot of dead hardwood. An', Miller, you an' Utah ride up into some of them canyons that open into the valley. Take stock of any place where there's sign of wild horses. Chess, you like to hunt. Now we're out of meat an' I look to you as provider. Take Bonny with you. There shore ought to be lots of game heah."

He gave order for the saddle horses to be brought in. Chess went whistling his pleasure at the duty assigned him, and taking his bridle up he halted before Sue.

"Little Girl Gold," he said gayly, "do you want your pony fetched in?"

"No, thanks, Chess. I've a heap of mending—washing to do. And why did you call me that? I'm not little. I weigh—or did—a hundred and thirty. My hair is chestnut, not gold."

"It had nothing to do with looks," replied Chess mysteriously.

"Oh, very well, little Boy Blue," returned Sue lightly.

"Say, I can stand that from *you*," flashed Chess, "but don't say it before anybody."

"You'll see. Wait till your brother Chane rides in on your trail," said Sue teasingly.

Sue's father rode in just before dark, dusty and weary, but elated over his day's experience. He had seen thousands of wild horses that apparently had never been chased, so tame were they.

"If there were only trees or brush down in the valley we could cut them and drag them into long fences leading to a trap!" he ejaculated. "What a haul we'd make! But there's not a tree in this heah valley, so far as we rode."

Utah's report appeared equally interesting. Some ten miles or more down the slope of the valley he had come upon a canyon which he thought it well to explore. At the head of this he encountered a wild, broken-up section of ridges, all sloping down from two converging walls that met above. He discovered fine grass and water, and a drove of wild mules. They were in a natural trap, and it was Utah's opinion they could be caught in one day.

"Wal, shore that's fine," declared Melberne. "We're going to be busy round heah."

Miller was the last to come in. Manifestly he had unusual and good reports to make, but, unfortunately, it happened to be a time when his fatal stuttering affected him most.

Long and earnestly the other wild-horse hunters talked. It was an interesting evening round the campfire. Sue deliberately sought out Ora Loughbridge and persistently made herself agreeable. At first Ora was stiff and what Chess had called snippy. But gradually she thawed. She was about Chess's age, and a romantic girl of strong emotions. Sue noted that Ora could scarcely keep her eyes from wandering in his direction, yet at the same time she was trying to hide her secret.

Sue divided the mornings between her own tasks and helping her stepmother; in the afternoons she was free to idle or ride or read. The men had not yet completed their reconnaissance of the surrounding country, nor had her father hit upon a satisfactory plan to trap a large number of the wild horses.

The first frosts had begun to tint the foliage of the deciduous trees, and this added fresher beauty and contrast to the evergreens. The cottonwood grove was half gold, half green; the oak brush of the canyons began to take on a bronze and russet hue; the vines overgrowing the ledges of rock back of camp showed red against the gray.

Sue rode far and high one afternoon, accompanied by Ora and Chess, who, however, were more concerned with other things than scenery or Indian summer. Chess had been complimented on his successful hunting and was eager to win more commendation. Ora was mostly concerned with Chess, and liked the hunting only because it furnished means to ride with him. They left Sue on a high open point, back of which was a big country of ridges and ravines, all thickly covered with brush and trees. Here the young hunters disappeared.

Dismounting to await their return, Sue found a comfortable seat and gave herself up to the solitude and loneliness of the surrounding hills, and the wonder of the purple open beneath her. The cottonwood grove which hid the camp appeared a golden patch on the edge of the green valley; the wild

horses were but dim specks; the valley itself was only an oval basin lost in a country as wide as the horizons.

What lay and upreared and hid beyond that level rangeland was the thing which drew and chained Sue's gaze. It was the canyon country of Utah. It seemed to spread out before her, a vast shadowy region of rock—domes, spurs, peaks, bluffs, reaching escarpments, lines of cleavage, endless scalloped marching rocks; and rising grandly out of that chaos of colored rock the red-walled black-tipped flat-topped mountain that was Wild Horse Mesa. Here Sue could see a magnificent panorama of the canyon country, above which the great mesa towered a sentinel. If it had earned Sue's interest from the valley below, it now fascinated her. What was she going to meet out here in wild Utah? Of late her working hours, her idle hours, even her dreams had been vaguely haunted by the shadow of a mood that did not wholly break upon her consciousness.

"Something's wrong," sighed Sue, and her practical common sense did not drive away the conception.

At last she confessed to her heart that she must be in love. It was one of the most secret of confessions, but as the vague idea grew it developed. It became a thought, amazing, ridiculous, inconceivable. It could not be supported by any facts. With whom could she be in love? Not Chess or Utah or any of the riders! Sue tried to recall the dream hero, knight, lover that had been an evolution of her fairy-tale days, but he did not suit her new and masterful image. The new one seemed like this country, hard, rough, wild, untamed, exacting, dominating.

"But it's only an idea!" burst out Sue, ashamed, astounded. Her cheeks were hot. Her blood ran strong from her heart. She felt it beat, beat, beat. Then there flashed into her mind what the boy Chess Weymer had said about his brother Chane: "You can't help but love *him!*"

Sue at once laughed away the absurdity of any connection between the boy's loyal worship of his brother and her own undivined yearnings. Yet there was something, and to strike a compromise with herself she acknowledged that any girl would have an interest in this wild-horse hunter who had such a great love for his brother and called him Boy Blue. There was enough romance in any girl for that, and if not romance, then a mother feeling.

Sue waited long for Ora and Chess, and at length they appeared riding under the trees, close together, without any game. Sue had a suspicion that they were holding hands just as they rode out of the timber, but she could not be certain.

"Some stranger in camp," spoke up Chess, as they rode into the back of the cottonwood grove. Whereupon he trotted on ahead of Sue and Ora.

Sue sustained a little shock of excitement. What if it might be Chane Weymer! She saw a muddy, weary pack horse sagging under a bedraggled pack. But trees obstructed her view of the rider.

Ora headed her horse for the quarters of the Loughbridges and Sue turned for her tent. When she dismounted, Chess rode up at a lope and leaped off.

"Doggone—it! I thought maybe

Chane had come and I'd get even with you," said Chess as he began to unsaddle her horse.

"Get even with me! What for?" queried Sue, exasperated.

"Well, I reckon I'd call it lack of recipro-city."

"Chess, you're not very witty—and please explain how the possible arrival of your brother would enable you to get even with me, as you call it."

"You're sure likely to fall in love head over heels, and you *might* get the cold shoulder, as I got it."

"Chess, you're adding rudeness to your many other faults," retorted Sue haughtily.

"Aw, Sue, I beg pardon," said Chess contritely, as he slid her saddle and blankets to the ground. "I'm only sore. But listen. Chane'd never give you a cold shoulder. Now remember what I tell you. He'll fall terribly in love with you."

Suddenly a hot blush burned Sue's neck and face. Ashamed, she turned away from Chess.

"Don't talk—non-nonsense," she replied hastily.

Chess mounted and went off whistling, leading Sue's mount toward Ora's tent. Sue kicked off her spurs and chaps and went inside her tent to change her masculine garb. It might have been that she paid the least bit more attention than usual to her appearance. Presently there came a rustling footfall outside.

"Sue, I yelled once supper is ready," called Chess. "I'll bet my horse to your spurs that you've been doing the same as Ora."

"What's that?" asked Sue, as she came forth.

"Aw, Sue!" he ejaculated, staring at her. "I never saw you—so—so sweet. All for the benefit of the stranger! Ora primped up, too. Sue, you women are all alike."

"Why, of course! Aren't men all alike?" returned Sue archly. "Well, who's the stranger?"

"Ahuh! Well, his name's Manerube—Bent Manerube. He's a horse wrangler from Nevada. Husky, good-looking chap. He's just in from the Piute country, across the canyons."

"That's the country I saw today from up high. Wild Horse Mesa! He can tell us about it, can't he?"

"I reckon. But see here, Sue," went on Chess, and as he faced about to walk with her toward the campfire he took her arm gently and firmly. "Don't forget you're to be Chane's sweetheart—and my sister."

"Little Boy Blue, I'll not be won by proxy," rejoined Sue.

Whereupon he let go her arm and maintained a rather lofty silence. Then they reached the campfire and the supper table. Manifestly the men were all waiting.

"Hello, lass!" called her father. "Sue, meet Mr. Benton Manerube of Nevada —this's my daughter. Now, everybody, let's eat."

Sue saw a tall man standing beside her father and she bowed in acknowledgment of the introduction. He had gleaming eyes that seemed to leap at sight of her and absorb her. Sue dropped her own.

"Sue, isn't he handsome?" whispered Ora.

"Who?" queried Sue.

"Mr. Manerube, of course. Did you think I meant Chess?"

"Why, I hadn't noticed."

"Well, he's noticed *you*, and I'm jealous," declared Ora.

Some moments later Sue covertly

stole a glance at the newcomer. Ora had not been mistaken about the man's looks, despite a discolored bruise on his face. His hair glinted in the sunset glow, and his complexion, though browned by exposure, was still so fair that it made the other riders look like Indians.

Sue, perhaps following Ora's example, rather prolonged the eating of her supper. One by one the riders got up from round the tarpaulin tablecloth and clinked away to the tasks necessary before dark. Finally Manerube stood up, showing the superb figure of a rider. He wore a belt which swung low on his right hip with the weight of a gun. His blouse was a heavy checkered woolen garment, and as he wore no coat or vest, his broad shoulders and deep chest showed strikingly. His unshaven beard, of days' growth, was so fair that it did not detract from the fresh ruddy virility of his face.

"I sure was starved," he remarked, in a deep voice with a pleasant ring. "No grub for a week, except with Indians. Reckon I could bless your womenfolk, Melberne."

"Shore, I've been hungry," replied Melberne heartily. "You looked fagged. Where you bound?"

"Well, nowhere in particular," replied Manerube slowly. "I was disappointed in my errand across the rivers. Fellow got ahead of me, buying horses from the Piutes. Reckon I'll tie up with the first wrangler outfit in need of a good rider."

"Ahuh! Do you know this wild-horse game?"

Manerube uttered a short laugh. "Do I? Well, Melberne, I reckon so."

At this juncture Sue noted how Chess sat up, after the manner of a listening jack rabbit.

"Have you ever caught wild horses in large numbers, so they could be shipped unbroken?" went on Melberne.

"I'm the man who started that game," replied Manerube. "Shipped three thousand for Saunders last year."

"Mel, I'm thinkin' Manerube is the wrangler we're after," said Loughbridge, turning to his partner. "Let's give him charge of our outfit."

"Shore," rejoined Melberne. "Manerube, if you'll hang up heah, we'll pay you top wages, with a percent of our profits."

"Glad to help you out," said Manerube. "Who're your riders?"

Melberne enumerated and named them, as he knew them, by their first names.

"You're forgettin' Alonzo," interposed Loughbridge.

"Alonzo. Is he a Mexican, a half-breed *vaquero*, catches wild horses alone?" asked Manerube quickly.

"Yes, we have him," replied Melberne.

"Know of him. Great wrangler, they say," returned Manerube thoughtfully. "But I reckon I never saw him. Well, you've hardly got enough good riders to handle big bunches of horses. Perhaps the young ladies could help?"

"Oh, you're not serious?" exclaimed Ora.

"Never more serious in my life," replied Manerube with a winning smile. "Can you ride? I don't mean like a cowboy, but well enough to ride fast and hard."

"Shore they can," declared Melberne, speaking for the girls. "You're sworn in as wild-horse wranglers."

"Dad, I'm not so sure I want to be one," said Sue, shaking her head.

"Why, are you afraid?" queried Manerube.

Sue looked at the new rider and did not like the something in his eyes any better than his intimation of her cowardice.

"No, I'm not afraid," she said.

"Say, Sue's got more nerve than a man," interposed Chess with spirit. "But she hates to see horses hurt."

"Wal, we won't argue aboot it," replied Melberne genially. "Manerube, you come across the valley; did you see many wild horses?"

"Thousands every day. All the way from Wild Horse Mesa. That's what the Mormons call the last stand of the wild horses. I saw the finest stock in all this country. It'd pay you, Melberne, after you catch and ship all horses possible near the railroad, to go after the fine stock."

"But shore we can't drive over thirty miles," protested Melberne.

"No. I meant to take time—catch the best wild horses and break them."

"Wal, shore heah's a new idea, Jim," declared Melberne. "I like it. What kind of range land over there?"

"Finest grass and water in Utah," replied Manerube.

"I heah there are horse thieves in the canyon country," said Melberne dubiously.

"Reckon some outfits hold up over there. But you're just as liable to run across them here. Fact is I run into some Mormon outlaws over across the San Juan. Stayed with them a few days. Not bad fellows to meet, though."

"Who were they?" asked Loughbridge.

"Bud McPherson and two of his pards, Horn and Slack."

"Bud McPherson's pretty well known over St. George way," declared Loughbridge. "Say, Manerube, how'd you come to camp with McPherson?"

"I was hunting for some Piutes, and run right into Bud and his pards," began Manerube, taking a seat on a log before the campfire, somewhat closer to the girls. "It really wasn't their camp, as I learned afterward. It belonged to the wrangler who beat me getting to the Piutes. You know I told you I went to buy horses for the Mormons. This wrangler got there first. Lucky for me, because McPherson was only hanging round to steal horses. It rather tickles me, for I had a little set-to with that wrangler. He gave me this black eye. But you should have seen him!"

Sue became suddenly very attentive, because she saw that Chess was reacting strangely to this rider's story. He half rose and leaned to listen. His slender body quivered. Through Sue flashed a sudden intimation.

"You had a fight?" queried Melberne, much interested.

"Reckon so. He didn't seem eager to throw his gun, and I had to beat him."

"Wal, you don't say!" ejaculated Melberne. "But shore you must have had cause?"

"Yes, I reckon I'd have been justified in shooting the wrangler. But as I said, he wouldn't draw. It was all on account of a pretty little Piute girl named Sosie. She'd been to the government school, talked English well, and was crazy about white men. The wrangler had been a squaw man among the Navajos, so I'd heard. Well, he was after Sosie pretty hard. Toddy Nokin, the old Piute father, told him to stay away from her. But he wouldn't. Finally I felt sorry for Sosie. She was being fooled, poor kid. So I just picked a fight with that wrangler and pounded him as he deserved."

Manerube ended his story with a dep-

recatory gesture, as if he rather disliked his personal contact in the affair.

"Ahuh!" ejaculated Loughbridge, with gravity. "Did you catch that wrangler's name?"

"Why, yes, come to think of that," replied Manerube blandly. "It was Weymer—Chane Weymer."

Loughbridge uttered an exclamation. And Chess leaped wildly to confront Manerube.

"You damned liar!" he burst out in ringing passionate fury.

Manerube was certainly astounded. "What?" he ejaculated blankly, and stared.

Chess's face was white, his big eyes burned, his jaw quivered. He seemed strung like a whipcord.

"Chane Weymer's my brother!" he cried, and his quivering hand reached to his hip for a gun that was not there. Then, quick as a flash, he struck Manerube violently in the face, a blow that almost toppled the man over. Righting himself, he sprang up with a curse. Rushing at Chess, he lunged out and beat the boy down. Chess fell into Jake's arms, and Loughbridge sprang before Manerube.

"That's enough. He's only a boy," ordered Loughbridge hurriedly, and he pushed the other back.

"Boy or not, I'll—I'll—" panted Manerube hoarsely, with his hand on his face.

"No, you won't do anythin'," said Loughbridge forcibly, and he pushed Manerube to a seat on the log. "Reckon you was provoked, but cool down now."

Jake was having trouble holding Chess, who wrenched and lunged to get free.

Melberne came to Jake's assistance, and then the two men, one on each side of Chess, held him firmly until he stopped wrestling. There was blood on his ashen face, and a piercing passion in his eyes. He fixed his gaze on Manerube.

"If I'd had my gun I'd have—shot you," he panted, thickly. "You dirty liar! I'll bet *you're* what—you made out my brother to be."

Then Chess turned to Melberne. "Let me go. I'll—I'll behave. But I want you to know my brother's—the soul of honor. Chane wouldn't lie—he couldn't hurt a girl, white or red. If he went out of his way for an Indian girl—it was to befriend her. He's big enough. He could marry a squaw, but it'd be out of the kindness of his heart."

Sue was aware that Ora was clutching at her with nervous hands. Chess, just then, seemed magnificent in defense of his brother. Without another word he wheeled away, his white face flashed in the firelight, and then he was gone.

Sue sought her own tent, considerably upset by the incident. Sitting down upon her bed in the dark, she went over the whole situation. After all, as far as Chess was concerned, it had only been another fight. It was not the first. This one, however, was serious. Chess had looked dangerous. Sue thrilled anew as she recalled the blaze of his eyes, the ring of his voice. Manerube did not show admirably. Sue had not been favorably impressed by his narrative; besides, he was too big a man to beat a boy that way. True, Chess had given great provocation. Sue was thinking back to the real cause of the trouble when she was interrupted by her father outside.

"Sue, are you in bed?" he asked.

"No, Dad."

He opened the flaps of the tent. Then he entered, to take a seat on the bed beside Sue.

"Lass, reckon I'd like your angle on the little fracas between Chess and this Manerube," said her father as he took her hand in his.

Sue told him briefly and candidly what she thought about it.

"Wal, wal, I reckon I think aboot as you," he replied ponderingly. "Manerube wanted to cut a dash before you girls. Chesty sort of rider. But I've met lots like him."

"I felt sorry for Chess," murmured Sue.

"Poor boy! But shore I can't see as he needed sympathy. He said what he thought, like a man, an' he banged Manerube hard. Sue, Chess shore must love that brother Chane."

"Dad, I happen to know he worships him."

"More's the pity. I'm afraid Manerube was telling the truth."

"Ah!" exclaimed Sue. "How—why—?"

"Wal, Loughbridge told me he had heard a lot aboot this Chane Weymer. Wonderful man with horses! He's been in some shooting scrapes. Lonely sort of chap. But, shore, that's all to his credit. It was the rumor aboot Indian squaws— Loughbridge heard talk in Bluff. I don't know. I'd like to believe Chess—he was so damn fine. But I reckon the boy's wrong an' Manerube's right. Loughbridge thinks so. Wal, wal, I'm sorry. Good night, lass."

Sue went to bed without lighting her candle. She felt a little shaken, and slipped under the blankets more quickly than usual. Then she lay wide awake in the darkness. Poor devoted Boy Blue, with his wonderful love for the wonderful brother! Chane Weymer! The vague, strange shadow of an ideal faded. Sue experienced a slight sinking sensation, almost a sickness, and following that a little heat at her vagrant and unfounded fancies.

She whispered to herself, "Poor boy! He said, 'You couldn't help but love my brother Chane!'"

Chapter Five

Lost: One Rifle

TO CHANE WEYMER'S surprise, Toddy Nokin did not drive the mustangs toward the left on the Beaver Canyon trail, but in the direction of the great green bowl of shelving land that led down into the rock country. The long string of bobbing mustangs stretched out, with Toddy's sons riding in the rear. At the junction of the two trails the old Piute waited for Chane, and motioned for him to dismount.

Toddy made one of his slow gestures toward Chane's camp. "No want white men."

Chane regarded his Indian friend with dawning comprehension. Toddy had reasons for signifying that Chane should dispense with Bud McPherson and his cronies.

"All right, Toddy. If you say so. I sure don't want them," he declared, and waited for the Piute to speak further.

Manifestly Toddy was pondering deeply. At last he said that Chane would be wise to leave his camp and supplies, without telling McPherson of his intention to drive the mustangs across the rivers. He could say he was going to ride across country to see a relative of Toddy Nokin's about purchasing more horses, and would give Chane opportunity to drive his mustangs across the San Juan before Mc-

Pherson became aware of the ruse. Toddy did not give any reason for this. But the mere suggestion was enough. Bud McPherson was undoubtedly a horse thief.

"But, Toddy, what'll I do for grub and blankets?" queried Chane. "And there're my pack horses."

The Piute said he would get the horses, and without further comment he mounted his mustang and rode down the trail after his sons.

Chane did not have any choice, it seemed, yet it galled him to sacrifice his outfit to three outlaws. Still, there was nothing of any value, except the food. Perhaps this was the wisest course to get rid of the men, but would McPherson be so easily fooled? Chane's hostility had roused with the certainty that these men had imposed upon him and were not what they claimed to be. Why not ride into camp with a drawn gun, fight it out with them, or, better, take possession of their weapons, so they could not ambush his trail?

"Reckon Toddy knows best," he soliloquized finally. "There's less risk in this plan—maybe. I don't know."

Mounting Brutus, he headed west on the Beaver Creek trail, reached the great corner of yellow cliff, and rode round under its looming wall, down the rock ledges to the stream, and up the other slope to camp. The cedars were thick, and through them he thought he saw an object move. Then a jack rabbit loped off through the sage. It might have been what he had seen. Chane rode to the cedar where he kept his bed and one of his packs, and here he dismounted. There did not appear to be any of the men in sight. Chane strode over to the camp. A fire of cedar boughs was still smoldering, and a pot of beans was smoking. The campfire duffle appeared as usual. McPherson and his men had ridden off somewhere.

Chane returned to his pack, and rummaged round until he found his little notebook and lead pencil. On a leaf of this he wrote that he was going off toward the Navajo country to buy more mustangs. This he tore out of the book, and going back to the campfire he placed it in a conspicuous place, with a little stone to weigh it down.

When he reached the cedar he found Brutus stamping.

"What's the matter, old boy?"

Brutus snorted and tossed his head. His ears were up and he had fire in his eyes. Chane peered around uneasily. No man or beast appeared in sight. Chane procured a box of rifle shells from his pack, a small leather case, and a bag of parched and salted corn, which he kept for emergency travel. These he folded in his coat and tied on the back of the saddle. As he finished this his quick eye suddenly fell upon his rifle sheath. It was empty.

Chane swore, and then thought swiftly to ascertain when last he had surely seen the rifle. It must have joggled out of the sheath, and by retracing his steps he would find it.

"No. It was there—when I got off Brutus," he said suddenly. Chane peered down upon the ground. In a bare dusty spot he espied a moccasin track. Fresh! It gave him a start. He recognized it as belonging to a crippled Piute who had often been in camp. Chane had not trusted him. Toddy Nokin said he was a bad Indian.

Now, the thing to decide is, is he just a sneak Indian thief, or did McPherson put him up to stealing my rifle? Chane leaned to the opinion that McPherson had had a hand in it. If this surmise was correct, then the pres-

ent locality might not be healthy for Chane. The Piute was somewhere close, in possession of the rifle, and possibly with the hidden outlaws. Chane leaped upon Brutus and for the first time spurred him. Brutus left that spot like an arrow shot from a bow. Chane fully expected to hear the report of his rifle. It would take an unerring marksman to hit Brutus at that speed; and as far as pursuit was concerned, that would be useless.

Chane headed west, directly opposite from what McPherson would have calculated upon, if he were waiting in ambush.

The wind whipped his face, blurring his eyes. But dim as his sight was, he made certain there were no riders in pursuit. Therefore checking Brutus, he rode down round the brow of the cedar ridge to the rim of Beaver Canyon. Half a mile farther on he encountered a trail used by horses going down for water, and here he reached the canyon floor. Chane took the first possible ascent, a small side ravine sloping out, and soon found himself on the green level above. Here he headed east, putting Brutus to his long easy lope. The horse had as smooth action as one of the light Indian mustangs.

"You never can tell about a horse—what he is—until you know," mused Chane. "But I'll have to give McPherson credit for sizing up Brutus. He knew, all right. And he was sure crazy to get Brutus. Meant to steal him! Well, Bud, I think we'll fool you."

Chane kept sharp lookout for sight of Toddy Nokin and the string of mustangs. This league-wide basin appeared deceptively level, but there was a decided pitch down toward the yellow rounded rocks, and shallow washes deepened and narrowed in that direction. Grass and weed were abundant, and a few cacti.

Chane began to quarter more to the northeast, and soon turned into the trail Toddy Nokin had taken. The dust was cut with fresh hoof tracks. Brutus swung into this winding trail, heading north and sloping perceptibly. As the miles swiftly passed by, Chane saw the great round yellow rocks come closer on each side, and gradually encompass him. A mile-wide space appeared to open into this wilderness of rock, and it sloped from each wall down to the beginning of a canyon.

Chane had not come in this way, but further to the eastward, by a trail crossing the San Juan east of Piute Canyon. Toddy Nokin was leading toward the little-known trail called the Hole in the Wall, long a rendezvous of outlaws. Presently Chane rode to the rim of a canyon that headed abruptly there. Across this canyon Toddy and his sons appeared, driving the string of mustangs. Chane rode down and climbed out, soon catching up with his Indian friend.

He was quick to observe that the trail here was very old and dim, in places scarcely perceptible. Evidently the trail that he had just left was the one mostly used on the way to the Piute ford of the San Juan. Chane lost no time telling Toddy about the loss of his rifle and the moccasin track of the club-footed Piute.

"Ugh!" grunted Toddy, and his accent was not reassuring. Halting his mustang, he looked back toward the uplands. Chane was relieved that Toddy turned away without comment. But he urged the mustangs to a little faster trot.

They headed narrow deep intersecting canyons. At length the Indians

came out on flat hard ground, a bench under a lofty crackling wall, and verging precipitously upon the canyon they were following. The bench was marked strikingly by immense boulders that had broken from the cliffs above and had lodged along the brink of the abyss. Some were ready to topple over.

At length the Piutes started down over the rim, at a place apparently perpendicular, a succession of rocky zigzag steps rather than a trail.

Chane dismounted at the rim and watched the file of mustangs clatter down, sending the rocks rolling to gather in momentum and volume, until there was an avalanche roaring down into this red chasm of ruined stone.

"Well, Brutus, if you can get down here I'll be ready to believe you can fly," said Chane. Heretofore, in climbing or descending bad places Chane had held the bridle and led Brutus. It occurred to him here to trust the horse, making travel easier for both of them, provided Brutus was clever and supple enough to go it alone. So he tied a knot in the end of the reins and hung the loop over the pommel. Then starting down, he called back to Brutus to follow.

To Chane's utter astonishment and delight, Brutus followed him absolutely without nervousness or hesitation. On the short turns he was as quick and supple as a jack rabbit. He had the feet and legs of a mountain goat. When he came to the high steps he would halt and look down at Chane as if for instruction. Chane would call out, "Come on, Brutus." The horse would look at Chane and snort, then lift both great hoofs evenly, and plunge down, landing them squarely. He would slide. His hind hoofs would follow, to thump down. Then the rocks would roar and scatter. Chane had to leap and run to keep from being hurt. If Brutus had not met often with the abrupt steps, where he halted until called, Chane would have found it difficult to keep ahead of him.

Down and down horse and man worked, until the ragged red wall loomed terrifically above and the hazy depths began to grow clear, and the opposite wall of canyon rose higher and higher, to blot out part of the glaring sky.

When Chane walked out on the level, Brutus was right behind him. So Chane got into the saddle again and soon caught up with the Piutes.

This narrow red gulch, with its lofty overhanging walls, opened into a wider canyon. When Chane turned the corner of wall he came upon a wonderful garden spot of green cottonwood and grass, perhaps ten acres in extent, set down like a gem amid the brazen iron devastation. A stream of water, shining like silver in the sunlight, passed through this oasis. A long wide canyon yawned to the west. From the direction of this canyon and the stream that wound through it Chane decided it must be Beaver Canyon.

Toddy Nokin and his sons drove the mustangs into the oasis and let that be the end of the day's journey. He said this was the safest place he knew to stop for the night, and the only one where there was plenty of grass. Chane was surprised not to find any indication of Indian camps or travel. Not a hoof track showed along the sand of the stream. Chane lost some of his apprehension about McPherson. There did not seem to be probability of the horse thieves surprising him here. The danger, perhaps, was farther on, at or near the ford of the San Juan.

Chane awakened toward dawn and found he was cold. He got up, cramped and stiff, and moved about until something of warmth began to creep along his veins. The Indians were cooking sheep meat. Chane ate his scant breakfast before daylight. Toddy Nokin's sons glided away to drive in the mustangs.

"Ugh!" grunted Toddy Nokin, presently attracting Chane's attention.

The Indian had cut strips of the cooked meat, which he had spread on a stone near the fire. He indicated that these were for Chane. Chane gathered them up, not forgetting to thank Toddy, and carrying them to his saddle he stowed them away in the bag that contained the parched corn. He would fare poorly until he got among the Mormons.

At daylight Brutus came trotting into camp. He had found good grazing, to judge from his sleek full sides. Chane saddled him, and waited for the Piutes to come with the mustangs.

Presently Toddy Nokin's sons rode in with the mustangs, and in a few moments the day's journey began. Chane faced it with a grim eagerness. They climbed out of the oasis on the eastern side, and threaded an uphill course through sections of broken wall. They came to a level rise of ground upon which the rocks stood scattered like the tents of an army. Some of these boulders had oxidized surfaces, almost black, upon which Indians had inscribed their crude signs.

Chane rode up out of that maze of scattered blocks of standstone, out upon a height from which he could gaze down into the canyon of the San Juan River.

A terrible red gulf wound from east to west, a broad, winding iron-walled canyon, at the bottom of which gleamed and glinted a chocolate-hued river in flood, its dull roar striking ominously upon Chane's ear. Miles to the eastward it came rushing out of a narrow split in the sinister walls, to wind like a serpent toward the west, pushing its muddy current into another river that swept on between majestic towering walls. This was Chane's first sight of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

On the side from which Chane gazed there were canyon mouths yawning everywhere. The descent from this side down to the river was gradual, but of such a rough nature that travel seemed impossible. Yet Chane saw the Indians and mustangs winding down. Far below the vast rock slides were ridges of colored earth, and below these stretched sandy levels parallel with the river.

Brutus started down, and soon Chane felt lost in a world of crumbled cliffs. The trail here, however, was neither steep nor difficult. Brutus soon was upon the heels of the Piute's mustang.

It took a long hot dusty hour to descend to the ridges of red and gray earth, a welcome change of travel. Here the mustangs resumed the leisurely trot that covered distance rapidly. From the ridges the Indians rode down upon a gravel level, almost wholly bare of vegetation.

The red slope that Toddy watched now slanted and heaved upward, a steep mile of jagged rocks, to end in a seamed wall which touched the sky. It broke abruptly into a notched mouth of canyon that cut clear down to the level where Chane rode. No doubt out of this canyon came the trail from which Toddy had switched yesterday and from which he felt apprehension

today. No living creature gave contrast to the appalling desolation of that red abyss.

The strip of gravel level, that had appeared narrow from far above, now proved to be wide and spacious. The time came when Toddy pointed to a break in the opposite wall, at the bottom of which shone a dense patch of green growth. Also a line of willows began to appear on this side of the river. Here was the place where the Piutes forded the river, to climb out on the yellow rock above.

To Chane the San Juan looked impossible to cross.

"Can I get over?" he asked, voicing his anxiety.

The Piute answered that he had crossed at worse stages of flood than this one, and he pointed ahead to the ford. They rode on, and had passed the mouth of the intersecting canyon when Toddy Nokin suddenly exclaimed, "Ugh!"

His gestures made Chane's heart sink. Low down over the rocks beyond the sand showed moving clouds of dust.

Chapter Six

King of Wild Stallions

THOSE dust clouds had been kicked aloft by moving horses.

"Toddy! Who's raising that dust?" flashed Chane. "Indians?"

"Ugh!" ejaculated the Piute. His dark gaze was fixed on the isolated boulders that had rolled out upon the level.

As Chane shifted his roving eyes, he suddenly espied a white man rising from behind one of the foremost rocks. Chane recognized Jim Horn. He was leveling a gun, resting his elbow on the rock. He was perhaps fifty paces from Toddy's older son, who was at the head of the string of mustangs.

"Horn! Don't shoot!" yelled Chane, at the top of his lungs. "These mustangs aren't worth bloodshed."

But Horn paid no heed to this call. He shot once—twice at the nearest Piute, who was knocked off his pony, but got up and ran back. Horn now directed his fire at Toddy's younger son, a mere lad, who uttered a yell and wheeled his horse. The string of mustangs, frightened by the shots and yells, stampeded and turned away with pounding hoofs.

Chane reached for his rifle. Gone! A swift fierce fury possessed him. How he had been tricked! Toddy Nokin's dark hand shot out toward the rocks to the right and back. Even as Horn fired again, this time at Chane or Toddy, for the bullet whistled close enough to make Brutus jump, Chane saw Hod Slack riding forward, gun in hand, and directly behind, Bud McPherson appeared, goading his white horse and waving his rifle.

"Run, Toddy!" yelled Chane. "Run for the canyon!"

Brutus was plunging to be off, so that Chane had difficulty in holding him. Perhaps his movement was fortunate for Chane, as another bullet from Horn whizzed uncomfortably close over his head.

In a second more Chane saw his only chance was to outrun McPherson with the rifle, and take to the ford. The Piutes were gone like rabbits in the rocks. The mustangs had run wild, back over the trail by which they had come. Two of the outlaws, one armed with a rifle, blocked escape in that direction. Chane

saw if he followed in Toddy Nokin's steps he would soon have to abandon Brutus. That thought did not hold in his mind.

"Hyar!" yelled McPherson. "Git off thet hoss!"

It was Brutus the thief wanted. Chane saw him level the rifle. That was a signal for Chane to spur Brutus and yell at once. The horse leaped into action, head pointed up the river. Chane drew his gun and shot at Horn. That individual was frantically trying to reload. He ducked back behind the rock and returned Chane's fire. This time his heavy bullet tugged at Chane's shoulder. The touch of lead infuriated the rider and, suddenly reckless, he swerved Brutus directly at the rock behind which Horn was hidden. The thief broke cover and darted for other rocks. Chane could have shot him in the back, but he held his fire.

"Run him down, Brutus!" called Chane, and goaded the horse.

He saw Horn fumbling at his gun as he dodged away. He dropped shells on the ground, stumbled and fell, sprang up and lunged on. The horse bore down upon him like a whirlwind of dust. Chane yelled. Brutus hurdled a rock. Then Horn, frantic in his terror, tried to elude the horse that was thundering down on him. As he whirled and lifted his gun Brutus ran into him. Chane saw a red flame and smoke, but did not hear the shot nor feel the bullet. Horn's distorted face, livid and savage, gleamed under the horse. Then came a shock, light and sharp, that did not even check Brutus. Horn was thrown as if from a catapult. But he had not been killed. He got up, staggered on, waving his arms, and fell again.

Brutus stretched out in his stride, headed for the curve of the river. Then Chane gave heed to McPherson. That worthy was behind him, between him and the river, and at the instant there flashed a white puff of smoke from the rifle. Chane was in a precarious situation. McPherson had a good horse and possession of the gun. Again a puff of white smoke! Chane saw the whip of sand where the bullet struck far ahead. McPherson was shooting high, evidently careful not to hit this horse he coveted.

"Now, Brutus, make good all that wrangler brag about your speed," shouted Crane, and he urged the horse to his utmost.

The ground was level hard gravel, and there was a mile of it between him and the bend of river where Toddy had pointed out the ford. Chane did not look back. He gave every sense to his riding of the horse. He heard the bullets sing above him and saw them strike ahead. Then, in a moment more, when Brutus settled into the terrible strain of a horse running to save the life of his master, it seemed to Chane that he was sailing through the air. The wind tore at him. The ground became a sheeted dim expanse, sliding under him. Rocks and walls blurred on either side. Never in his life had he bestridden a horse as fleet, as powerful as Brutus.

After fleeing across the turbulent San Juan, and evading the pursuing McPherson and Slack, he crossed the Colorado River. Now Chane rode into a long wide stretch that permitted him to see afar, both north and south. And he was amazed and thrilled to discov-

er far above and back of his position the unmistakable southern end of Wild Horse Mesa. Like a grand bold-faced mountain it towered above him.

Chane rode on. The farther up this strange canyon he traveled the more he became prey to apprehension. At any moment he might turn a bend and face an insurmountable wall. Chane could stand to go long on scant ration, but Brutus had to have grass. Therefore Chane lost no time working toward the head of this canyon.

The first sight of cottonwood trees, still beautifully green, cheered him to hopefulness. Other trees met his trail, and then a grassy bench, a strip of willow bank.

Again the walls converged and there followed a long stretch bare of green growth or glint of water. At the end of this lane Chane saw a sunlit space, and he gave a sudden start, believing that the canyon headed out there into open country. But an instant's thought scouted this idea. He was still in the depths of the rocky fastnesses.

All at once Brutus halted. His long ears shot up.

"What's up, old boy?" queried Chane, peering keenly ahead.

To his amazement, the canyon aisle led into the most wonderful place Chane had ever beheld. It was an enlargement of the canyon, green and gold and silvery, walled on his right by a cliff that reached to the skies, and on the left by a strange slanting area, a falling of the wall, to a gradual slope of bare yellow stone, dotted by cedar trees growing out of niches in the rock.

Chane's swift gaze had just time to take this all in when Brutus jumped to a halt and whistled an alarm. Following that came the swift padding of hoofs on soft ground.

"Wild horses, by gum!" Chane ejaculated, with the old thrill of his boyhood.

Then out of the cottonwoods trooped a band of wild horses, bays and blacks, sleek, shiny, with hanging manes and switching tails and keen wild heads erect. They faced Chane.

Brutus neighed now, more with welcome than affright. These were creatures of his kind. His neigh was answered by a piercing whistle that rang like a bugle down the canyon.

"Say, that's a stallion!" exclaimed Chane.

Then out of the green pranced the most beautiful and wildest horse Chane had ever seen.

"*Panquitch!*" gasped Chane in bewildered ecstasy. His heart leaped to his throat.

The king of wild stallions was the color of a lion except for black mane and tail. This quivering mane seemed to stand erect like an arched wave, and fall almost to the sand. He had the points of a racehorse, with the weight and muscle gained from wild life on the desert. But his symmetry and grace, his remarkable beauty, were dwarfed by his spirit. His black eyes shot fire. His nostrils dilated to send forth another piercing blast. Wild, proud, fierce, he was a creature to stop the heart of a wild-horse hunter.

Then with a backward spring, like that of a deer, he wheeled to race into the green. He disappeared, and his band of bays and blacks raced after him. Chane thought they would run up the canyon. No! The sharp click, click, click of hoofs on rock told him they had taken to the slope. Above the green of cottonwoods they appeared, Panquitch leading on a run uphill. What

a torturing thrill the sight gave Chane! For his first instinct had been one to capture.

Panquitch slowed to a trot, and led his band up and down the waves of slope until Chane lost sight of them. He sat there astride Brutus and marveled. Then he galloped Brutus through the open, and the grove, to the slope. Here he dismounted and took to climbing. As he got up his range of vision widened.

He could see north over the waving slope, to the far height where the spreading flange of Wild Horse Mesa met this rising plane of yellow rock. But there was no sign of the wild horses. Thereupon Chane climbed less violently, until he had passed the zone of straggling cedars and mounted high enough to command the prospect. A canyon split the escarpment to the north. Panquitch could not cross there, nor climb to the towering rim of Wild Horse Mesa from that side.

Chane waited. At last, far above, he espied the tawny stallion now driving his band ahead of him. Manes and tails tossed wildly on the summit of a yellow ridge, and vanished. Then Panquitch stood silhouetted against the red of the mesa wall, far beyond. His mane waved in the wind. Every line of his magnificent frame seemed instinct with freedom. Wild and grand he stood outlined there on the height. Then he vanished.

Toddy Nokin had it figured wrong, decided Chane, at length. *Panquitch gets on top the mesa round this end and not to the north. He comes down this canyon to climb up here. Somewhere above he has found a trail to the rim. But—if he comes down this canyon, why hasn't he been trailed? I'll find out.*

Chane descended to Brutus and rode on out of the beautiful colored oval. As he had expected, he found fresh horse tracks in the sand, headed toward him.

The canyon narrowed to a V-shaped cleft, with gleaming walls slanting almost straight up to the sky. How weird and strange! This pass of gleams narrowed and widened as Chane traveled on.

He came to pools of water over beds of gravel, then boulders almost blocking passage. But the trail of the wild horses led Chane on. He heard the gurgle of running water and saw where a stream disappeared under the cliff. He came to a pool that Brutus waded, clean, clear, beautiful green water. Beyond this was bare stone which showed no hoof marks. Then came sand again and the telltale tracks.

Looking ahead, Chane was utterly astounded to see the cliffs come closer and closer together. This cleft grew gloomy and somber. Chane was sure of exit now. The wild horses had come down here, and his escape was certain. Besides, he would learn how Panquitch eluded his trailers.

Boulders had to be clambered over, and more pools traversed. The water now was running swift and deep in places. The converging walls took on a darker, weirder gleam.

Chane came to a pool that was twenty feet deep. Brutus swam it. No horse tracks showed now on the granite floor. Even the iron hoofs of Brutus left no trace. The sand was gone.

Pool after pool of deep water Chane had to drive Brutus to swim. And the last was a hundred yards long. Chane could see the green depths under him. Beyond that the canyon widened and the stream rushed shallowly over a

granite bed. No intersecting canyons broke these tremendous walls. The trail of the wild horses had come down that stone-floored stream.

Chane remembered the canyon he had marked bisecting the eastern flange of the mesa. Soon he must come to where that opened into this one, unless both were one and the same. He traveled a tortuous mile or more before he reached it. But one glance was sufficient to prove to him that Panquitch had never come down there. It was impassable. Chane kept to the winding lane of denuded rock until at last it opened out into bright space. A stone slope that dwarfed the one below greeted Chane's expectant gaze. The canyon pierced it and ended in a wide cleft.

Brutus carried Chane up that long slope and out on a wide desert bench which fell away from the mesa and merged on the seamed and cracked canyon country below. The bench appeared rock as far as eye could see. Everywhere along its rim slanted rugged bare declivities of stone, any one of which might lead into a canyon. Chane had marked the place where he had climbed out. He meant to come back. Panquitch's access to Wild Horse Mesa was no longer a mystery to Chane. He could trap that great stallion.

But what a baffling country was that eastern lower escarpment of the mesa. It appeared endless. To the right stretched the sea of carved rock, lined by its canyon rims, and ending only in the dim rise of purple upland. All on the other side of Chane the towering fluted wall of red wandered northward. Fifty miles and more Wild Horse Mesa stretched its level black-fringed horizon line toward the Henry Mountains.

Chapter Seven

Chane's Arrival

SUE MELBERNE missed Chess so much that she was surprised, and compelled to admit appreciation of the lad's many little acts of thoughtfulness and service, not to mention the interest aroused by his personality. Chess and Jake had taken the big wagon and driven off to the railroad to fetch back a load of barbed wire. Sue had overheard Manerube's talk with her father about how easily a trap to catch wild horses could be constructed in the valley; and despite her own pleadings not to use so cruel a method, and Alonzo's disapproval, and Utah's silence, he had listened to Manerube, who was strongly backed by Loughbridge.

This incident had marked in Sue a definite attitude of mind toward Manerube. Her first impressions had not been favorable, yet these had not kept her from feeling an inexplicable fascination when the man was in her presence. But after he had successfully put through a plan to catch wild horses with barbed wire, Sue thought she despised him.

Three days after Chess had left, Manerube had apparently ousted him from his place in Ora's fickle affections. Ora babbled to Sue about Manerube, utterly forgetting that she had babbled almost as fervently about Chess.

"Ora, listen," said Sue, finally driven to irritation. "I feel bound to tell you Benton Manerube has tried the same kind of talk on me."

"Wha-at! Why, Sue?" faltered Ora. "What did he say?"

"Oh, I—I don't remember," replied Sue, blushing. "But soft flattery, you know. About my pretty face—how sweet I am—that he never saw anyone like me. Then he makes eyes—and more than once he has got hold of my hand. Does that sound familiar, Ora?"

"Yes, it does," she replied, solemnly and ashamed. "But, Sue—he has kissed me!"

"Ora!" cried Sue, aghast.

"I—I couldn't help it," hastily added Ora, greatly troubled. "We were out under the cottonwoods, last night. He just grabbed me—he's like a bear. I boxed his ears, but he just laughed. Then I ran off."

"Ora, I'm surprised," returned Sue, much concerned. "Chess is a boy—nice, you know, and maybe harmless. But Manerube is a man. He is queer—sort of dominating. But I never felt he had any reverence for women. Ora, I think you had better keep away from him. At least don't be alone with him."

"Leave him all for you, I suppose?" queried Ora sarcastically. "I'll play hob doing that."

Sue steadily regarded the girl for a long moment. "Ora, I believe Chess was right—you are catty. Now stop coming to me with your confidences—about Manerube or anybody."

With that Sue turned her back and went to her tent, tingling with anger. She resolved to pay no more attention to Ora and to avoid Manerube.

This latter decision was not easy to uphold. Melberne's outfit ate and talked and worked as one big family. During the early hours, and especially at suppertime and afterward, Sue could not keep out of Manerube's way. He watched her across the spread tarpaulin around which they ate, and across the campfire, and when Sue slipped away to watch the sunset Manerube followed her and stood by the log where she sat.

"Ora says you told her to keep away from me," he began, quite pleasantly. "What made you say that?"

"Why don't you ask her?"

"I will. Say, is Ora Chess's girl?"

"She was."

"Humph! Well, Miss Melberne, I'm sorry you think I ought to be avoided. I can't see that Ora ran away from me." He laughed with a pleasing assurance. "Girls are different. I've been weeks alone riding the desert—lonely, hungry for the look and voice of a woman. Would you expect me to avoid one? Ora is full of fun. She's like a kitten. She'll purr and scratch. And if I'm fond of being with her, teasing her, how do you think I feel about being with you?"

"I never thought about it," replied Sue.

"All right. Think of it now. I'm settled in this horse deal with your father and am likely to go in the ranch business with him later. So you're going to see a good deal of me. And I tell you it's a different thing from seeing Ora. You're a woman, a beautiful young woman. If you'd rather I stopped tormenting you, trying to make you like me—I'll do it. But then I'll get serious and when I'm serious I'm dangerous."

"Mr. Manerube, you seem to take a good deal for granted—about yourself," retorted Sue.

Manerube grew rather more forceful in his arguments and statements, and as he waxed more eloquent and personal he drew closer to Sue until he sat beside her. His proximity seemed more compelling than his speech. Sue had contempt for this man's estimate of himself. The more he talked the less she liked him, yet she was conscious

of some singular attraction about him. When at last, twilight fell like a mantle over the valley, Sue decided it was time to return to camp. So she slipped down off the big log.

Manerube grasped her hand and tried to draw her closer. It took no small effort on Sue's part to get away from him.

"Keep your hands off me," she said, with a heat she could not restrain. "Didn't I tell you before?"

"Sue, I reckon I'm in love with you," he replied.

Without replying, Sue fled and went to her tent. She was furious. Her cheeks were hot. Not until she was snug and cozy under her blankets did she find composure. Then she thought out her estimate of Manerube. He might have had some education, some advantages beyond those of a range rider, but he was not a gentleman. Sue intuitively grasped that Manerube was not influenced in the least by her objection to being courted. He had no sense of shame, or perhaps of honor. He would work his will with a woman one way or another.

But as for his effect upon her—that was a matter very much more difficult of analysis. Sue seemed baffled. If Manerube did not cease his importunities she was going to hate him, that much was certain, but it did not imply she did not feel some strange power in him. It could not be because he was a big bold-looking rider and handsome. She acknowledged that he was that, though she preferred dark men. There must be something which came to her in his presence that thrilled her, yet did not belong to him. Being masculine, virile, and strong, he must represent something to her.

Then she happened to think of Chess and the singular emotion his simple avowal of love had stirred in her heart. Strange to recall, Manerube's had likewise quickened her pulse, though she scorned it. This vague power, then, had to do with love. Before that word love she trembled like a guilty creature surprised. It was an Open Sesame. Any man, did he choose to employ it, could make a woman's heart quiver, if she happened to be in Sue's peculiar state of unrest, of longing, of fancy-freedom.

The next day Sue accompanied the men on a wild-mule chase. When they reached camp the sun had just set. The campfire was smoking. Sue rode to her tent, and quickly turned her pony loose. Kicking off spurs and chaps, she wiped the dust from her face and brushed back her disheveled hair. Then she hurried out with a ravenous appetite.

Manerube passed her without even seeing her. His face seemed strangely pale. It struck Sue so forcibly that she turned instinctively to gaze after him. Manerube appeared to be striding aimlessly away from the campfire.

Then Sue espied a wonderful shiny horse, almost black, standing with head down. Her father had just helped a rider to get out of the saddle. Sue halted with a start.

Melberne half supported a tall lithe man whose back was toward Sue. His garb showed rough travel. He could not walk without support. Loughbridge was talking somewhat excitedly as he walked beside Melberne. Utah strode on the other side.

Sue ran forward, and reached her father just as he carefully let the stranger down under a cottonwood.

"Never—mind—me," said the man in a husky whisper. "Look after—Brutus

–my horse!"

"Wal, stranger, we'll shore have a care for you both," replied her father.

Utah folded a blanket to slip under the man's head, raising it. Sue saw piercing dark eyes, and a black ragged beard of many days' growth. Something seemed to stop her heart. But it was not the pain in those eyes or the pallid lined brow. Sue recognized a man she had never before seen.

Melberne drew up the blanket that Utah had spread over the stranger. "Reckon you're Chane Weymer," he affirmed, rather than asked.

Sue did not need to see the man nod affirmation of his identity. Venturing closer, she dropped upon one knee beside her father.

"Are you hurt anywheres?" went on Melberne solicitously.

"No–just starved–worn out," came the whispered reply.

"Ahuh. So I reckoned," said Melberne, and looked up to tell one of the riders to fetch Mrs. Melberne.

"Wal, I shore knew you was Chess Weymer's brother the minute I laid eyes on you. Didn't you reckon that way, Sue?"

Chane Weymer gave a slight start and would have sat up but for Melberne's restraining hand.

"Chess! Do you–know him?" he asked huskily.

"Shore do. He's in my employ, an' a fine lad. Isn't he, Sue?"

It was then the piercing eyes flashed upon Sue and seemed to be penetrating to her very heart.

"Yes–Dad," she replied.

"Where–is he?" queried Weymer.

"Wal, he was heah. But I sent him to the railroad with the wagon. He'll be back aboot tomorrow."

The weary face of Weymer underwent a singular transfiguration. Those falcon eyes, dark as an Indian's, shone with a beautiful light. They met Sue's, and a smile seemed to open them, showing the man's soul. Then they closed, and he whispered something inaudibly that Sue interpreted as "Little Boy Blue"!

At that moment Mrs. Melberne came bustling into the group. "Is–he hurt?" she inquired breathlessly.

"No, Mary. He's starved. Now I reckon he ought not eat much or anythin' heavy. A little warm milk with bread, or some soup."

"Seems like he has some fever," replied Mrs. Melberne, with her hand on Weymer's face. "An' see how he's twitching. Make a bed for him–right here–an' put him in it. I'll look after him."

"Shore that's good," responded Melberne heartily. "I'll fetch blankets. An' say, Utah, will you take charge of Weymer's horse? Feed him a little grain–very little–an' mix it in some warm water."

They left Sue kneeling there, strangely influenced by something that was not all sympathy. Chess Weymer's brother had come.

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked, a little hurriedly.

"Who are–you?" he returned.

"Sue Melberne. He was my father," replied Sue, with a motion of her hand toward the campfire.

"Do you–know Chess?"

"Indeed I do. We're great friends," she said, feeling a warmth steal to her cheeks.

"Well!" The single whispered word was expressive enough to cause Sue to drop her eyes and be relieved that her father returned with his arms full of blankets.

Sue helped him make the bed.

"Now, Weymer, let me lift you over," he said.

"I'm not—quite helpless," was the reply. And Weymer edged himself over into the bed, where Melberne covered him.

"Shore you're not. But you're tuckered out. Sue, stay with him until Mother comes. I've got work to do before dark."

Again Sue found herself alone with this brother of Chess Weymer's. The fact was disturbing. She had an unaccountable shyness, almost embarrassment.

"You're kind people," whispered Weymer. "My bad luck—seems broken. A fellow can never—tell."

"Tell what?" asked Sue.

"When there's—no hope left. Maybe there's always hope."

"You mean hope of life—during such terrible experience as you must have had?"

"Yes—of life—and happiness," he whispered dreamily. "Always, both have seemed just beyond the horizon —for me. I'll never be hopeless again."

"Your strength left you," said Sue earnestly. "But of course there's always hope for any man—if he— But here comes Mother with something for you to eat."

It fell fatefully to Sue's lot to help Mrs. Melberne feed this newcomer. The practical motherly woman bade Sue hold him while she lifted spoon and cup to his lips. Thus Sue found herself kneeling beside Chess's brother, with her arms round his shoulders. Chane Weymer's shoulder touched Sue's heaving breast as she knelt beside him. Of all the moments of Sue's life, these endless few were the most astounding and inexplicable.

Weymer could not swallow much, though he tried hard. Soon he lay back on the folded pillow, with whispered thanks, and closed his eyes.

"It's sleep he needs now more than food," declared Mrs. Melberne as she rose from her knees. "Sue, stay beside him a little till he falls off. If he sleeps he'll be better tomorrow an' can eat."

Then for the third time Sue found herself alone with the man who called his brother Little Boy Blue. In a few moments indeed he was fast asleep.

Dusk stole softly down through the rustling cottonwoods. And the moon cast a pale glow down upon the encampment. It lighted the face of the sleeping man. Sue did not want to gaze at him, yet she was powerless to resist it. The dark disheveled head, the ragged black beard, gave something of wildness to this stranger's presence. He was breathing deeply, as one in heavy slumber.

Sue edged noiselessly closer to her charge, so that she could see him better. She suffered a sense of something akin to shame, yet she bent to look at him closely.

In the moon-balanced shadow his face seemed to have a sad cast, level noble brow burdened with pain, dark hollows where the eyelids shut, blank spaces, yet how compelling, and stern lines that faded in the ragged beard. Sue drew back, strangely relieved. That face held something which did not mock her interest in the wild rider who called his brother Little Boy Blue.

Some time later, Sue heard quick footsteps rustling the dry leaves outside her tent, and then an eager voice calling her name.

"Hello, Chess! You back? I'm sure glad," she replied.

"Oh, Sue!—Chane has come!" he went on, his low voice betraying deep feeling. "Are you in bed?"

"No. But I was just going."

"Please come out. I want to tell you something," he begged.

Sue had no wish to resist that earnest appeal. Rising, she slipped out between the flaps of her tent. Chess stood close, a tall dark figure, his face indistinguishable against the background of shadow. He made a dive to secure her hand, and, bending, he kissed her cheek.

"Why—Chess!" exclaimed Sue. Amazement was succeeding to anger when she made out his face. He was greatly excited. Evidently he had no consciousness of a bold action.

"Chane is asleep," whispered Chess hoarsely. "I went close—to look at him. Say, it was hard not to wake him. But I was glad, for it gives me time."

"Time? For what, Chess? Why, boy, you're all upset!" replied Sue.

"Upset! Huh! You'd be upset, too—if you knew Chane. If he finds out Manerube knocked me down—and what for—my God! Sue, he'll kill him!"

Sue felt a cold tightening prickle of her skin, and her thoughts raced.

"You must keep him from finding out," she said.

"Sure. I'm going to. When I found out Chane was here I asked your father if anyone had told about my fight with Manerube. He said he'd forgotten that. Then I begged him not to tell Chane. He said I had the right idea. He went with me to fix it with Jake and the other fellows who saw the fight. They were all darn nice about it. Then, Sue—what do you think?"

"Go on, Chess. Tell me."

"We looked for Manerube," whispered Chess tensely. "No one had seen him since Chane rode into camp. Your dad said that 'shore was damn strange.' But I didn't think so. Anyway, we hunted all around camp, and at last we found him sitting back on a log away from the campfire. I pitched right in to tell him I—we didn't want Chane to know about the fight. I reckon that surprised Manerube. He got a little chesty, right off. Well, I *crawled.* Think of me begging that liar's pardon, just to prevent a fight here!"

"But, Chess, you hardly needed to humiliate yourself so," responded Sue. "Manerube would not have told Chane you struck him, that's certain."

"Darn my thick head!" ejaculated Chess in exasperation. "Sure he wouldn't. I could just feel how relieved he was. Well, I did it, and I reckon I'm not sorry. It was for Chane's sake."

"Chess, it was manly of you," said Sue earnestly. "Never mind what Manerube thinks. But, Chess, in your excitement because of your brother's return, haven't you exaggerated any danger of his—of any—"

"Sue," interrupted Chess, "I'm not exaggerating anything. Chane might overlook insults—such talk as that squaw-man stuff, or the vile hint about the little Piute girl. But if he learned Manerube had struck me—beat me in the face for defending his honor—why, so help me heaven—he'd *kill* him!"

"Then, boy—you've done right," faltered Sue.

"Don't misunderstand me, Sue," went on Chess. "I haven't any fears for Chane's life. Did you think that? Say—wait till you know this brother of mine! But it's that I'd hate to have him shed blood on my account. He's done it, Sue. He shot a rowdy who mistreated me—in a saloon where I was drinking. Thank God, he didn't kill

him. But that was only luck. Sue, I ask you to help me be a better man, so Chane will never fight on my account again."

"Chess—you're confessing now? You've been bad," whispered Sue.

He dropped his head and let go of her hands.

"Don't be afraid to tell me. I'm no fair-weather friend," continued Sue.

"Bad! I should smile," he replied. Then he looked down squarely into her face. "Sue, I was only a wild youngster. You've helped me. Chane coming at this time—just makes me think. I don't want him to fight for his sake, more than for mine. And for *yours*, Sue!"

"Mine!" murmured Sue, suddenly shocked. "I—why—what concern is it of mine?"

"Didn't I say if I couldn't have you for a wife I'd have you for a sister?" he queried forcefully.

"Yes, you did, and it was very foolish talk."

"Just you wait! But never mind about that. All this talk of mine means only one thing. I'm scared stiff for fear Chane will fight again. Now, Sue, Chane will get a job riding for your father. He'll be with us. I knew that was coming. I'm glad, if only he never finds out about Manerube. If only I can be half a man!"

"Chess, I think you're pretty much of a man right now," declared Sue.

"You mean it, Sue, honest?"

"Yes, judging from all you've said here. If you stick to that I'll be proud to help you."

"You could do anything with a fellow."

"Very well, flatterer," returned Sue, trying to be light and gay, but failing. "I'll put my remarkable powers to a test. Make me one promise?"

"Yes. What is it?" demanded Chess.

"Don't drink any more."

"Have you heard anything of my drinking? I haven't lately," he said simply. "But you've sure hit my weakness, Sue."

"Well, then, good night, Little Boy Blue," she said with a laugh.

When Sue presented herself for breakfast she found she was the last one. Mrs. Melberne's eyes twinkled as she observed Sue's carefully brushed hair, and clean white blouse with bright tie, and a soft woolen skirt, and beaded moccasins.

"Daughter, I thought yesterday's ride must have been too much for you, seein' you didn't bounce out as usual," she said drily. "But I reckon you're well enough. You sure look pretty. Ora tidied up a bit, too, but you needn't let it worry you."

"Mother!" exclaimed Sue, with a hot blush. "Do you mean to insinuate I—you—"

"My dear, don't mind me," interposed Mrs. Melberne, suddenly warmed and won out of her teasing by that word mother.

At that moment Chess came in, bright, keen, all smiles.

"Hello, sister! There's somebody here who wants to meet you."

"Yes? Oh, I suppose you mean your brother," said Sue casually. But it was only outwardly that serenity abided with her. She seemed powerless to help her feelings. Sue wanted to resent the familiar word sister; she wanted to avoid meeting Chane Weymer. But at

that moment she did not have it in her to hurt this boy, who had promised to go straight for her sake. So, assuming an air of amiable indifference, which she was far from feeling, Sue permitted Chess to lead her away under the cottonwoods.

Chess was talking, as usual, only faster, and with elation—how he had moved Chane back in the grove, shaved him, and made him look presentable, and other things Sue did not catch. She was concerned with her own smothered emotions. Then Sue espied Chess's tent, and near it, in the shade of a full-foliaged tree, a bed in which a man was sitting upright. Sue did not see a disheveled head, a pallid face, a ragged beard, things she remembered. Could this person be Chess's brother? Sue dropped her eyes. It seemed as if she was being led to some sort of execution. Then a sudden fury of spirit dismissed this incomprehensible mood or perversity and left her as she used to be.

"Chane, here she is—Sue Melberne!" cried Chess joyfully.

"I'm sure glad to meet you," said Chane Weymer.

"How do you do, Mr. Weymer!" responded Sue, lifting her eyes. "I hope you're better this morning."

Before he could reply to Sue they were accosted by her father.

"Wal, heah you are, Weymer, entertained by the young folks," he said in his loud voice. "Shore you look like a different man this mawnin'."

"You're Melberne, boss of the outfit, I reckon," replied Chane, extending his hand. "I'm much obliged to you. Yes, I do feel different. But I'm tired—and hungry. Your good wife said I must eat sparingly today."

"Shore. Go easy on grub. Reckon you've had some hard knocks lately?" rejoined Melberne tentatively. He squatted down beside Weymer.

Sue seated herself on one of the packs near by.

Chane Weymer wore a clean corduroy shirt, too small for his wide shoulders. Sue had seen Chess wear that. This rider did not appear to be brawny of build, yet the muscles rippled under the tight sleeves whenever he moved his arms. His face, shorn of the ragged beard, was the most compelling Sue had ever gazed upon. It was brown and smooth, with a blue tinge under the skin. His dark hair appeared as if touched with frost.

"No, Melberne, I can't say I've had any particular hard knocks," he was saying. "I've been over in the Piute country. Bought a bunch of mustangs from Toddy Nokin. I'd had the bad luck to fall in with some horse thieves—Bud McPherson and his pals. They trailed us, stampeded the stock. I had to take to the river to save my life. McPherson had got hold of my rifle. They ran me up a box canyon, so I had to cross the San Juan. Lucky I had a grand horse. Both rivers were high. Well, I missed the Hole in the Wall and had to climb out of the canyon country way round under Wild Horse Mesa. I had a little grub the Piutes gave me, but it didn't last long. Reckon that's about all."

"Hum! Lost your stock an' all your outfit?" replied Melberne sympathetically.

"All I owned—no, I shouldn't say that. I've got Brutus left."

"Brutus. That's the black bay you rode in on. Shore he's all horse. Wal, where were you headin' for?"

"Mormon country. I was goin' to borrow an outfit from some of the Mor-

mons, and then come back."

"What for?"

"I've several reasons," said Weymer, smiling. "One is I expect Toddy Nokin to come over with another string of mustangs. Then I'd like to look for Bud McPherson. And, well, Melberne, I've another reason I want to keep to myself for the present."

"I see. Wal, how'd you like to throw in with me? I need riders. We'll furnish what you want an' pay good wages. Chess will be glad to have you, I reckon."

"I should smile," replied Chess.

"Melberne, I'll take you up," replied Chane. "May I ask your plans? You're new to this wild-horse game, aren't you?"

"Reckon I am," returned Melberne shortly. "That's why I want good riders. I'm aimin' to trap a thousand horses heah in Stark Valley, ship them out, an' then move west over there under Wild Horse Mesa, ketch an' break some good horses, an' then homestead a fine valley."

"A thousand wild horses! Reckon you are new to this game. If you do catch them how on earth will you ship them? Wild horses!"

"Wal, I reckon I don't know, but this rider Manerube knows, an' I'm leavin' that to him."

"Bent Manerube?" queried Weymer sharply, his fine smooth brow wrinkling slightly between the eyes.

"Yes, he's the man."

"Melberne! Do I understand you to mean you've hired Bent Manerube?" demanded the rider in astonishment.

Sue felt Chess's hand gripping hers, and she returned the pressure, as if to reassure him.

"Yes, I told you. Bent Manerube."

The rider laughed outright.

"You had some trouble with Manerube across the river, didn't you?" queried Melberne.

The rider's head lifted, with the movement of an eagle. Then Sue saw fire added to the piercing quality of his eyes.

"No. I reckon I'd not call it trouble with Manerube," returned Weymer. "What did he say?"

Melberne seemed somewhat flustered, compared with his usual free directness. Chess sat as stiff as a statue, yet he was inwardly trembling, for Sue felt his hand quiver.

"Wal, he didn't say much," replied Melberne warily. "Just mentioned you an' he had a little scrap. Shore it's nothin' to fetch up heah. I'm runnin' this outfit. An' all I want to know is if you'll ride for me."

The frown deepened on Weymer's brow, and the sternness of his features, that had hidden behind his smile and glow of gladness, brought sharply to Sue the face she had seen in the moonlight. Certain it was he divined Melberne's swerving from the actual truth. Then he turned to look at Chess, and as swiftly as a light or shadow could cross his face it changed, softened.

"Sure I'll ride for you, Melberne," he said. "If you want to know, I'm right glad of the chance. Here's Chess—and, well, I might be of other service to you. *Quien sabe?* as the Mexicans say."

Melberne shook hands with Chane, and with a curt word of thanks he got up and strode away.

"Boy, it seems I've taken a job to ride with you," said Chane to his brother.

"I should—smile," responded Chess, choking down some stubborn emotion. "And I'm sure glad. Aren't you, Sue?"

"Why, yes, Chess, if it pleases you,"

she replied.

"Miss Melberne, my brother tells me you have been good to him," said Chane directly, and fastened his eyes on Sue's face.

"Oh, no, hardly that," murmured Sue.

"Don't believe her, Chane," spoke up Chess. "She's an angel. She calls me Little Boy Blue and I call her sister. Now what do you say to that?"

"I hardly know," replied Chane gravely. "I'll reserve judgment till I see more of you together."

"Chane, listen," said Chess with entire difference of tone. The boyishness vanished. His ruddy face paled slightly. "Sue has stopped my drinking."

"*No!*" exclaimed the elder brother.

"I swear to you she has," declared Chess, low and quick. "Chane, I fell in love with her. I've never drank since. Of course, Chane—you mustn't misunderstand. Sue doesn't love me—never can. I'm too much of a boy. Sue is twenty. But all the same she stopped me—and I'll promise you, too—I'll never drink again."

"Little Boy Blue!" replied Chane. "That's the best news I ever had in all my life."

Then Sue felt his eyes on her face, and though she dared not raise it, she had to.

"This boy's mother will love you, too, when she knows," said Chane. "As for me—I will do anything for you."

"I declare—you make so much of—of hardly anything," returned Sue, struggling with unfamiliar emotions. "Chess is the same way. You make mountains out of mole hills."

He smiled without replying, his dark eyes of fire steadily on her. Sue suddenly felt that if she had been an inspiration to Chess, wittingly or otherwise, it was a big thing. And the reverence, or whatever it was she saw in Chane Weymer's eyes, went straight to her heart, unutterably sweet to the discord there.

"Boy Blue, I'd never make light of your fight against bad habits," she said. "I'm only amazed that I could help. But if it's true—I'm very proud and very happy. I will indeed be your sister."

Chapter Eight

Fallen Female

DAYS passed. The beautiful Indian-summer weather held on, growing white with hoarfrost in the dawns, rich and thick with amber light at the still noons, smoky and purple at sunset. Melberne's riders labored early and late, part of them cutting and dragging fence posts, the others stretching barbed wire down in the valley.

Sue wandered about the grove and along the slope, believing she had fallen under a magic spell of Indian summer. For the most part she watched Chess and Chane at their labors up and down the hillside. She heard the sharp ring of Chess's ax, and his mellow voice floated down, crude and strong, singing a cowboy song. The tall Chane gathered several trimmed saplings in his arms, and carrying them to a declivity, he threw them over, where they rolled and clattered down to a level. Here Jake and Bonny and Captain Bunk loaded them into wagons.

Sue watched all the riders, but her gaze went oftenest and lingered longest upon the lithe figure of Chane Wey-

mer. She was not blind to it. But this golden day had dawned to strange purpose. Never had there been such a day in her life. All at once she faced her soul and knew her trouble.

She had perched in a favorite seat on a low branch of a gnarled and spreading cottonwood, quite remote from the camp, at the base of the slope where the canyon opened. Here she could see without being seen. Then came a moment when Chane Weymer passed out of sight on the timbered hillside and did not return. Revelation burst upon her quietly, inevitably, without the slightest shock.

"Chane Weymer! He's the man," she soliloquized mournfully. "I felt something must happen out here in this desert. It's come. Chess was right. He said, 'You can't help but love Chane!' I can't. I can't— Oh, I'm done for!"

At last she knew. Her torments had suddenly given place to a great dawning of something immeasurable. Like a burst of sun in the darkness of her heart! Her spirit did not rise up to crush this betraying love. It could not be crushed. It was too new, too terribly sweet, for her to want to crush. It was herself, her fulfillment; and in a moment she had become a woman.

"When did it happen?" mused Sue, womanlike, trying to retrace the steps of her undoing.

Sue recalled the night of Chane's arrival, when she sat beside him as he slept as one dead. Could love have come to her then? Surely it had been hidden in her heart, mounting unknown to her, waiting, waiting. She recalled the following morning, when he had shown her in few words and single glance how forever he would be in her debt for her influence upon his brother. It could not have come to her then. Then, the following days—how utterly impossible to grasp by recollection of them one meeting, one exchange of look or speech more significant than another!

Still there were things she thought more of than others—little incidents that stood out, facts only unusual because of memory—the difference in Ora, the way Manerube avoided the campfire, the splendid gaiety of Chess, the piercing eyes of Chane, who watched her from afar, the wild joy which had come to her while riding Brutus.

Chess had brought Brutus up to her one day. "Sue," he had said, "Chane says this horse saved his life. Brutus, he's called. Look at him! Brutus will grow on you. But you'll have to take time to find him out, Chane says. Ride him—learn to know him—love him."

"Chess, the last won't be hard to learn," replied Sue, and after the manner she had acquired from riders she walked round him.

"Sue, it'd never do for you to love Brutus and not his master," said Chess, with a face as solemn as a judge's.

Had that been the moment? wondered Sue.

But she had laughed archly, taking him at jest.

"Why not? I don't see why I can't love a horse, any horse, independent of his master."

"Well, you see, in your case it would separate them. Any rider who loved you and found out you loved his horse would give him to you."

Chess had put her saddle upon Brutus and insisted she ride him. So this was how it had come to pass that Chane, coming suddenly from under the cottonwoods, had surprised her astride his horse. Would she ever forget his look?

"You can ride?" he queried earnestly.

"Oh yes. Don't worry. I'll ride him," she replied loftily.

"Let him go, then," said the rider. "The faster he goes the easier his gait. Just stick on."

Brutus, free of rein, had taken Sue on the wings of the wind. How surely she felt Chess and Chane watching her as Brutus raced over the green! She would ride him. Yet as he settled down to a speed she had never known, her audacity succumbed to thrilling fear. Her heart leaped to her throat as Brutus sailed over a deep wash she had not seen. Then wildness ran riot with pulse and thought. The blanket of wind, pressing hard and harder, lifted her out of her saddle, so that one hand had to grasp the pommel. She ran down wild horses that could not escape this fleet racer; and when she turned him in a curve back toward the camp, the wind blinded her, tore her hair loose and strung it in a long waved stream behind her.

His hoofbeats clattered and beat faster, until they made a single dim sound in Sue's roaring ears. She cried out in the abandon of the ride. In her blurred sight the golden grove of cottonwoods seemed to grow and move toward her. Then the swift level sliding through the air broke to a harder gait. Brutus was easing out of his run. His change to a gallop threw Sue up and down like a feather before she could get his swing; and when she did he dropped to long lope, and from this to tremendous trot, so violent in stride that Sue just managed by dint of all her strength to stay upon him. When he pounded to a stop she could see only blurred images against the gold background of grove. She heard Chess's whoop.

Then, overcome by dizziness, she swayed in the saddle. Not Chess, but Chane had lifted her down, blinded, burning, thrilling. Yet she had felt his gentle hold, his strong arms on her. Had that been the moment?

Sue loved Brutus, the sight of him, the feel of him, his response to every word. She learned what a tremendous engine of speed and power he was, governed by gentle and spirited mind, if a horse could have one. She grew to understand him. A horse took on new meaning to her. Brutus was a comrade, a friend, a sweetheart, and he could as well be a savior.

"Did Brutus ride me into this—this spell?" murmured Sue. But she was denied the satisfaction of understanding when or how or why she had come to fall in love with Chane Weymer. All might have contributed to it, nothing might have been particularly to blame.

Sue's inherent honesty of soul, as it had forced her to confess the naked truth of her dilemma, likewise in time forced other considerations. She next had to deal with sense, not sentiment. And shame flooded through her.

What is he? A wandering rider, lover of wild horses and Indian girls! Squaw man!

Clamoring voices from the unknown depths of her fought for hold in her conscience. But she silenced them. To realize that she had loved unsought, unwooed, made her untrue to the best in her, merciless to the man who had roused this tumult of her heart. She must hide it. She must avoid Chane Weymer; she must welcome anyone whose attention might help to divert suspicion of her humiliating secret.

That night Sue Melberne, with the fierce pride and strange egotism of a woman who must avenge herself upon the innocent cause of her pangs, was

the life of the merry campfire circle. Chess was as merry as anyone, until Sue sat down beside Manerube, flushed of face, bright of eye, and talked and laughed with him as she had with the others. Then Chess became suddenly sober.

Sue was aware of this. It helped her, somehow. But when Chane silently strode away into the shadows her vivacity lost its inspiration. Still she kept amusing Manerube, who responded, expanded under her laughter and sallies.

The evening wore on. One after another the members of Melberne's outfit went to bed, until only Manerube and the girls were left, with Chess sitting across the fire, his head on his hands.

Sue knew he was waiting for her to start for her tent—that he would wait no matter how she tarried. At last she could keep up the deception no longer, and rose to go.

"Sue, let me walk with you to your tent?" asked Manerube.

"No, thanks. Take Ora. She's afraid of the dark," replied Sue, tripping away. But once out in the shadow, her feet became as heavy as lead. Chess caught up with her, took hold of her arm, and turned her to face him.

"Sue Melberne, what's come over you?" he demanded.

"Over me? Why, nothing! Do you mean my—my cutting up a little?"

"Yes, I mean that—with Manerube."

"Oh! Chess, it's none of your business if I want to make merry—a little, is it, with him or anyone?"

"No, I reckon not," replied Chess darkly, as he stared down at her. "But Manerube! Didn't you see Chane walk away the minute you began flirting with Manerube?"

"I—I didn't flirt," declared Sue hotly.

"Aw, you did. And it wasn't like you. Something's wrong with you, Sue Melberne. Tell me what it is. Please. Aw, Sue—"

"I've nothing to tell you," she replied, and turned away.

Chess followed her, and once again strode before her, just as she reached her tent. His head was bare, his face clear in the moonlight.

"Are you sure? You can't hurt us Weymers more than once."

"Yes, I'm sure. And I think you're rude."

"Rude!" he ejaculated. "What in damnation has come over you? I'd do anything, though, to keep you from making eyes at Manerube, being sweet—like you were. Promise me you won't."

"Chess, have you any right to criticize my actions?" she demanded.

"I'm just asking you something. Will you promise not to flirt with Manerube again?"

"No! I deny I flirted, but if I'm wrong—I'll do it when I please," retorted Sue passionately.

Chess stepped back from her as if she had struck him. "Did you see Chane's face just before he left?" he asked.

"No, I didn't. What's it to me how he looked?"

"Nothing, I reckon," replied Chess, with a dignity Sue had never noted in him. "I'm telling you, though. Chane looked terribly surprised, terribly hurt. He hates a flirt."

Sue heard a bitter little laugh issue from her lips. "Oh, he draws the line at white color, does he? I hear he's not so righteous—or indifferent toward redskinned flirts!"

"*Sue—Melberne!*" gasped Chess.

A sudden hot anger at herself, at Chess, at Chane had possessed Sue; and this, with a sudden tearing pang of

jealousy, had given rise to a speech which left her shocked.

Certain it was that Chess turned white in the moonlight, and raised his hand as if to smite the lips which dishonored the brother he revered. Sue awaited that blow, invited it, wanted it, in the shame of the moment. But Chess's hand fell back, nerveless and shaking. Then with a wrench he drew himself up.

"I didn't know you, really," he said. "And I'll tell you one thing more. If I hadn't made that promise to Chane I'd sure get drunk tonight."

Wheeling with a bound, he plunged into the shade of the cottonwoods.

"Oh, Chess—I—I didn't mean that," cried Sue. But he did not hear. He was running over the rustling leaves. Sue went into her tent and fell on her bed.

"What have I done? Oh, I'm a miserable little beast!"

Sue rode every day, but no more on Brutus. Where heretofore she had interested herself solely in the labors of Chess and Chane on the timbered hillside, now she rode far afield and watched the stretching of the barbed-wire fence. She carried warm food to her father, and otherwise served him during this long arduous task, growing farther and farther from the camp.

These rides kept her out in the open most of the day. Around the campfire she encouraged Manerube's increasing attentions, though less and less did she give him opportunity to seek her alone. Ora had tossed her black head and said, tartly, "You can have Bent Manerube and welcome!" She had gone back to Chess, growing happier for the change. Sue sometimes found it impossible to avoid Chess's scornful eyes. He seldom came near her. How she missed the little courtesies that now no one else had time or thought for! Sue seldom saw Chane Weymer, except at a distance. Yet always her eyes roved in search of him.

She happened to be present one night at the campfire when talk waxed warm about the proposed wild-horse drive very soon now to be started. The argument started by Melberne's query, "Wal, now our trap is aboot ready, how are we goin' to start the drive?"

"We'll just spread out and drive down the valley, toward the trap," replied Manerube.

"Ahuh! So that's all?" returned Melberne with sarcasm. His eyes held a glint foreign to their natural kindly frankness. Then he addressed himself to his Mexican *vaquero.*

"Alonzo, what's your say aboot how to make this drive?"

"No savvy Señor Manerube," replied the half-breed, indicating the rider.

"What?" shouted Melberne, growing red in the face. "You mean you're not favorin' this barbed-wire trap Manerube's built?"

The *vaquero* had no more to say. His sloe-black eyes gazed steadily into Melberne's, meaningly it seemed to Sue, as if he was not the kind of a man to be made talk when he did not choose to. Melberne, taking the hint, repeated

his query, without the violence. Alonzo spread his brown little hands, sinewy like an Indian's, to indicate that the matter was too much for him and he wanted no responsibility. Sue intuitively felt that the *vaquero* was antagonistic to Manerube.

"Wal, Utah, you know this heah wild-horse game," said Melberne. "Will you tell me how you think we ought to make this drive?"

"Shore. I think we oughtn't make it atall," drawled Utah.

Melberne swore. "Jim, look heah," he said, turning to Loughbridge. "You hired most of these close-mouthed gentlemen. Suppose you make them talk."

"Don't think thet's important," replied Loughbridge. "Manerube's plan suits me to a T. An' I sure don't see why you're reflectin' on his judgment by naggin' these other riders."

"Wal, Jim, I reckon there's a lot you don't see," responded Melberne with more sarcasm. "We're deep in this deal now an' we stand to lose or gain a lot."

"We don't stand to lose nothin'," rejoined Loughbridge, "unless you make these riders so sore they'll quit us."

"Jake, please fetch Weymer heah quick," said Melberne. "Tell him it's important."

Sue gathered from this obstinacy on the part of her father that there was something preying on his mind. She slipped back into the shadow and waited. When presently she heard Weymer's well-known footstep, he was striding out of the gloom, in advance of Jake. The instant Sue saw the dark gleam of his eyes in the firelight, his forward action, guarded yet quick, the something commanding in his presence, she divined what had actuated her father in sending for him. He was a man to rely upon.

"What's wrong, Melberne?" asked Chane, as he halted in the firelight. The absence of his coat disclosed the fact that he wore a gun belt, with gun hanging low on his right side. Sue had not seen him armed before. A slight cold shudder passed over her.

"Wal, Weymer, I cain't say there's anythin' wrong, exactly," responded Melberne. "But I cain't swear it's right, either. Heah's the argument. We're aboot done fixin' this wild-horse trap I'm so keen aboot. Reckon the success or failure of this trick means a lot to me. Jim an' Manerube swear it cain't fail. Wal, now we're near ready to drive, I asked Manerube what his plan was. An' he up an' says we'll just spread out an' drive the valley. That's all!—I asked Alonzo to tell how he'd do it, an' he says he doesn't savvy Manerube. I've a hunch you know this wild-horse-wranglin' game. Now I'd shore take it as a favor if you'd tell me what you think aboot this drive we're soon to make."

Without the slightest hesitation Chane responded with a swift "Melberne, I hired out to ride, not talk."

Here Sue, in her mounting interest at this colloquy, expected her father to fall into a rage. But Melberne manifestly had himself now well in hand. Manerube shifted uneasily from one position to another.

"Shore. That was our understandin'," went on Melberne, stepping closer to Chane. "Reckon you're not duty-bound to express opinions to me, especially when they concern an enemy of yours. But on the other hand, I've befriended you. I fed you when you were starved, an' then I gave you a job. Now, as man to man, isn't it fair for you to tell me if you know anythin' for or against this wild-horse drive?"

"It'd be more than fair of me, Melberne," declared Chane significantly. "It'd be more than you or any other man could expect."

Melberne took that as a man receiving a deserved blow. Chane's retort had struck home to Sue as well.

"Ahuh! I get your hunch," returned Melberne gruffly. "Mebbe you've somethin' to say for yourself. If so, I'll listen."

"No, Melberne, I don't have to talk for myself."

"Dammit, man, self-defense is only right," retorted Melberne, losing patience. "Even the law expects that."

"Talk is cheap out here on the desert," rejoined Chane with cool disdain. "I'd never employ it in my defense. But you notice I pack a gun?"

"Ahuh! I shore didn't overlook it," said Melberne, and his tone lost impatience for menace. There was probability of imminent antagonism here. Sue held her breath.

"Melberne, any man who believes of me what you believe has got to know he can't *talk* it, unless he wants to hear my *gun* talk," declared Chane bitterly.

Thus Weymer threw down the gauntlet between them.

"Weymer," began Melberne in slow crisp utterance, "I asked you kindly to do me a favor. Now you're politely invitin' me to draw."

"Bah! Such talk from a Texan!" exclaimed Chane. "You know I've respect and liking for you. The last thing on earth I'd want would be to fight you. The trouble with you, Melberne, is you've got your bridle twisted out here in Utah. Your two-bit partner Loughbridge and your skunk foreman Manerube are to blame for that. Why don't you use your own head?"

Melberne shot a quick expectant glance at Manerube. At Chane's stinging remark his face turned livid. But he made no move to rise or speak. Then slowly Melberne shifted his gaze to Loughbridge, less expectant this time. He saw a stupid angry wonder on that worthy's features. It roused him to a laugh, gruff, not merry.

"Weymer, I reckon I feel like apologizin' to you for fetchin' you out heah," said Melberne, still with gruff, grim voice. The cold edge, however, had left it. His face, too, had lost its tightness. Then it was that Sue felt a sudden flooding warmth of relief, joy, admiration. Her father was indeed a man.

"You needn't apologize," returned Chane, visibly softening. "I'm glad you understand me."

These words from him, following her father's, so wrought upon Sue that she answered to unconsidered emotional impulse.

"Chane," she called, rising to step into the light, "I think you ought to tell Dad what he asked."

"Miss Melberne—*you* ask me to?"

"I beg you to. I don't approve of this barbed-wire trap. If you know anything against it—please tell Dad. If you can make it easier for the poor horses—please tell Dad how."

"Do you realize you are asking me to go against your friend Manerube?" went on Chane.

A hot blush burned up into Sue's neck and cheeks. How glad she was for the cloak of darkness!

"I am thinking of the wild horses, not of Mr. Manerube's success or failure—or my father's profit," returned Sue. She became aware of someone close behind her. Chess! As she half turned he took a step and encircled her with his arm.

"Chane, old boy, she's got you fig-

ured right," he spoke up, quite loudly. "Tell the boss what you told me about this wild-horse drive—what a bloody mess it'll be."

At this juncture Manerube rose to his feet, sullen-faced, and unmistakably laboring under stress.

"Melberne, am I a horse thief that I have to listen to this gab?" he demanded.

"Wal, it's a little rough on you, I'll admit," declared Melberne in perplexity. "But if your wild-horse deal is what you claim for it you needn't fear heahin' what others think about it."

Chane had turned his back upon Manerube and was regarding Chess and Sue with something akin to ironical amusement.

"Melberne, the young couple there seem to endow me with great virtue," he said, smiling. "I'm supposed to concern myself about the good fortunes of your outfit when you all despise me."

"Wal, I've tried to keep this a confab on horses, not personal character," rejoined Melberne testily.

"Melberne, you'll talk to *me* some day about personal character," retorted Chane. "Now, what do you want to know?"

"Your idea aboot drivin' wild horses into this barbed-wire trap," replied Melberne eagerly.

"It's a cruel, bloody, cowardly method that originated in Nevada. It will catch twice as many wild horses as any other kind of a trap, and kill half of them, and maim many for life. It never ought to be done at all. If you must make this drive do it in the daytime, not by moonlight as Manerube wants."

"Why so?"

"Because more horses will cut themselves to pieces at night."

"Ahuh! I reckoned that myself. Now how many horses do you figure we can trap in one drive?"

"Somewhere round two thousand, if we work fast."

"*Two thousand!*" ejaculated Melberne. "Wal, that knocks me flat. Two thousand wild horses in one drive! A whole trainload. Weymer, I could ship an' sell them all."

"Ah, there you are wrong. You might sell a trainload if you could ship them. But it's impossible. You'd be very lucky to get even a hundred head to the railroad in fit shape to ship."

"How's that?"

"Hasn't Manerube informed you how it's done?" queried Chane.

"No. He says trap them an' drive them to the railroad, an' ship them," declared Melberne.

"Sounds easy. But it's the hardest, dirtiest, and meanest job ever tackled by horsemen," continued Chane, almost wrathfully. "Say you've got your horses trapped inside the first big wire corral. All right. We rustle down there at daylight. We open the gate from the big corral to the small one, and let in a few horses. Then we pitch into work. Five good men can handle a wild horse, but seven do it quicker and better. We rope a horse, throw him, jump on him, hold him down. Then one of us takes a short rope and doubles a front foot up under his knee and binds it tight. Round his knee tight! Then we let him up and go after another. The faster we work the more time we have to drive to the railroad.

"We've got to get the bunch of horses to the railroad the same day we tied them up. So we work like dogs say from daylight to noon. Then we start off with maybe a hundred or more horses. These three-legged wild horses

take a lot of driving. They can run almost as well on three legs as on four. Some of them will get away. Others will kill themselves plunging and falling. The bound knees sometimes develop terrible swelling sores. Of course the knees have to be untied in the stockyard at the railroad. Then many horses that looked fit develop gangrene and have to be shot. You don't get paid for them. Well, after the first shipment you ride thirty miles back to camp at night, get a couple of hours sleep, and at daylight tackle the same dirty job again. I'd say three days will be your limit. The wild horses left in the corrals will cut themselves to pieces, if they don't break down the fence. Even if you had strong wooden corrals you couldn't keep so many horses long. There, Melberne, you have the barbed-wire game. It's a hell of a job."

At the conclusion of Chane's long statement there ensued a silence that testified to its effect. All eyes gravitated from Chane to Melberne. He did not appear in any hurry to speak. Sue imagined she detected a slight paling of her father's ruddy cheeks.

"Loughbridge," he said at length, "let's give up this barbed-wire drive."

"No, by damn!" shrieked Loughbridge in a frenzy. "If you don't go through with it I'll demand half the outfit money back. I ain't takin' stock in this pretty talker. Besides, we cain't ketch wild horses without scratchin' them a bit. Sure it's tough on them, an' men, too. But we're out for cash, aren't we? What do we care if we kill a hoss or two?"

Melberne threw up his hands with a gesture of impotence. Disgust distorted his visage. "Turn in, everybody," he ordered, and taking Sue's arm he led her toward her tent.

Sue felt so fatigued that she staggered along, leaning on her father. She was unnerved, too. That illuminating explanation of the barbed-wire capture of wild horses had been the last straw.

"Lass," began her father as they halted before her tent, "I'm shore glad you spoke up to Weymer. If you hadn't he'd never have told us. But he's sweet on you an' you fetched him— I'm bound to say, Sue, I'm worried. Not only by this horse deal we're in, but by this mix-up among the men. Loughbridge's a good friend an' bad enemy. This Manerube begins to look fishy to me. He doesn't ring true. Can you imagine a Texan swallerin' what Weymer called him, before us all? He's yellow, that's all. An' Weymer—he shore shot it into me. An' I deserved it. Sue, I was ashamed. Mebbe this Weymer *has* been foolin' with Indian squaws, but he's straight with men. He has an eye on him, an' he's shore dangerous. I'm worried. There's been bad blood, an' some of it'll get spilled."

"Don't worry, Dad," replied Sue coaxingly, and kissed his worn cheek. "It'll all come right. You've never been anything but fair and square. If the wild-horse drive turns out as we fear—why, you must never do it again. You got led into this. And, oh, Dad, you must keep Chane Weymer from fighting!"

"Lass, I reckon it's got beyond me," replied her father. "But shore I'll do my best. Good night."

Sue went to bed fighting desperately to silence that insistent trenchant voice within, the voice which cried out in defense of Chane Weymer. What if her father had begun to rely upon this strong-spirited rider of the old school? Fearless he undoubtedly was, one to whom men and women would instinc-

tively draw near in a moment of doubt or peril. But for Sue all his fine qualities had been poisoned at the roots. Lover of squaws! She hid her face at the shameful thought. But the still small voice bade her listen—to wait—to watch—to withhold judgment—to be tolerant—to give benefit of a doubt—to plead extenuating circumstances. A desert rider's loneliness, the need of woman's touch, kindliness of a big heart, the imperious desires of nature, the hard fierce life of that wasteland, even love—these one and all flashed through Sue's merciless mind, tried her, tested her, and before the flame of her pride and jealousy they perished. But forgiveness was one thing and love another. She could no more help loving Chane Weymer than she could forgive him. Yet as the struggle went on the balance shifted, to the slow corroding and wearing of her spirit.

Sue had been dissatisfied with all the horses she had ridden of late. Brutus had spoiled her. And on the last day before the drive, when the barbed-wire fence was completed, she went out to see it, riding another strange horse.

Away down in the valley bands of wild horses dotted the green, some moving, others grazing, ignorant of the plot against their freedom. Sue gazed upon them with pity, praying for something to scare them far away before it was too late.

In time she circled to the west, and eventually got into rough ground, which she desired to cross, so that she could climb to the valley rampart and ride the ridge top round to where it joined the mountain slope near the camp. Her horse stumbled over a shallow clay-banked wash, and, falling, threw her hard against the opposite bank.

The impact stunned Sue. She lay there, numb, for a few moments, slowly becoming conscious of pain in her right knee. After a while she recovered enough to sit up. And feeling of her injured knee she sustained such an excruciating pain that she feared a broken leg. But, presently, despite the pain, she found she could bend her knee, and that relieved her dread.

As the pangs lessened she stood up with great difficulty and looked for her horse. He did not appear to be in sight. This occasioned Sue genuine distress, and she was wringing her hands when she espied a horse and rider coming down the trail she had intended to climb. Immensely relieved, Sue untied her scarf and waved it. And at that instant Sue recognized Brutus, then his rider.

"Chane Weymer!" gasped Sue, with swift change of emotion. "That it'd—have to be he! Of all the miserable luck!"

Clouds of dust puffed from under the great horse as he leaped the washes. Before Sue had time to think of composure he plowed the clay and sand before her, sliding to a halt as the rider threw himself off.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, his searching eyes sweeping her from disheveled head to dusty boots.

To find herself tingling to the point of dwarfing her pain roused in Sue a very devil of perverseness.

"There's nothing wrong with *me*," replied Sue flippantly. "I'm admiring the scenery."

"You've been crying," he said, coming close to her. "You've had a fall. Are you hurt?"

"Only my vanity," she said.

He looked doubtfully at her and inquired about her horse.

"He's gone, and I hope I never see him again."

"Well, it's good you weren't hurt," he went on severely. "But you shouldn't ride out alone this way. Perhaps you meant to meet Manerube!"

"That's none of your business," she retorted, with a tilt of her chin. "But I didn't intend to meet him. I'd rather, though, it'd been he—than you."

"You can ride Brutus," he said, ignoring her slighting speech. "I'll shorten the stirrups. Miss Melberne, I shall tell your father this is dead wrong of you—riding far from camp this way."

"I don't care what you tell. But ride back to camp. Send someone with a—a wagon."

She saw the brown flash out of his face, and as he whirled from beside Brutus she could not meet his piercing eyes.

"You are hurt!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. My knee. It hurts terribly. It's getting stiff. I—I can't ride."

"I'll carry you," he said.

"No—no. Ride back to camp. Send someone with the wagon. Don't scare Dad."

"But it'll be dark long before the wagon can get here. In fact, nothing on wheels could come within a mile of this place."

"Oh, what shall I do?" cried Sue.

"I am afraid you must submit to the humiliating necessity of my carrying you," he replied, with that slight scorn again in his grave voice.

"I'll not let you," declared Sue hotly.

"Miss Melberne, I certainly don't want to carry you. But the afternoon is far gone. Your folks will be worried. I can't let you stay here alone. There's no other way."

"I—I don't care," cried Sue. "I'll—I'll die before I let you—carry me."

"Well, what a sweet disposition you have!" he declared. "I wouldn't have guessed it."

Suddenly he placed a hand under each of her arms, and lifted her bodily, with a sweep, and set her feet gently down on the edge of the wash. It was done so adroitly and with such strength that Sue could only stare her amazement and resentment. He returned the resentment fourfold.

"I'm not a rattlesnake or a—a Mormon," he shot down at her. "You stand still. If you make a fuss you're going to hurt yourself. So don't blame me."

Sue did not leave the spot where he had set her down, for the very good reason that her leg pained so badly she did not dare move it. Chane vaulted upon Brutus and rode him down into the wash and close to where Sue stood.

"I'll have to hold you free of the pommel," he said, as he leaned out of the saddle and reached for her. "I hope you show some sense. If you act the spoiled baby it'll hurt all the more."

Sue stood like a statue, with her head bent. But she could see his arms, one of which he slipped round her waist, and the other under her knees. Gently as he lifted her, the pressure and contact made her wince. Then she found herself resting in his arms, her head on his shoulder.

"Brutus, old boy, you can step out light," he said to the horse. "We've got rather a precious burden."

Sue closed her eyes, not so much from pain as from the stunning reality of her position. She felt him shift the hold of his right arm, so that it no longer came in contact with her injured knee. After that she began to

feel easier. She was in a kind of swing, the light embrace of his arms, and felt only slightly the jar of the horse as he walked. She lay in his arms—Chane Weymer's arms—and could not help herself. Then flashed the monstrous truth. The secret emotion she despised burned the truth over all her palpitating body, through veins of fire. It sent messages along her throbbing nerves. She lay in his arms glad, shamelessly glad, despicably glad. Vain to lie to herself! She had changed to a woman and had come to love him more every day. Her love had battened on her bitter, savage, perverse spirit, and now it mocked her.

Every time she swayed gently with the movement of the horse her cheek rolled against Chane's shoulder. She felt the vibration of muscle, the heat of blood. And her cheek flamed under the contact. She was undone. All the torments she had endured were as nothing to this storm that assailed her —deadly sweet, unconquerable, terrible, the staggering deeps of her betraying heart that had drowned her pride.

Chapter Nine

Barbed-Wire Drive

THE first glimmer of dawn was lightening the east when Chane Weymer, with Chess and Alonzo, rode away from camp, down into the dark melancholy void of Stark Valley, to begin their part in Melberne's great wild-horse drive.

"Chane, I'll bet we owe it to Manerube that we got the hardest job today," complained Chess.

"I reckon. But what difference does it make?" returned Chane. "Believe I'd rather have the wide level valley to cover than that rough ground to the west. Anyway, the harder it is the better I'll like it, till we get the bloody business over."

"You think one drive will be enough for the boss, huh?" inquired Chess.

"Reckon I know it. Melberne's a white man. If he'd known about this barbed-wire game he'd never have gotten so far along."

"But if it's a success? The boss's keen to make money."

"If he made ten thousand dollars on this drive he'd never tackle another. I'm gambling on his daughter. She'd keep him from it."

"I'm not so sure of Sue lately," returned Chess thoughtfully. "One day she's this way and the next day that."

"Horses, señor," said Alonzo, his lean hand pointing.

"Yes, there's the first bunch," returned Chane, peering through the opaque dawn. "Reckon they'll run down valley for a while anyhow."

They trotted their horses on, keeping to the edge of the oval valley. The black mountain range loomed above, tipped with paling stars. It was a frosty morning, nipping cold, and the iron-shod hoofs rang like silver bells on the stones.

As the riders rode on and down into the valley the dim gloom gave place to an opaque veil of gray, and that lightened with the gray of the eastern sky. A faint rosy glow appeared, gradually deepening. Dawn succeeded to day. The stark valley stretched clear, cold, steely from range to rampart, and far to the upflung level of Wild Horse Mesa. Droves of horses dotted the frosty floor.

"Now!" called Chane. "Spread out

now, boys, and begin the drive. Keep about a mile apart. Wave and yell and shoot as you drive. When a bunch breaks to run between us—ride!"

Chane was left alone. While waiting for his comrades to reach their stands he bent keen roving eyes on the valley below. Many bands of wild horses were in sight. Chane could see the dim shadow of ridges, far down, where the two flanges of the wire fence joined the corrals. They appeared ten miles distant, perhaps more. All of Melberne's force of riders were in the field, stretched across the valley; and the work of each and every one was to ride to and fro, and always down, driving the wild horses before them. As this drive progressed down the valley, toward and into the trap, the lines of riders would converge, at last meeting at the apex of the long triangle of barbed wire.

"Devilish trick!" muttered Chane grimly. "Wish I'd shot Manerube that day I caught him running off with Sosie."

The thought voiced so violently had flashed before through his mind, always to be subdued and cast aside. Yet he could not prevent its recurrence. As time went by he divined more and more that there was something wrong in regard to his status in the Melberne outfit. No other than Manerube could be accountable. Never before in any camp had there hovered a shadow over him. As he milled it over in his mind he felt that for Chess's sake he did not want to pry into the matter. What did he care for the gossip of a man like Manerube? This individual would soon enough hang himself. But the girl in the case had caused the situation to grow poignant.

Two terrible things had happened, Chane confessed—at first sight he had fallen in love with Sue Melberne, and secondly he had divined she had accepted some base estimate of him.

"Reckon I think of nothing but her," he soliloquized, aghast at the fact. "Well, it's only one more trouble. Maybe I'll be the better for it. But she'll never know. I'll hang on with this outfit till she learns what Manerube is. Reckon that won't be long."

The time came when Chane saw Chess lined up with him a couple of miles distant, and Alonzo the same distance farther on. Likewise to the west toward camp Chane made out riders stationed far apart. Presently they began to move, as if by spoken order, and he turned his horse to the south.

Far below Chane espied wild horses. A scattered drove began to walk and trot half a mile in front of Chess, and a large number had headed away from Alonzo. The riders west of Chane would have considerable ground to cover before coming upon any wild horses.

Brutus did not want to go slow. He sensed a race with his wild brothers, and though he was good-natured in obeying Chane's word or touch, he repeatedly manifested his spirit.

Chane kept his eye roving from west to east, to see how soon the action would begin. In perhaps a quarter of an hour, when he had covered a couple of miles, he saw Alonzo riding to head off a band of light-colored horses that were making a break. Chane halted Brutus and watched, and he espied Chess doing the same thing. Chane's opinion was that Chess would have to ride hard to help turn this band, and that he ought to be getting started pretty quickly. It turned out, however, that Chess's inaction must have been due to a better perspective than Chane's,

for he sat his horse watching, while Alonzo, riding like an Indian, intercepted the leaders of the band and turned them back down the valley.

Then Chane resumed his slow advance. He could tell when the leader of a band first lifted a wild head and espied him coming. Erect, motionless, he stood for a moment, then he ran toward his band, excited them, turned to look again, pranced and cavorted, and then drove them before him for a distance, only to halt and turn. Presently several hundred wild horses, in a dozen or more different bands, were moving to and fro across the valley before Chane, gradually working south.

Chane rode on, and as he advanced the interest of this drive began to increase. It was impossible to look in every direction at once, and as the bands of horses were now moving forward and back, to and fro, some trotting, others running, Chane was hard put to it to see everything. Dust clouds began to dot the green floor of the valley.

Brutus whistled a blast and jerked under the saddle. Chane turned to see a string of wild horses racing for the wide open between his and Chess's position. At that moment Chess was making fast time in the opposite direction to head off another bunch.

At word and touch Brutus dashed into action. A short swift spurt of a quarter of a mile brought him so far in front of the escaping wild horses that they began to swerve. The leader, a lean white mustang, spotted black, wilder than a deer, let out a piercing blast of anger and fear. His mane and tail streamed in the wind. As he ran parallel with Brutus his followers, perhaps more fearful, swerved more to the right, and in half a mile there was considerable distance between them. Chane saw with great pride that Brutus, even carrying his weight, was faster than this spotted mustang. But then Brutus had twice the stride. Chane soon turned this leader toward the others, and presently they were running south as fast as they could go.

Whereupon Chane reined in the eager Brutus and trotted across the ground he had covered, so to regain as equal a position as possible between Chess on the east and the nearest rider on the west. A general survey of the valley straight across in both directions convinced Chane that it would have taken twice the number of riders to drive all these wild horses down into the apex of the barbed-wire fence. While Chane's back had been turned a small band had raced across his regular position and were now sweeping north in close formation, dark bays and blacks, with their manes and tails tossing. How beautifully they ran! Chane was glad that they had gotten by him.

Five thousand wild horses were in motion along a belt of valley three miles deep and perhaps three times as long. Farther than this Chane could not see clearly enough to make estimates. They appeared to be running in every direction, though the general trend was south.

Suddenly Chane espied a big bay, at the front of a straggling bunch of mustangs, headed straight for him. The leader was as large as Brutus and he was a fierce-looking brute. Brutus manifestly wanted both to run and to fight, and plunged to meet this huge bay. Chane had been run down by wild horses more than once, and he did not intend to take chances of hurting Brutus. When the space narrowed to less

than a hundred yards and the bay kept sweeping on straight as an arrow, Chane resorted to his gun to scare this gaunt leader. At the first shot the bay leaped into the air, seeming to turn in the action, and when he alighted on his feet his ugly head was pointed west. The shot, likewise, stampeded the band, and scattering to both sides they passed at breakneck speed.

Chane had another half hour of leisurely working to and fro across his beat before the strenuous riding he anticipated became necessary. He kept watch on Chess and was amused at that boy's undoubted troubles. Alonzo, however, had the widest stretch of valley, and by far the largest number of horses to contend with. Finally Chane saw a huge moving patch of black, many acres in extent, sweeping down upon the Mexican's position. There must have been a thousand wild horses in that drove. Chane did not expect the Mexican to turn back that stampede. The white puffs of Alonzo's gun showed against the green. Then as the horses swept on in a resistless tide Chane saw how Alonzo had to run for his life. He disappeared behind the moving level mass and showed no more.

That incident was the last Chane had time to watch. Presently he had to get into the race in earnest.

As Chane raced to and fro, firing his gun to frighten the horses that trooped toward him, the drive grew to be a rout toward the notch of the fence. Chane could not see it, but he appreciated the fact that it was now not many miles distant. Everywhere the valley floor appeared colorful and active with twinkling legs, bobbing heads, flying manes and tails. The air grew thick with dust, so that in some places a clear view could not be obtained. An intermittent trampling roar of hoofs mostly drowned the gun-shots of the riders. From time to time Chane heard faint shots, like spats, on both sides of him. But he never saw a rider.

Brutus grew hot and wet, and a dusty lather collected on his chest and neck. Bands of horses grew numerous and thick, making Chane's task more difficult and dangerous. He might have turned more horses back if he had been more free with the use of his gun, but Chane had a grim excuse for saving ammunition. He knew presently it would be merciful to shoot with deadly intent.

The drive approached the flanges of the fence. Thousands of wild horses were being driven into a triangular space of comparatively small size. The roar of hoofs, the whistling and snorting, became incessant. A gray dusty haze made fast riding perilous. Chane had to peer through the gloom to protect Brutus.

At length Chane found himself in a melee of running, plunging, maddened wild horses, criss-crossing the space in every direction. There came to be as many horses behind him as in front or on either side. They streaked by like specters. Then, despite, dust-clogged nostrils, Chane caught the odor of blood. From this he concluded that he had reached the vicinity of the wire fence.

Wheeling Brutus and slowing to a trot, Chane headed to the left, away from the increasingly thickening streams of horses. As far as he could tell, the riders had driven thousands of horses down into the notch of the trap. Pandemonium certainly reigned down in that pall of dust. Soon Chane rode out into clearer atmosphere where he could see, and found that his deduc-

tions were not far short of the mark. All the riders evidently had worked down into the triangle he had left. Still wild horses were numerous, running both ways. They were mad with terror.

Chane at last came upon the left flange of the fence. It presented a gruesome spectacle, that part of it which was still standing. Bits of flesh and tufts of hair showed on the sagging wires, and many places red with blood. The top wire was gone entirely; sections of the fence had been laid flat or carried out of sight; posts were broken and leaning. Farther east along this flange the fence was intact, and here Chane began to encounter crippled and dying horses. Promptly he shot them. Brutus grew exceedingly nervous.

Most of these wounded horses had been cut across the chest, great deep gaps from which the blood poured. It sickened Chane, yet relentlessly he rode on, until no more horses appeared along that flange of the fence. Upon riding back he saw the dust lifting, and through the cloud a blood-red westering sun shone with weird, sinister effect. Strings of horses were running north and west, away from that fatal notch. In the huge corral a dark mass of horses, acres in area, moved in close contact; and the whistling, snorting, squealing din was terrific.

Chane heard a spatting of gunshots, out along the western flange of the fence, and as he neared the center of the notch he espied Utah riding in, manifestly from the merciful task of ending the misery of crippled mustangs. Chane's heart was heavy and sore and there had risen in him a temper that boded ill.

At length he reached the spot where Melberne and his riders formed a singular group. Some were still sitting their wet, heaving horses; Chess hunched on the ground with his face in his hands; Alonzo was so pasted with froth from his horse as to be unrecognizable. Utah came riding up, his gun in his hand, a black sternness on his lean face. Loughbridge was jabbering like a wild man:

"Seventeen hundred! More mebbe! Near two thousand horses trapped! We've struck a gold mine!"

Chane last bent a curious look upon Melberne. This was where the Texan must be judged.

"Well, Melberne, what do you think of your barbed-wire drive?" demanded Chane.

Melberne turned to disclose a gray face and gleaming eyes. He seemed another man. Savagely he cursed, and gave Chane no intelligible reply. But his profanity was expressive enough. It took the edge off Chane's bitterness, as he replied:

"Man, the worst is yet to come."

Chapter Ten

Three-Legged Horses

DUSK found the weary riders approaching camp. Chane led the cavalcade. The flickering campfire shone like a pin point through the gathering darkness, growing larger and brighter as he rode on. At last Chane, announced by a shrill neigh from Brutus, entered the circle of firelight.

Sue Melberne limped out of the shadow. She was bareheaded and her eyes seemed unnaturally large and dark in

her pale face.

"Tell me—was it successful—the drive?" she asked intensely.

"Successful? Yes, if you mean a big bunch of horses captured."

"I don't mean numbers. Were they caught without crippling and torturing many?"

"No. I'm sorry to say it was the bloodiest mess I ever saw. I wouldn't tell you how many horses I shot—how they looked. We can never tell the number that broke through the barbed wire—to die lingering deaths down in the desert."

"Oh! I feared that!"

Naturally, after supper, the talk waged vigorously, and opinions, deductions, forecasts were as many and varied as the personalities of the riders. Loughbridge was already raking in big profits from the drive. Manerube had taken upon himself the honors of a hero, and swaggered before the listening women. Chess sat hollow-eyed and raging, his voice lifted high. Melberne had not spoken a word.

Presently Manerube detached himself from the half-circle of men on one side of the campfire and crossed to where the women sat listening. Ora obviously gave him the cold shoulder. Sue, however, began to question him eagerly.

"You women go to bed," spoke up Melberne gruffly.

His wife obediently left the group, but Mrs. Loughbridge and Ora paid no attention to him, and if Sue heard she gave no sign. She stood looking up at Manerube with an interest which could very easily be misunderstood.

"Sue, I told you to go to bed," called Melberne sharply.

"But I'm not sleepy," protested Sue. "I want to hear all about—"

"Go to bed!" interrupted her father, and he swore at her.

"Why—Dad!" faltered Sue.

"You seem to take it for granted there's only one man heah," replied Melberne sarcastically. "The rest of us were aboot when it happened."

Sue's pale face flamed, and turning away without another word she limped into the shadow.

Chane felt sorry for her, but the significance of the incident made his heart beat quickly. The situation grew more to his liking. Sooner or later he would find himself vindicated.

"Loughbridge, listen heah," said Melberne deliberately. "You remember our deal. I lent you the money for this outfit an' you were to pay me half out of your share of the proceeds of our wild-horse huntin'."

"Yes, I reckon thet was the deal."

"Wal, on condition I boss this outfit I'll consider your debt paid right heah. How about it?"

"Suits me fine, Mel," returned Loughbridge with his greedy smile.

"Ahuh! All right, it's settled," went on Melberne, and then turned to Manerube. "You said we'd divide the outfit into two squads for this ropin' an' hawg-tyin' stunt tomorrow. Now I'm tellin' you to pick your men."

"All I need is some help," said Manerube. "I'll do the roping and tying. My men will be Loughbridge, Miller, Alonzo, and Utah."

"Nope, you're wrong Mister Manerube," retorted Utah coolly. "I wouldn't be on your side."

"Utah, you'll take orders," said Melberne testily.

"Shore, but not from him. An' if you say for me to go on his side, I quit."

"Manerube, pick another man."

"Bonny," said Manerube shortly.

"Wal, that leaves me, Utah, Captain Bunk, an' the Weymers. Jake can stay in camp," said Melberne reflectively. After a moment he addressed Chane. "I reckon you ought to take charge of our squad?"

"If you think so I'll do it," replied Chane slowly.

"I'm thankin' you," said Melberne. "Now, men, you'd better turn in, as I'll call you aboot three o'clock."

Whereupon he left the fire. Chane followed him. Melberne did not walk like a man with hopeful prospects. Chane caught up with him and strode beside him into the grove.

"Melberne," said Chane. "I know how you feel. This drive looks bad. It *is* bad. And I told you, the worst is yet to come. But I reckoned you'd put too much store on the success of catching large numbers of wild horses for the market. You've just followed wrong hunches. This deal will likely lose you money. It'll do worse than that. It'll hurt you, because you're a man with human feelings. But it's nothing to discourage you as to the future. You'll do well in Utah. The country has great possibilities that men such as you will develop. So don't worry. This barbed-wire mess will be over in a few days. You'll soon get things straight."

"Say, Weymer, are you giving me a good hunch?" inquired Melberne.

"Hardly. I see you're a little down tonight, and I just wanted you to know I understood."

"Ahuh! Wal, mebbe you do," responded Melberne heavily, and went his way under the cottonwoods.

Chane's squad of five rode out of camp into the dark hour before dawn while Manerube's men were getting ready. The air was cold, the ground gray with frost, the sky steely blue lighted by white stars.

Chane led at a brisk lope, and when the first streaks of morning brightened the east he drew rein before the huge trap corrals. A whistling and trampling roar attested to the fact that the wild horses had not broken the fence.

"We'll wait for the other gang," said Chane. "Reckon we'd better throw off our saddles. It'll be noon before we get ready to ride."

The men unsaddled, haltered their horses, uncoiled and recoiled their lassoes, and lastly cut the short lengths of soft rope designated as necessary by Chane. When this was done the other squad rode up.

"You fellers get a hustle on," said Melberne.

"No rush," replied Manerube. "Are any of you fellows betting we don't tie up two horses to your one?"

"Manerube, this is a gambling matter for me, but not for you," retorted Melberne significantly.

"Now, boys," said Chane, "crawl under the wires. We'll go round to the empty corral."

Two corrals had been constructed, one a quarter of a mile in diameter, which now contained the seventeen hundred wild horses, the other smaller in size, and with a fifty-foot gate of poles and wires.

"Boys, here's our system," said Chane, when his men gathered round

him inside the empty corral. "We'll open the gate and let in ten or a dozen or twenty horses. Keep out of their road. Some wild horses are bad. I'll do the roping. When I throw a horse you all make a dive to hold him down. Melberne, you're the heaviest. You sit on his head. Chess, you hold one front foot while I tie up the other. Utah, you know the game. I'm asking you to look out for Cap till he gets the hang of it."

Manerube's squad now appeared, and all approached the wide gate. When it had been released at the fastening it was swung open wide. Horses were thick in the gray obscurity of the larger corral, but evidently the dim light did not prevent them from seeing well. Soon a wild leader shot through like an arrow from a bow, to be followed by several passing swift as flashes, and then by a string of them, whistling and plunging.

"Enough. Shut the gate!" yelled Chane. They were just in time to stop a stampede. "Now follow me round." Chane broke into a run toward the dim shapes of the wild horses. He swung his lasso as he ran.

"Chase them past me," he yelled. "Chess, you stick by me to lend a hand. If a horse gets the jerk on me instead of me getting it on him, I'm liable to be yanked out of my boots."

A group of wild horses broke up and scattered, running everywhere. Chane ran forward, to one side, swinging a wide loop round his head. In the dim gray he had to guess at distance. But this roping was as much a feeling with Chane as an action. Several horses raced past. At the fourth, a lean wild bay, clearly outlined against the gray, Chane cast his lasso. He did not need to see the horse run into the loop. Bracing himself, Chane gave a sudden powerful jerk just as the noose went taut round the forelegs of this horse. It was in the middle of his leap, and he went down heavily.

"Quick!" yelled Chane to his comrades as hand over hand he closed in on his quarry. Melberne plunged down on the head of the prostrate horse. Utah was almost as quick at his flanks. Captain Bunk fell on the middle of the horse. "Good! Hold hard," shouted Chane. "I got both his legs."

Chane loosened the noose and slipped it off one leg, which he drew back from the other. "Grab that leg, Chess. Hang on."

The groaning, quivering horse lay helpless. He could kick with his two free legs, but to no purpose. Chane hauled the foreleg back, then let go his rope to grasp the leg in his hands. Chess, by dint of strength and weight was holding down the other leg. Chane pulled one of the short lengths of soft rope from the bundle hanging in his belt. He had to expend considerable force to draw the leg up, bending it back. The horse squealed his fury and terror. Then Chane's swift hard hands bound that bent leg above the knee. It gave the leg an appearance of having been cut off. The foreleg and hoof were tied fast against the inside of the upper part of the leg. Chane slipped off the noose of his lasso, and jumped up.

"Get away and let him up," ordered Chane. All the men leaped aside with alacrity.

The wild horse got up as nimbly as if he had still the use of four legs. He snorted his wild judgment of this indignity. His first move was a quick plunge, which took him to his knees. But he bounded up and away with amazing action and balance. His speed, however, had been limited to half.

Chane heard the rival squad yelling and squabbling over a horse they had down. The gray gloom was lifting. Chane coiled his lasso, spread the loop to his satisfaction, and ran to intercept another passing horse. Thus the strenuous day began.

Chane tied up fifty-six horses before he was compelled to ask Melberne for a little rest.

"My–Gawd!" panted Melberne, as he flopped down against a fence post. "I'm daid–on my feet. Weymer–you're shore–a cyclone–for work."

The sun shone bright and hot. All of Chane's squad were as wet as if they had fallen into a pond. Melberne's face ran with dirty streaks of black sweat; his heavy chest heaved with his panting breaths. Chess was the least exhausted of the squad, as his labors had been least. Captain Bunk was utterly played out for the moment.

"Blast me!" he gasped. "I could–drink–the ocean–dry."

They passed the water bag from one to another. Then Melberne, beginning to recover somewhat, began to take active interest in the operations of Manerube's squad. On the moment they were dragging a mustang down.

"Weymer, that man cain't throw a horse," declared Melberne testily.

"Wal, Boss, how long are you goin' to be findin' out he cain't throw anythin' but a bluff?" drawled Utah.

Manerube, with the help of Bonny and Miller, downed the mustang. Loughbridge tried to hold down its head, but did not succeed until Alonzo came to his assistance. They were a considerable time tying the knee.

"How many horses have they tied?" inquired Melberne, shifting his gaze to the far side of the corral.

"Sixteen or seventeen at most," replied Chane.

Melberne cursed his amazement and disgust. "Weymer, let's go over an' watch them."

"Not me. You're boss of the outfit. You go," replied Chane.

Whereupon Melberne got up and strode toward the other squad. Perhaps his approach caused them to speed up in action, but it did not add to their efficiency.

Chane had needed only one glance to see that Manerube was only ordinary in the use of a lasso. He cast his noose to circle the neck, and this hold, when accomplished, was not a good one for the throwing of a horse. It took three men to haul the horse over on his side, and then he was half choked to death. As the horse staggered up Chane saw that the job of tying had not been cleverly done, and certainly not as humanely as it was possible to do. Manifestly Melberne saw this, for he pointed at the flopping shortened leg as the horse hobbled away.

The only unbound horse left in the corral now was a chestnut sorrel. He was a beauty, big, smooth, graceful, and wild as a hawk. Alonzo and Miller, both clever at herding horses, finally drove him within reach of Manerube's rope. But Manerube missed, and the lasso, crackling on the head of the stallion, scared him so that he seemed to have wings. In half a dozen magnificent bounds he got stretched out. Then headed for the fence he gave such exhibition of speed that some of the riders voiced their feelings.

"Boys–he's going to jump the fence," declared Chane excitedly.

"He's got a bone in his teeth," called out the sailor admiringly.

The sorrel meant freedom or death.

His action showed more than mere brute wildness of terror. He had less fear of that terrible barbed fence than of the man enemies with their ropes. Like a greyhound he rose to the leap, having the foresight to leave the ground far enough from the fence to allow for the height. Up he shot, a beautiful wild sight, his head level and pointed, his mane streaming back. His forehoofs cleared the top wire, but his hind ones caught it. With a ringing twang the wire snapped. The stallion fell on head and shoulder, rolled over, and regaining his feet, he raced away, evidently none the worse for the accident.

Chane let out a short exultant shout. Melberne, who had come back, gave sharp orders for the men to let in more horses from the big corral.

"Manerube hasn't the knack," he declared, fuming.

"Who said he had?" retorted Chane.

"He did."

"Well, if you were damn fool enough to believe him, take your medicine," rejoined Chane grimly.

Then, as another band of snorting, shrieking wild horses thundered from the big corral both Chane and Melberne had to take to the fence to save their lives. The frightened beasts trooped by; the men closed the gate and hurried up.

"Come on, you wranglers," shouted Chane. "See if you can stay with me." He ran out into the corral, swinging his lasso.

The glaring sun stood straight overhead and dusty heat veils rose from the trodden floor of the corral.

"Sixty-eight," said Chane huskily, as with cramped and stinging hands he slipped his noose from the leg of the last horse tied. "Shall we—make it—sixty-nine?"

"I—pass," whispered Utah.

Chane and Utah had been working alone for some time. Chess had given out, then Melberne had succumbed, and finally Captain Bunk, after a wonderful exhibition of endurance, had fallen in his tracks. Manerube's squad had quit an hour ago.

Approaching the spot where Melberne sat against the fence, Chane slowly drew in his dragging lasso.

"Melberne—we made it—sixty-eight. And that—finished Utah."

"Damn you, Weymer!" declared Melberne.

Chane could only stare a query as to the reason he was being damned, when he had worked like a galley slave for eight hours.

"Sixty-eight an' fifty-six make one hundred twenty-four," said Melberne. "That with the forty-nine Manerube has accounted for sums up one hundred seventy-three."

"For ten men—some of them—green hands—that's a mighty—good showing," panted Chane as he wearily seated himself and began to wipe his dripping face.

"Hell!" ejaculated Melberne, throwing up his hands.

"Sure. I told you—it'd be hell," replied Chane.

"I don't mean what you mean," grunted Melberne.

"Well—Boss, the worst—is yet to come," replied Chane with as much of maliciousness as he could muster.

"Ahuh! Reckon you said that before. Weymer, have you heard me squeal?"

"No, Melberne," returned Chane quietly. "I've only respect—for you."

"Wal, let's eat an' make the drive to the railroad. Chess, fetch the saddle-

bags of grub, an' call the men over."

All the riders, except two, were mounted and ranged on each side of the gate, which, being opened by the riders on foot, left an avenue of apparent escape to the disabled wild horses. They did not need to be driven out.

Chane, closing the gate and leaping astride Brutus, was the last rider to get into action. A long line of bobbing horses stretched before him across the valley, and on each side rode the riders. These three-legged wild horses would take a good deal of driving. Brutus had to run to keep up with them. It was necessary, therefore, to keep them at as uniform a gait as was possible, for if some traveled fast and others slow the line would spread so wide that ten riders could not prevent escape of many. Drives like these were nightmares to Chane. He had never taken one that was not a race. Indeed, the crippled wild horses were racing for freedom. But if any did escape it was only to meet a lingering death.

Toward the middle of the afternoon what was left of Melberne's first assignment of captured wild horses was driven into the corrals at Wund, a hamlet at the terminus of the railroad. Here help was available. Melberne's drove were on the verge of collapse. Thirty-seven had been lost or killed on the drive in; some were in condition necessitating prompt shooting; others had great raw sores already fly-blown; many had legs swollen to twice their original size.

The ropes that bound the bent forelegs had at once to be removed. This meant roping and throwing the horses, and holding them down until the bonds could be cut. The suffering of these wild horses was something that worked more deeply upon Chane's emotions than any cruelty to beasts had ever done before.

Out of one hundred and seventy-three bound at Stark Valley a total of one hundred and twenty were available for shipping, from which Melberne received a little more than fifteen hundred dollars.

"Wal, that's twice what my outfit cost me," he muttered.

Chane, who heard this remark, turned it over in his mind, pondering at its significance. From Melberne's tone he gathered that it would have been pleasure to throw the money into the sage. Melberne was no longer his genial self, and showed scant courtesy to his former partner, Loughbridge, who evidently regretted his hasty relinquishing of joint authority in the deal.

During supper, which was eaten in a tavern kept for cattlemen and horse wranglers, much talk was indulged in regarding the remainder of the captured wild horses back in Stark Valley. Melberne took no part in it. Manerube, backed by Loughbridge, was loudly in favor of taking a large force of men to help tie up the rest of the wild horses.

"I was handicapped," protested Manerube. "I had to do it all alone. Alonzo lay down on the job. Same with Miller. If I had men, now—"

"Y-y-y-y-you—you—" stuttered the accused rider fiercely.

"Manerube," interrupted Melberne coldly, "I reckon Miller is tryin' to call you a liar."

"Is that so?" shouted Manerube, rising from the table and glaring at the little rider. "If you can't talk, make signs, you stuttering idiot. Do you call me a liar?"

Miller had never been an aggressive fellow, and now, dominated perhaps by

Manerube's swaggering assurance before all the men, he did not attempt an answer. He dropped his head and resumed eating his supper. Chane observed that Miller was not the only one who bent his face over his place. Melberne and Utah both seemed absorbed in the food before them, which on the moment they were not eating. Again Chane sensed the passing of a crisis to which Manerube was as ignorant as if he were deaf and blind.

Chapter Eleven

Whip and Gun

SUE MELBERNE rode down the ridge over the ground that the wild horses had just covered. In the distance she could see a dark patch on the valley floor and knew it to be the captured wild horses trapped in the corral. The sight sent a little quiver over her and spurred her to ride at a lope.

This ride of Sue's was not for pleasure. She did not watch the distant purple ranges, or gaze in rapture at the wonderful walls of Wild Horse Mesa. She was bent on the most independent and reckless deed of her life. She felt driven. The pangs of a consuming and increasing love had played havoc with Sue's temper. The days since her injury had been dark ones.

At last the wide trail made by the mustangs led to the level of the valley and on to the high barricade of posts and barbed wire. She reached the first corral. It was the smaller one and empty. Sue got off her horse and, by tugging hard, opened the gate to its limit. Across this corral she saw another and larger gate. Behind it moved a mass of pounding, snorting, whistling mustangs. Dust rose in a pall over them. The sun poured down hot. How thirsty these poor creatures must be!

Owing to her stiff knee, Sue preferred to walk across the intervening corral, so she led her horse, and every step of the way felt a rising tumult in her breast. Had she a right to defeat her father's labors? When she reached the far side of the corral fear and conscience were in conflict with her love of wild horses. She was panting for breath. Then her pony neighed shrilly. From the huge corral came a trampling roar. The dust flew up in sheets.

She gazed at the wide gate.

"Oh, can I open it? I *will!*" she cried.

Going close to the barbed-wire fence, she peered through at the horses. Her approach had caused them to move away some rods back from the fence. All heads were pointed toward her. Lean, wild, beautiful heads! She saw hundreds of dark, fierce, terrible eyes, it seemed, fixed accusingly upon her. What an enormous drove of horses! There must be hundreds, thousands. Sue trembled under the weight of her emotions. Impossible to draw back!

Then she became aware of an incessant buzzing. Flies! A swarm of flies buzzed around and over her. Flies as thick as bees—a black cloud of them—horseflies, the abominable pests that made life miserable for all horseflesh. Next Sue's sharp eyes caught sight of red cuts and scratches on the legs and breasts of the horses. Thus she had a second actual sight of the work of the barbed wire. Bleeding sores and horseflies! There could be no more horrible combination, to one who loved horses.

It took all Sue's strength to unwind the wires that held the gate shut. The

gate itself she could not budge. Taking her rope from the saddle, she tied one end to the gate, and then pondered whether or not she should ride the horse while he pulled open the gate, or walk and lead him. She decided the latter would be safer, even though she risked losing her horse. So she wound the other end of the rope around the pommel, and urged the horse. He pulled the gate open wide. Hurriedly Sue untied the rope, fearfully listening for the expected stampede. But she had plenty of time to lead her horse away from the gate.

The foremost wild horses of that dense mass saw the break in the fence which had hemmed them in. They were fascinated. A piercing blast from a stallion seemed signal for a whistling, snorting chorus. Next came a restless pound of hoofs. A leader appeared—a stallion, the wildest creature Sue had ever beheld, black as coal, instinct with fire. He trotted warily forward, neared the gate, gazed with fierce bloodshot eyes. Then he bolted. Like a black flash he passed through the opening. A white horse, a bay, a buckskin leaped to follow and, fleet as their leader, sped out to freedom.

"Run! Oh, run!" screamed Sue.

The restless pound stirred, quickened, closed into a roar of trampling hoofs, smiting the hard ground as one horse. The gate emitted a stream of moving horses, heads up, manes and tails tossing. Sue saw the stream lengthen and widen across the corral until it connected both gates. Then dust obscured clear vision. The ground shook under her feet. The din was terrific. It swelled until she could not hear more.

Sue found herself sagging against a post, holding the halter of her horse, weak from tumultuous emotions. Far out on the valley floor a yellow mantle moved toward the west, and with it a wonderful diminishing sound. Sue sank down on the ground.

"Gone! Free! Oh, Heaven, what have I done?" she gasped.

It dawned on her then, the wrong she had done her father in being true to something as deep and wild in her as the instinct the horses had showed—for love of life and freedom. For a long time Sue sat there, overcome by the consciousness of the accomplished deed.

Twilight had fallen when Sue rode into the eastern end of the cottonwood grove and on to the encampment. She unsaddled and freed her horse, and reached the security of her tent without being seen. There she fell upon her bed in a state of exhaustion and agitation unparalleled in her experience.

Sue fell asleep, and in the morning she lay for hours, it seemed, before she rose. What would this day bring forth? When she went out she was politely informed by Mrs. Loughbridge that she could get her own breakfast. This eminently pleased Sue, for she wanted to be round the campfire, yet with some task to cloak her intense curiosity. While she was eating, the different members of Melberne's outfit rode singly and in groups into camp. Sight of them roused Sue's audacity. She had outwitted them. Yet, presently, when her father rode up, Sue could not find it in her to face him.

"Wal, lass, is it breakfast or lunch?" he asked cheerfully.

"Why, Dad—back so soon?" she replied, raising her eyes. "I—I thought you were to drive horses to Wund today."

"Haw! Haw! 'Were' is good. Yes, I were! But, Sue, the horses broke out of the corral gates or somebody let them out. They're gone! An' the only hide an' hair of 'em is left on the barbed wire."

"*Oh!*" cried Sue.

Her father bent down to her ear and whispered hoarsely, "Never was so damn glad aboot anythin' in my life!"

"Dad!" cried Sue, springing up so suddenly as to spill what remained of her breakfast. She kissed him. She felt on the verge of tears. "You—you won't use barbed wire again—ever?"

"Huh! I shore won't. Sue, there ain't a cowman in this heah West who hates barbed wire more than me. An' I'll tell you real cowmen, the old Texas school where cowmen came from, all hate wire fences."

"Dad, I—I'm very—happy," faltered Sue. "I hope you haven't lost money."

"Broke just even, Sue. An' I'm square with Loughbridge an' the riders. But listen, don't you let on I'm glad aboot this busted deal."

"Dad, dear, I've secrets of my own," replied Sue with a laugh. Some day she would dare to tell him one of them, at least.

Loughbridge roughly called Melberne to join the group beyond the campfire. Manerube was there, with two strange riders that no doubt had come from Wund. Sue did not like their looks. The rest of Melberne's outfit stood back in a half-circle. Excitement attended that gathering, emanating from the Loughbridge group.

"Melberne, somebody in this camp let out them wild horses," declared Loughbridge forcefully. "Manerube swears he can prove it."

"Say, talk sense. Nobody but Jake an' our women were heah," retorted Melberne.

"Some of your outfit rode into camp before eleven last night," went on Loughbridge. "Between then and daylight there was plenty of time for a *rider* to do the trick."

"Wal, I reckon that might be so," drawled Melberne. "Is Manerube accusin' any rider who got heah early last night?"

"No, he ain't. Not yet."

"Ahuh! All right. I shore hope you tell me before he begins his accusin', because I'm too dog-tired to go dodgin' around. I want somethin' to get behind."

Loughbridge fumed over this slow, sarcastic speech. Then he burst out with redoubled vehemence.

"If Manerube does prove it, you'll have to pay me half the money we'd earned for two more days' drive."

"Loughbridge, you're plumb locoed," rejoined Melberne in a voice that had gathered might. "You're as crazy as I was when I made a partnership with you or when I listened to Manerube."

"Crazy, am I?" shouted the other hoarsely. "But you'll pay me just the same."

"Crazy, shore. An' as for Manerube provin' that, why I'm tellin' you he couldn't prove anythin' under this heah sun to me."

"Hell! I'm not carin' what you think or what you tell. I'm talking business. Money!"

"Wal, you've shore got your last dollar from me, Jim Loughbridge. An' if you think so little of my talk—mebbe you'd listen to bullets!"

"What!" bellowed Loughbridge, his red face turning ashen.

"Reckon I've learned patience from Mormons. But I was born in Texas," replied Melberne, menace in his voice

and eye.

"Melberne, here we split," said Loughbridge. "I want half this outfit."

"Wal, you're welcome—when you pay me for it. Not before," rejoined the leader, and with a gesture of finality he strode toward the tents.

Loughbridge drew Manerube and the two strange riders aside, where they took up a low and earnest conversation.

Sue was about to move away when Chane Weymer confronted her. The smile in his dark eyes disarmed Sue for the moment.

"Sue, you're a dandy brave girl," said Chane, very low. Never before had he addressed her by her first name, let alone pay her a compliment.

"Indeed?" returned Sue impertinently. But she knew she was going to blush unless fury or something rushed to her rescue.

"You have such dainty little feet. Your riding-boots make such pretty tracks," went on Chane, still low-voiced, still smiling down into her eyes. But now his words held strange significance. Sue felt a cold shiver run over her.

"You—think so," she faltered.

Chane glanced around, apparently with casual manner, but Sue saw the piercing keenness of his eyes. Suddenly he bent lower.

"Manerube must have seen your boot tracks down by the corral gates," he said swiftly. "But he can't prove it. I found them later, and I stepped them out in the dust. They're gone."

"Ah!" breathed Sue, lifting her hands to her breast.

"You did a fine thing. You've courage, girl. I wanted to free those wild horses."

Sue could not answer, not because she did not want to thank him for both service and compliment, but for the reason that the look in his eyes, the depths she had never seen before, rendered her mute. He was gazing down at her wonderingly, as if she presented a new character, one that stirred admiration, and he was going to speak again when something interrupted. Sue heard voices and the patter of light hoofs on the leaves. Chane straightened up to look. His dark face lighted with gladness.

"Piutes! By golly! My friend Toddy Nokin has come with my mustangs," he ejaculated, and he ran toward an Indian rider just entering camp.

Sue saw a small squat figure astride a shaggy pony. Chane rushed to greet him. The Piute's face, like a mask of bronze, suddenly wreathed and wrinkled into a beautiful smile. He extended a lean sinewy hand which Chane grasped and wrung.

A drove of clean-limbed long-maned mustangs had entered the grove, surrounded by Indian riders, picturesque with their high-crowned sombreros, their beads and silver. How supple and lithe their figures! With what ease and grace they rode!

When Sue's gaze reverted to Chane and the Piute she was amazed to see an Indian girl ride up to them. She was bareheaded. Her raven-black hair glinted in the sunlight. She was young. Her small piquant face, her slight, graceful form, the white band of beads she wore round her head, the silver buttons and ornaments bright against her velveteen blouse—these facts of sight flashed swiftly on Sue, just a second ahead of a strange dammed-up force, vague, powerful, yet ready to burst.

Chane shouted something in Indian to this girl—perhaps her name—for she

smiled as had the old Piute, and that smile gave a flashing beauty to the dusky face. It broke the barrier to Sue's strange emotion. Her blood left her heart to confound pulse and vein. The might of that blood was stinging, searing jealousy. Pride and scorn and shame, bitter as they were, could not equal the other.

Sue tortured herself one moment longer, with a woman's perversity, and in it she saw Chane greet the Indian girl. That sufficed for her. Averting her gaze, Sue walked slowly toward her tent and upheld herself with apparent inattention. But when she had once closed and tied the flaps behind her the pretense vanished, and she sank to her knees in misery and shame.

Sue did not answer the call to the midday meal. She remained in her tent, fighting for the fortitude she would need to carry her through the inevitable worst to come.

A heavy clinking step outside her tent brought Sue up, excited and thrilling.

"Sue, are you home?" asked her father.

"Always to you, Dad. Come in," she replied, untying the tent flaps.

He entered and closed the flaps after him. Then throwing his sombrero on the bed, with the gesture of a man come to stay awhile, he faced Sue with an unusual expression.

"Lass, if you want to see a locoed daddy, just look at me," he said.

"I'm looking—and, well, you don't seem quite so bad as you say," replied Sue with a nervous little laugh. "What is the matter?"

"Wal, a lot of things, but mostly I'm a damn fool."

"Have you had more words with Loughbridge?"

"He's all words. But I'll settle him shortly. It's not Loughbridge who's botherin' me now."

"Who, then?"

Her father sat down on the bed, and Sue, with heart beginning to misbehave, dropped to her knees before him.

"Who's bothering you, Dad?"

Then he met her eyes. Behind the smile in his there was sadness. "This heah Chane Weymer," he said.

"Oh—Dad, don't say you've quarreled with him!" she exclaimed wildly.

He studied Sue closely, peering deep into her eyes. "Wal, what'd you do if I said me an' Weymer was goin' to fight?"

"Fight? Oh, my Heaven! no—no! Dad, I'd never let you fight him," she cried, suddenly clinging to him.

"Ahuh! I had a hunch you wouldn't, my lass," he returned shrewdly. "Wal, I was just tryin' to scare you. Fact is there's no quarrel."

Sue sank against his shoulder and hid her telltale face, while the awful panic that had threatened slowly subsided in her breast. She grew aware of her father's arm round her, tenderly and closely holding her.

"Lass, you an' me are in a devil of a hole."

"You mean about the horses?"

"No. Aboot Chane. Haven't you a hunch what the trouble is?"

"Your trouble with Ch—with him? No, Dad."

"Wal, I shore hate to tell you. Yet, I'm more glad than sorry. Lass, we've

done Chane Weymer wrong. He's the finest man I ever met in all my life. Manerube is a dirty liar. He's what Chess called him that night. He's just exactly what he made out to us Chane was."

Sue felt as if she had been stabbed. Then joy welled up out of her agony. She sank into her father's arms, blinded with tears.

"Lass, you love Chane?" he whispered.

The query, the simple spoken words, made Sue shake like a leaf. She could speak no answer. She had betrayed herself. Yet it was not the revealing of her secret that held her mute.

"Wal, you needn't give yourself away," continued her father gently. "But I reckon I know. I seen you look at Chane once—the way your mother used to look at me."

After that he held her in silence for a long while, until Sue recovered in sufficient measure to sit up and wipe her eyes and face the situation.

"Dad, you can't guess how glad I was to hear you say that about Chane. Never mind now why. Just tell me—how you know."

"I shore will," replied her father earnestly. "These heah Piutes an' Navajos are friends of Chane's. They have a bunch of mustangs for Chane to sell, an' I've bought them. Wal, when the old Indian—Toddy Nokin—saw Manerube he just grabbed for his rifle. He shore was goin' to do for that rider. But Chane got hold of the gun, took it away from him, an' talked.

"Toddy Nokin was shore a mad Indian. He couldn't understand Chane. Neither did I then. But you can bet I was keen to find out. It seems this Piute is a chief an' a man of dignity an' intelligence. He says he thinks Manerube is a horse thief, in with Bud McPherson, but he can't prove that. But he an' Chane caught Manerube carryin' off the little Indian girl, Sosie. You remember how Manerube's face was all black an' blue when he came to us? How he bragged we ought to see the other fellow! Wal, Chane beat Manerube soundly an' drove him off. You remember, Sue, how Manerube said he did just that to Chane?"

"Remember! Can I ever forget I *believed* it?" cried Sue, shrinking.

"Wal, Manerube is the one with the bad name among the Indians. Not Chane! We talked with the Navajo, too. He said Chane was never a squaw man. Then I got hold of the girl Sosie. Shore I had the surprise of my life. Sue, she's educated. Talks as well as you! An' what she said aboot Manerube was aplenty. I'll gamble the Piutes kill that rider. Wal, Sosie said Chane was the kind of man among the Indians the missionaries ought to be but wasn't."

"Oh, I *knew* it, in my heart," wailed Sue. "But I was a jealous cat."

"Wal, lass, Chane said as much aboot me," went on her father, breathing heavily. "I went to him an' I up like a man an' told him I'd wronged him an' was sorry. An' the darned fellow asked me what aboot. I told him I'd believed Manerube's gossip. An', Sue, what do you think he said?"

"I've no idea," murmured Sue.

"He said, 'Melberne, you're a damn liar. You *knew* that wasn't true. Now shut up aboot it an' let's be friends.' Wal, Chane has stumped me more than once. But that was the last straw. Funny, too, because he was right. I knew he was a man. But this horse-wranglin' had upset me, sort of locoed me."

"So he forgave you?" queried Sue dreamily. "Will he ever forgive me?"

"Shore. Why, that fellow's heart is as tender as your mother's."

"Dad, it's different in my case. I shall go straight to him, presently, and confess I wronged him. I can tell him I'm —I'm little, miserable, but I couldn't ask his forgiveness."

"Huh! You won't need to. The fellow's crazy about you. He—"

"Dad, please don't," whispered Sue, dropping her head.

"Lass, never mind my bluntness. Don't fret over the turn of affairs. It's sort of tough, but I'm glad, an' shore you'll be glad, too."

"I'm glad *now*. But it's terribly worse for me."

"Wal, lass, fight it out your own way," he responded with a sigh. "I know things will work out right. They always do."

"What'll you do about Loughbridge and Manerube?" inquired Sue.

"Get rid of them," her father replied tersely. "Then we'll strike for Wild Horse Mesa."

"To catch more wild horses?"

"Yes, but in an honest way. An' Chane's goin' to take us to Nightwatch Spring, which he swears is the most beautiful place for a ranch in Utah."

Later Sue sat on the cottonwood log with Chess and Ora, assuredly the most absorbingly interested one in the Piute girl, Sosie.

Sue found herself in line to be as surprised as was her father. At first she regarded Sosie as an alien creature, unsexed, a wild little savage. Her impressions having been formed long before had become fixed.

Sosie evidently like the opportunity to be with young white people. Chess soon overcame what little shyness she had felt and inspired her to tell them about herself. Never in her life had Sue listened to so fascinating and tragic a story.

Sosie told about her childhood, tending goats and sheep on the desert, how she had been forced to go to the government school, how she had learned the language and the habits of white people. The religion of the Indians had been schooled and missionaried out of her. Then when she had advanced as far as possible she was given a choice of becoming a servant or returning to her own people. She chose the latter, hoping her education would enable her to teach her family better ways of living. But her efforts resulted in failure and misunderstanding. Her people believed the white education had made her think she was above them. She could no longer accept the religion of the Indian tribe and she would not believe in the white man's. She had to abandon her habits of cleanliness, of comfort, of eating, and return to the crude ways of her people. Lastly, she had been importuned to marry. Finally she had yielded and had married one of the braves of her tribe, a young chief who had also received an education at the government schools. He and she had this much in common. The future held nothing for them, except life in the open, which, somehow, seemed best for the Indian.

An hour after this Indian girl had begun to talk Sue had shifted from disgust and intolerance to amazement and sorrow. Sosie was not what she had expected. The girl was a little beauty. A white man might have been excused, certainly forgiven, for being attracted to this girl.

Eventually Sue, stirred to her depths by the revelations of this day, made her way toward the tent of the Wey-

mers. Her full heart cried out to make amends.

Sue found them together, Chess at work on a quirt he was braiding for Ora, Chane watching her approach with sad dark eyes. She vowed she would meet their gaze even if they penetrated to her shameful secret love. She walked straight up to him.

"Chane, I have wronged you."

His bronzed face paled. "You have? How so?"

"I believed what Manerube said about you. I was stupid and shallow. Then—afterward—I was too slight and miserable to listen to my weak little conscience."

"Sue Melberne, this is what you say to me?" he demanded incredulously.

"Nothing I can say matters to you now. But I wanted you to know what I think of myself."

"No, it doesn't matter now what I think of you—or you think of—yourself."

"But you must hear what I think of myself," cried Sue, beginning to break under the strain. "You must hear that I'm a silly, mindless, soulless girl—Why, even when Chess denounced Manerube as a liar I couldn't see through it! Worse, when Chess spoke so nobly of you I didn't believe. Most shameful of all, after they fought, when I saw Manerube's horrid face after he'd beat Chess down—"

"What!" cried Chane in piercing interruption. He sprang erect, and the look of him made Sue quake. "Beat Chess down! Say, boy, come here."

"Sue, you darned little fool! Now you've played hell!" wailed Chess.

Chane fastened a powerful hand in the boy's blouse and with one pull drew him close.

"Boy, you've kept it from me. You've double-crossed me. Because I asked you."

"Yes, Chane—I lied," choked Chess.

"What for?"

"I was afraid of what you'd do to Manerube."

"Then he beat you? For defending me? Out with it!"

"Sue's told you, Chane. But, honest, she's made it worse than it was. What's a few punches to me? It was only a fight and he didn't get so awful much the best of it."

Chane let go of the boy's blouse and shoved him back.

"I knew there was something," he muttered darkly to himself, and then abruptly he dove into the tent.

"Sue, you've played hell; I tell you," said Chess.

"Oh, I didn't mean to tell. It slipped out. What can I do?"

"You can't stop Chane now."

"Yes I can," cried Sue. She recognized she must do something desperate, but she had no idea what it should be. Then, when Chane emerged from the tent, she quailed before the lightning of his eyes. He held a rawhide whip in his left hand. And on his right side a heavy gun swung from his belt.

"Sue Melberne, I'll use either gun or whip on your lover. But I suspect it must be the whip."

"Lover! Bent Manerube? How dare you?" burst out Sue, suddenly infuriated beyond endurance. She gave him a swift hard slap in the face.

A bright red spot stained his pale cheek. He lifted a hand to feel the place, while his gaze blazed down on her.

"Thanks. I like that. It was human and womanly, something you've never been to me. Did I wrong you with my insinuation?"

"You insulted me. I despised Manerube. I *never* liked him. I—I flirted with him—to my shame—because—well, I don't choose to tell."

"So. You are indeed clearing up much this day," returned Chane. "I apologize. I didn't really mean it. All the same, I'll use my gun or whip on Manerube."

Chess did not even attempt to stop Chane, but Sue cried out some incoherent entreaty and tried to hold him back. Not gently did he thrust her aside, and without another word strode toward the group of men plainly discernible round the campfire.

"Come to your tent, Sue," begged Chess.

"I guess not. I'll not quit—like that," panted Sue. "I'll tell Dad. He'll stop them."

"Sue, it's too late. Anybody getting in front of Chane now will be hurt."

"But, Chess—he—he might be killed!" whispered Sue.

"Who? Manerube, you mean? Well, it'll be darn good riddance."

"Oh, I mean Chane—Chane. Listen, if you tell I'll hate you forever. Forever! I—I love Chane. It's killing me. Now do you understand?"

"You poor girl!" replied Chess in wonder and pity, and he put his arm round her. "Sue, don't be scared. Manerube is a coward. He'll never face Chane with a gun. All he'll get will be a horsewhipping. Come on—let's see him get it."

Sue was unsteady and weak on her feet and needed Chess's support, yet slow as they were they got out to the edge of the grove in time to see Chane confront the staring half-circle of men, among whom Manerube stood out prominently.

"Manerube, the jig's up," said Chane. "I don't care a damn about the lies you told. But you laid your dirty hands on my brother for defending me. You beat him! Are you packing a gun?"

"I reckon," replied Manerube, white to the lips.

Sue swayed to a resistless up-surging spirit. Tearing herself free of Chess, she ran swiftly to confront Chane, to grasp him with hands strong as steel. But her voice failed her.

"Sue, you're mad," he protested, with the first show of softening. "We've got to fight. Why not now?"

Melberne stepped swiftly up to Chane, calling to his men. Utah and Miller ran in. Jake followed.

"Grab him, boys," ordered Melberne. "Chess, get Sue out of this." Then he strode toward the men opposite. "I won't have my womenfolk runnin' risks round heah. Manerube, you're shore gettin' away lucky. Take your two rider pards from Wund an' get out of my camp. An' Jim Loughbridge, you can go along with him. I'll make you a present of wagon, team, grub."

"All right, Melberne," returned Loughbridge harshly. "I'll take you up. But you haven't see the last of this deal."

Chapter Twelve

Nightwatch Spring

FAR west of Stark Valley the reconstructed Melberne outfit had halted on a lofty rim to gaze down into a gray-carpeted, green-dotted, golden-walled canyon, wide and long, running close under the grand bulk of Wild Horse Mesa.

"Nightwatch Spring is there, up in the rocky notch where you see the

bright green," Chane Weymer had said, directing Melberne's gaze. "It's so big it makes a brook right where it comes out from under the cliff."

Melberne had never been a man to rave. Here he gazed as if spellbound, at last to burst out, "Beats any place in Texas!" From him that was not unlikely the most extravagant praise possible. Then he continued, with a singular depth in his voice: "Wife, daughter, heah we shall make our home. I'll send for my brothers, who are waitin' for word of good country to settle in. We've relatives an' friends, too, who'll take my word. We'll homestead this place, an' right heah I pick the haid of this canyon, takin' in the spring. Weymer, I reckon my debt to you grows. I wonder now—won't you an' Chess throw in with us heah?"

"*Quien sabe?*" replied the rider musingly. "Chess surely will. But I—well, I'm a wandering wild-horse hunter."

Melberne pitched camp on the site he chose for the ranch house he would erect eventually. It was a low bench, sloping with sage toward the open, backed by a belt of timber, and canopied by a leaning golden wall. Night-watch Spring burst from under this cliff, a thick rushing volume of pure water, and made music down the slope, to meander between willow-bordered banks far as eye could see.

Melberne began the second day in this place he had chosen to labor and end his years with an energy and heartiness that augured well for his ultimate achievements.

After breakfast he dictated letters which Sue wrote for him, sitting on the ground beside the campfire. Then he dispatched Utah and Miller on the long wagon trip back to Wund.

"Pack your guns an' don't be slow in usin' them," was his last instruction.

Next he set to work with all the men available to fence the mouth of two verdant prongs at the head of the canyon, where he turned loose all his horses. He now had over fifty head, counting the mustangs he had bought from Chane. Toddy Nokin had promised to return in the spring with another band to sell. Melberne had conceived the idea of raising horses as well as cattle. He saw into the future when horses would not be running wild over every range, when well-bred stock would be valuable. It took half the day to erect those cedar and spruce fences.

"Wal, now we can breathe easy an' look around," he said. "Shore was afraid one of them stallions down there would come up heah an' stampede us."

"Melberne, you'll want this canyon free of wild horses," said Chane thoughtfully. "Because your stock will never be safe where wild stallions are ranging. You know tame horses, once they get away, make the wildest of wild horses."

"Wal, what're you foreman of this heah outfit for?" rejoined Melberne jovially.

Chane laughed pleasantly. "We'll get busy and catch the best of the wild stock in here, then drive the rest out. It's a big country down here. You can't tell what we'll run into."

"Mebbe Panquitch, huh? Forgot that stallion, didn't you?"

"Forgot Panquitch? I guess not. I'll bet I've thought of him a thousand times since I saw him. There's his range, Melberne."

Chane swept a slow hand aloft toward the yellow rampart, so high and far away that the black fringe of cedars and pinons looked like a thin low

line of brush.

"On top, hey? Wild Horse Mesa!" ejaculated Melberne, craning his neck. "Chane, I reckon if Panquitch ranges up there he's no longer a horse. He's an eagle."

In the afternoon Sue accompanied her father and the riders out upon a venture that provided thrilling excitement. Alonzo, the Mexican *vaquero*, gave an exhibition of his ability to run down and rope wild horses. It seemed a fair and honest matching of speed and endurance against the wild horse, with the advantage all his. Melberne had abandoned any further idea of cruel practices in the capturing of wild horses.

That evening at sunset Melberne's outfit were a happy, merry party. Alonzo had roped three wild mustangs, and one of them was a beautiful red mare.

This occasion was the first time Sue had ever seen Chane Weymer happy. His dark face, clean-shaven and bronzed, shone in the sunset glow, and his eyes sparkled. He even had a bright look and nod for Sue.

"Melberne, I reckon I see two of Toddy Nokin's Piutes riding down the trail," observed Chane, shading his eyes from the last golden glare of the sun.

"Ahuh! Ridin' in for supper, hey?"

Chane shook his head ponderingly, as if he could not just quite understand their coming. Presently two little mustangs, with the wild-appearing riders unmistakably Indian, rode out of the cedars and came across the level in a long swinging lope.

"One of them is Sosie's brother," said Chane, peering hard. "And, by golly! the other one is her husband."

With that Chane strode down to meet them, and at the foot of the bench he detained them in conversation for some minutes. Presently they dismounted and, slipping the saddles and bridles, they let the mustangs go, and accompanied Chane up to the campfire.

Sosie's husband was a slender Indian, with lean, dark handsome face and somber eyes. He carried a shiny carbine which he rested on the instep of his moccasined foot.

"Jake, rustle some grub," called Chane, and then he turned to Melberne. "Some news. Though I'm not surprised. Loughbridge and Manerube, with *five* men and no women, are camped back on the rim about five miles."

"Five men now, an' no womenfolk!" ejaculated Melberne. "Huh! that's kind of funny. How'd they get rid of Ora and her mother?"

"They're packing their outfit. They haven't the wagon you gave Loughbridge. Reckon that's gone to Wund with the girl and Mrs. Loughbridge."

"Wal, that's where Jim Loughbridge ought to be, I'm thinkin'. But shore I'm not carin' where he is."

"Would you mind if he packed down here?" inquired Chane.

"Huh! I shore would," declared the other bluntly. "I just wouldn't let him. This is my range."

Chane threw up his hands as if he had understood before he asked. "That talk is as old as the West, Melberne. You can hold the water rights of Nightwatch Spring. But that's all."

"I reckon it's enough. What's your idee aboot it?"

"Water is power here. We might be in for trouble if Manerube has control. I'm just wondering if those extra men could be Bud McPherson and his cronies."

Chane bent lower toward Melberne, so that none but he and Sue, who sat

with him, could hear.

"It's got a funny look. Both ways," whispered Chane. "Especially Sosie's brother and husband trailing along when I supposed them over the rivers. Do you get my hunch?"

"Ahuh!" ejaculated Melberne seriously.

Chapter Thirteen

Self-Appointed Proxy

CTOBER ended, but Indian summer still lingered down under the zigzag walls of Wild Horse Mesa.

Melberne had thrown up a two-room log cabin of peeled spruce. Utah and Miller had returned with two wagonloads of supplies, not the least of which was a plow Melberne regarded with the pride of a pioneer. In the spring he meant to drive in cows for domestic use, and cattle to range the grassy reaches.

In the two weeks of their stay there Alonzo had roped close to fifty wild horses, which was about as many as Melberne felt he could handle that fall. The Mexican was now at the harder and longer task of breaking them.

More and more horses showed up down in the canyon as the days went by. As yet Chane had not been able to find where they entered. A month of hard riding would be needed to explore the nooks and crannies of the western wall, and thus far Chane had devoted his efforts only to the Wild Horse Mesa side.

He would return at sunset with stories of his vain attempts to find a way up over the wall to the first escarpment of the great mesa.

"I'm sure one of these cracks in the wall can be climbed," he said. "But I've not hit it yet. It'd take days to go up our trail and under the Henry Mountains and round west through the canyons. I want to get up right at this end and save seventy-five miles' travel."

"Wal, keep huntin'," replied Melberne. "I shore want to know all aboot Wild Horse Mesa. Reckon I'll run cattle up there some day."

November ushered in days as still and mellow and golden as had been those of October. The only difference Sue could see was a gradual increase in the nipping morning air, a deepening of the autumn purple and gold and red, and an almost imperceptible southward trend of the setting sun.

One afternoon Chane came back to camp ragged and dusty of garb, but beaming of face.

"By golly! I've found a way out on top," he ejaculated happily. "Took me right under the sharp bluff of the mesa. Grandest view in all the world! Now I can explore the great wall all along this side. And on the other I'll be right on the bare rock benches that slope down into the canyon country."

"Wal, I'll tell you what," interposed Melberne. "I'll go with you. We'll take a pack horse an' explore for a few days."

"Dad, I want to go and I'm going," declared Sue.

"You couldn't keep me from going if you hawg-tied me," spoke up Chess.

"Say, is this a picnic I'm to be scout for?" queried Chane.

"Shore it's a picnic," replied Melberne. "We'll take the kids, Chane. They can look after themselves. I'll do the same. That'll leave you free to car-

ry out your own explorations. But we'll have a camp we'll all come back to."

"All–right," drawled Chane with returning good nature, "if you can keep up with me."

Next morning Sue rode out of camp with Chess, following her father and Chane, who were driving two pack horses. The adventure to Sue had an alluringly bright face.

"Well, sister dear," began Chess, "this little trip will be Chane's finish. The big stiff of an iceberg!"

"Chess, I declare, if you begin to tease me about–about him–I–I'll not go," replied Sue.

"Not go? You're crazy. This'll be the chance we want. But I know you're bluffing. You just couldn't keep from going."

How well he knew her! Chess seemed unusually happy, brotherly, protective, and yet more devilish than ever. Sue no longer had control over Chess. Since that moment of anguish when she had confessed her love for Chane –that it was killing her–Chess had made her completely his own, in a boyish, masterly, brotherly way. She could do nothing with him. He had closed her protesting lips with a kiss. When she slapped him, with no slight hand, he had offered the other cheek. She was afraid to be alone with him, yet his presence, his laughing eyes, his never-ending habit of yoking her name with Chane's, her future with Chane's, caused her as much ecstasy as torment.

Sue followed Chess into one of the many mouths of the cracked wall. Presently they passed the zone of fertility, to go into a narrowing gulch where riding soon became impossible. Climbing on foot, however, had one relieving virtue–Chess had to save his breath and so could not tantalize her.

The fissure in the wall narrowed, zigzagged, grew steeper and more choked with rock and shale, until Sue gladly welcomed those intervals when Chane and her father worked to make a trail, cracking with sledge hammer, heaving the stones. There were places where the pack horses had to squeeze through. It was slow, hot, laborsome work. An hour was consumed on the last steep ascent of the split in the wall.

Sue's leaden boots could barely be lifted; they seemed riveted to the trail. At length she made it, and raising her eyes was almost staggered by a colossal red corner of wall, cracked, seamed, stained, sheering up so high that she had almost to unjoint her neck to bend back her head to see the top.

"What's–that?" she asked huskily.

"Reckon it's Wild Horse Mesa."

The bulging red corner hid whatever lay to east and south. In the other direction the view showed the country back upon which Sue had so often gazed–desert upland, sweeping away, grass and ridge and range, to the distant black mountains. Suddenly she gazed down. The gray canyon yawned at her feet. Her father's labors seemed lost in the vastness of gray and green. Only the column of blue smoke proved that the homestead was a reality.

"Get on and ride," called Chane.

The bare red rock sloped up gently in the direction Chane and her father were leading. Sue trotted her horse to catch up with them. To her left the stone slanted gradually, growing broken, and at length merged in the deceiving irregularity of the desert. She felt a mounting curiosity to see what lay beyond the close horizon. As for the wall of the mesa to her right, that

somehow staggered her.

Chane and her father halted just as Sue reached them. Then for Sue the very world of stone upon which she stood seemed to have dropped away before her transfixed gaze.

The southwest country, the canyon country, lay beneath her, as if by some incredible magic, within the grasp of her vision. Waving gently, bare and red, the rock beneath her sloped down and down, until it seemed to be lost in the gleaming abyss.

Sue did not need to be told that the first terrible gap in the terraced stone was the Grand Canyon. She saw the granite walls, almost black, and under them the swirling red river. Dark and menacing, this canyon wound in rugged sweeps through the leagues of bare stone, meeting lines of cleavage that were other canyons, emptying into it. Between and beyond rolled the endless waves, knolls, ridges, domes of red and yellow rock; and dark clefts, thin, wandering, showed deep in every rounded surface. It was a grand and stunning spectacle. Dimly across this waste of canyon-cut stone rose a flat land, purple in color, overtopped by a round black mountain.

The west seemed all closed by the bulk of Wild Horse Mesa. It ranged away, an unscalable wall, for many miles, a mountain of seamed and creviced stone, with millions of irregularities, sheering down to the base of bare stone that appeared to be its foundation. This mesa rose from a tableland that in itself towered above the canyon country. The far end of Wild Horse Mesa stood up in supreme isolation and grandeur, bright-walled in the morning sun.

If Chane expected those whom he had brought here to exclaim with rapture their impressions of this spectacle, he had reckoned falsely. Chess was the only one to speak. Sue wanted intensely to get off by herself; she gazed no more because her faculties seemed to have become dwarfed.

Chane rode down over the waving stone, to enter a curving-walled break, that soon became a canyon in itself and swallowed them up. It opened at length into a loftier walled canyon, where clear water ran, and the richest of green grass and most exquisite of flowers made verdure on the narrow benches.

"Here's a good place to camp," said Chane. "Grass, water, and wood. And we can explore in four directions."

"Wal, I reckon we'd better hang up right heah," declared Melberne. "Because, I'll be darned, if you show me any more pretty places I'll get discontented with my homestead."

"Melberne, did you see any tracks on the way across the bench above?" asked Chane as he swung out of his saddle.

"Tracks! On that bare rock? I shore didn't."

"Well, I did, and some of them were fresh, made by shod horses. They were headed west along the bench. The Piute boys rode up this way yesterday, but their ponies were not shod. I'm

inclined to believe Manerube and his outfit made those tracks."

"Ahuh! Wal, what if they did?"

"No matter, I reckon. They're leaving us alone," rejoined Chane. "But it bothers me—the idea they may be trying to climb Wild Horse Mesa. They're on the wrong track down that bench, for about ten or twelve miles down there's an impassable break which runs square up to the wall. That'll turn them back."

"How far have we come down heah?"

"Two or three miles, I should say."

"Wal, I'll take it afoot an' go back, keepin' an eye peeled for them. Shore I'd just as lief do that as go further into these canyons. I want to climb where I can see. What'll you do?"

"Melberne, I don't mind telling you I think I can get on top of the mesa."

"Good! You make shore," he replied. "An', Chess, you an' Sue prowl around to please yourselves, only don't work back up the way we come. Now let's make camp quick, have a bite to eat, an' then be free till dark."

Sue and Chess, more in spirit of fun than for any other reason, had trailed Chane down the canyon until they lost his tracks.

"Doggone him! Has he turned into a bird?" complained Chess.

"He's an angel," said Sue, who had responded strangely to this growing adventure.

The canyon had grown to be a remarkable one, narrow, lofty-walled, full of golden gleams and hollow echoes. It drew Sue on and on. Chess gathered flowers, caught frogs and butterflies for her, helped her over the boulders.

"Do you suppose he climbed out?" inquired Sue.

"I don't see how we could have missed any place where Chane could have gone up with Brutus. It sure is queer. But, Sue, we've come mostly over bare wet rock and granite boulders. I'm not so bad following tracks. Still, with a distractingly sweet girl like you, I couldn't track an elephant in the mud."

"Chess, you can shore spout."

Presently the canyon narrowed until all the space was covered with water. It ran swift in places, and appeared shallow.

"Looks like we're stumped," observed Sue ruefully.

"Us stumped? Never. I'll carry you," said Chess gayly, and without more ado he gathered her up and splashed into the stream. The water began to rise above his knees. Chess slipped, then caught his balance. Sue cried out:

"Don't you dare fall with me, Chess Weymer."

Suddenly he halted in the middle of the canyon, with roguish eyes on hers.

"That gives me a wonderful idea," he said.

"Does it? All right. But hurry and get me out of this."

"Not at all. That isn't the idea. I suddenly thought just how much love Chane and I have wasted on you."

"Oh! Have you? Well, you needn't waste any more. Hurry, I tell you."

Chess hugged her a little and laughed down at her. "Sue, you kiss me or I'll be sure to slip and fall."

"I will not. Chess, this isn't fun."

"It's great. I never had such a chance. I'm sure Chane won't miss one little kiss. Come—"

"Shut up!" interrupted Sue. "I declare you are no—no gentleman."

"You don't appreciate me. I'm fighting *you* for your happiness and for Chane's. You love each other and

you're a couple of fools."

"*I* am, yes. But not he– Chess, don't hold me here–jibbering that way–like an idiot."

"Kiss me, then, and call me brother," he went on, shaking her gently.

"You–you–" began Sue, and ended abruptly. There did not appear to be any other way out of the dilemma. "Very well, Little Boy Blue," she went on, and raised her face to his. "Brother!"

Not the kiss, which she really meant, but the word, which she felt was untrue, sent the blood surging to her temples. Chess gave her a radiant smile, and plowing through the water, soon reached the dry rocks, where he set her upon her feet.

"If Chane only knew! Wouldn't he just die? Come, sis, we're having a jolly adventure," he babbled, and taking her hand he led her on down the canyon.

"Chess, it's getting fearful," murmured Sue, gazing up the dark, almost perpendicular walls to the narrow flowing stream of blue sky overhead.

"What? Roaming round with me this way?"

"No. I mean the canyon. Isn't it just wonderful? Look! I see golden sunlight far ahead."

"Sure is a place for sweethearts," replied Chess knowingly.

"Chess, you've got girls and sweethearts and–love on the brain."

They walked and waded on down the canyon, inspired now by its alluring mystery and beauty. Presently they entered an enlargement of the canyon, so remarkably and abruptly a contrast that they halted in their tracks. It was a great red-wall oval, open on the right, with a most stupendous waving slope that apparently lifted to the clouds. Sand bars gleamed in the sun like gold. Gravelly beds shone white. Here the stream had disappeared underground. Grassy benches were colorful flower gardens. Cottonwood trees straggled along, growing more numerous, until they bunched in a beautiful grove, with fluttering leaves half yellow and half green. The hollow murmur of swift water down the canyon made dreamy music.

Like two children, Sue and Chess explored the benches, the grove, and the caverns under the wall. Then, upon going across toward the waved slope Chess discovered horse tracks in the sand.

"I'm a son-of-a-gun! Wild-horse tracks!" he exclaimed in amazement. "Sue, can you beat that? Look at that slope. Wild horses could climb it. Sue, I believe Chane knew there were wild horses down in here. But I haven't seen any sign of Brutus's tracks. I'll look."

He went all over the sand and gravel bars, to return to Sue with a puzzled shake of his head.

"Got me buffaloed," he said. "We trailed Chane so far down this very canyon. Then we lost his tracks. We must have missed some place he went up. But I'll gamble on one thing sure. He's got some big idea."

"Panquitch!" cried Sue thrillingly.

Chess cracked his fist in his palm. "It might be. Sue, it's early yet. Let's climb up this slope. We can't get lost. All we've got to be careful about is to get down and past that deep water before dark."

"Come on, brother," cried Sue, carried away by the thrill of his words.

"You mean that, don't you?"

"Now, Chess, the moment I–I try to be nice you spoil everything."

He took her hand again and led her toward where the yellow sand met the

red slant of the rock.

"Be honest, Sue dear," he went on, suddenly tender and deep-voiced. "I mean—you do love Chane? You haven't gone back on him? Tell me."

They reached the slope and began to climb, Sue hanging her head and Chess leaning to see her face.

"You've kept my secret?" she asked.

"I cross my heart, yes. And it's been hard."

"You'll still keep it? Remember, if you betray me I'll hate you forever."

"I'll never tell what you say to me," he answered. "But don't think I'll not move heaven and earth to fetch you two to your senses."

"Then—once more—the last time—I'll tell you," she said, very low and solemnly, "I love your brother with my whole heart and soul."

Chess took her avowal differently from the way she expected. Instead of breaking out into robust gladness he took it in poignant silence; his face worked, his eyes filled, and he squeezed her hand so hard it hurt her. Then he drew her on up the slope.

Chess drew a deep hard breath. Wild Horse Mesa loomed before and above them, its great western cape a magnificent promontory, running toward the westering sun. Its inaccessibility seemed more paramount than ever, yet from this height Sue conceived a haunting sense that it was indeed the abode of wild horses.

"Sue, sit down and rest," said Chess. "I've got something to tell you—this is the place. Sue—my brother loves you."

The absence of his old teasing tone or any semblance of fun, the direct simplicity of his assertion, robbed Sue of power to ridicule, or retreat in anger. She could only look at Chess.

"He loves you terribly," went on Chess with swift eloquence. "He dreams of you. He talks of you in his sleep. He keeps me awake."

Sue covered her burning face with her hands, and bent over, shot through and through with a tumultuous bliss that all her morbid and hateful doubts could not quell. There was truth in Chess's voice. It had lain at the root of all his teasing.

"But you've got to do some big thing to square yourself for believing Manerube's lies," went on Chess. "That hurt Chane. He's never been the same, not even to me. But I've watched him close. I know he worships you. But he'll never tell you unless you break him down. He'll never forgive you unless you make him."

"Chess, if you force me to believe he—he loves me—when he doesn't—I could never stand it," she whispered.

"No fear. I know."

"Then what on earth can I do?"

"I've no idea. Telling him wouldn't be enough. You've got to *do* something. And, Sue, you must do it quick. Only last night he told me he reckoned he'd be on the go soon."

"Oh—he means to leave us?"

"Sure he does. I'm afraid he can't stand it longer. But you mustn't let him go. His happiness, yours, and mine, too, all depend on you, little girl."

"Oh—what—what—" choked Sue, overcome.

"Find him alone," whispered Chess tensely. "On this trip, before we get back. Throw your arms round his neck!"

"I—I could not," cried Sue, starting up wildly. "Are you mad, Chess? Have you no—no—"

"It's a desperate case, Sue. He adores you. If you can only make him see you

love him—quick—throw him off his balance! Chane's the proudest of all the Weymers I ever knew. He'd freeze you to death if you tried any ordinary way to make up with him. Storm him, Sue, storm him!"

Suddenly, before Sue's whirling mind could meet that last insidious speech, Chess grasped her arm so violently as to jerk her upright.

"Look! Look!" he shouted in a frenzy of excitement, pointing down and across the waving hollow bowl. "Wild horses! A whole string of them!"

Sue leaped erect with excitement thrilling out her agitation. Wildly she gazed down.

"Oh, I can't see them. Where?"

"Far across and down," he replied swiftly. "On the *other* side of this ridge. Over the yellow, down on the red, among the cedars. Sue, sure as we're alive they've come down from Wild Horse Mesa and are working round to go down into the canyon we came up. Maybe for water."

At last Sue espied them, a file of horses, long-maned and long-tailed, unmistakably wild, passing through some dwarf scattered cedars. Looking toward the head of that file Sue saw a horse the sight of which made her start. He was tawny in color, with mane like a black flame, and tail as black that swept the stones. How proudly he stepped! How he moved his wild head to right and left!

"Chess. Look at the leader," called Sue in delight.

Then Chess burst out, "*Panquitch!* Sue, we're looking at the greatest wild stallion Utah and Nevada ever knew. Oh, the color of him! Look at that mane! I told you Chane had something up his sleeve. Sue, he's after Panquitch. But, where is he now?"

Chapter Fourteen

Strange Bargain

CHANE reached the big parklike oval, the expansion of the canyon, where in his memorable flight across the rivers and out of this labyrinth he had encountered Panquitch with his band. Near the upper end of this huge oval Chane dismounted to walk along the stones at the edge of the sandy bars, and worked back to where the water disappeared. He found horse tracks, made, he was sure, the day before. They came to the water and went back toward the low rise of red slope. This point was not where he had encountered Panquitch. That, Chane remembered, was a beautiful constriction of this enlargement of the canyon, a bowl-like place, full of cottonwoods and willows.

Chane studied the whole opposite wall, as far as he could see. Just opposite where he stood a wide break in the wall came down to the sand. It was smooth and worn rock, widening like a fan toward the wavy summit of yellow ridges. These he knew were the round knolls so marked when one gazed down upon the canyon country from the rims. Beyond and above, of course, rose Wild Horse Mesa, but Chane could not get a glimpse of it. He noted how the wavy red rock spread beyond and behind bulges of the wall, that to the left and right of him sheered down perpendicularly to his level.

That one to the right of him held his studious attention because he believed it hid much from his gaze. This huge frowning section of canyon wall lay between the slope opposite him and the

one below where he had watched Panquitch climb. It looked to Chane as if the wild horses could come down one slope and go up the other. Then he remembered the narrow gleaming walls and the long deep pools of water. Surely the wild horses could not swim these except when on the way out to the upland country above, or when they were returning to their mysterious abode.

Returning to Brutus, Chane rode on down the oval, keeping to the curve of wall, far from the center. As he rode he got higher, and farther back, so that his view of the slope opposite was better. Soon, however, the bulge of intervening wall shut out his view entirely of that slope. Then he attended more keenly to what lay ahead.

The oval park ended in a constriction like the neck of a bottle. The sunlight came down from a marvelous slope of red rock, waved and billowed, resembling a sea on end. This slope was where he had watched Panquitch climb out. A dark cleft, V-shaped, split the ponderous bulk of the cliff at the end of the oval. It was still far off, but Chane recognized it. Down in there was where he hoped some day to meet Panquitch. His hope was merely a dream, he knew, for the chances were a thousand to one that he never would have such luck.

"Reckon I'll leave Brutus and climb that slope," soliloquized Chane.

Whereupon he rode on down past the break in the wall toward the grove of cottonwoods. As Chane dismounted Brutus lifted his head and shot up his ears.

"Hey! what'd you hear, old boy?" queried Chane, suddenly tense.

All at once a weird, horrid blast pealed out, not far from Chane, and higher than where he stood. The echoes bellowed from wall to wall. Chane, seeing that Brutus was about to neigh, clasped his muzzle with strong pressure.

He had never heard a sound so uncanny and fearful. It made his blood creep, and for a second he sustained a shock. Then his quick mind solved the realization that in this country nothing but a horse could peal out such a cry. Therefore, when it was followed by light quick clatter of hoofs, Chane was not at all surprised.

"Brutus, we've heard that before," he whispered, patting the horse.

Chane was several hundred yards from where the slope merged into the level canyon floor, and the lower part of it, owing to the cottonwoods, was hidden from his sight. But wild horses were surely coming down, and they might turn to enter the V-shaped cleft instead of up the canyon. Something had frightened them.

"By golly!" he muttered. "This's a queer deal."

He wanted much to linger there and see the wild horses, but instead of staying he leaped on Brutus and, riding close to the wall, under protection of the cottonwoods, he made quick time to the end of the grove. Here lay sections of wall that had broken from above. At the mouth of the cleft Chane rode Brutus behind a huge boulder, and dismounting there, he peeped out.

This point of vantage gave him command of the canyon. He was just in time to get a glimpse of red and black and bay mustangs entering the cottonwoods from the slope.

Far up that wavy incline he espied a slight figure, moving down. Did it belong to an Indian? Yet the quick lithe step stirred his pulse! He had seen it before, somewhere. Dark hair stream-

ed in the breeze.

"*Sue!* Well, I'll be— She and Chess have wandered up there. They're having fun chasing wild horses. But where's he?"

Then a band of wild horses burst from the cottonwoods, out into the open sandy space of several acres. They were trotting, bunched close, frightened but not yet in panic. Presently, far out on the sand bar they halted, heads up, uncertain which way to go.

From the far side of them Panquitch appeared, trotting with long strides, something in his leonine beauty and wildness, his tawny black-maned beauty, striking Chane as half horse and half lion.

Sight of him sent a gush of hot blood racing over Chane. Here he hid. Panquitch was there, not a quarter of a mile away. If Chess should happen to be on the other side of that band of wild horses they would run pell-mell down toward the V-shaped cleft.

Panquitch trotted in front of his band, to one side and then the other, looking in every direction. He did not whistle. To Chane he had the appearance of a stallion uncertain of his ground. He looked up the slope, at the girl coming down, choosing the easiest travel from her position, now walking, now running, and working toward a bulge of cliff. Then Panquitch gave no further heed to Sue. He was sure of danger in that direction. He trotted out to the edge of the sand bar and faced down, his head high, eager, strained, wild.

"By golly! I'm afraid he's got a whiff of me and Brutus!" whispered Chane. "What a nose he has! The wind favors us. Now, I want to know why he doesn't make a break up the canyon."

Panquitch wheeled from his survey down the canyon to one in the opposite direction. His action now showed that his suspicions were strong in this quarter. His great strides, his nervous halting, his erect tail and mane, his bobbing head, proved to Chane that he wanted to lead his band up the canyon, but feared something yet unseen.

A sweet wild gay cry pealed down from the slope.

Chane espied Sue standing on the bulging cliff, high above the canyon floor, and she was flinging her arms and crying out in the exultance of the moment. Chane strained his ears.

"Fly! Oh, Panquitch, fly!" she was singing to the wind, in the joy of her adventure, in the love of freedom she shared with Panquitch.

Chane understood her. She loved Panquitch, and all wild horses, and yearned for them to be free.

"Girl, little do you dream you may drive Panquitch straight into my rope," muttered Chane grimly.

The stallion suddenly froze in his tracks, making a magnificent statue typifying fear. A whistling blast escaped him. It pealed from cliff to cliff, and then, augmented by united whistles from the other horses, it swelled into a deafening concatenation.

Chane's keen eye detected Chess up the canyon, bounding into view. At the same instant Panquitch wheeled as if on a pivot and leaped into headlong stride down the canyon, with his band falling in behind him.

Like a flash Chane vaulted into the saddle. He sent Brutus flying into the cool shadow of the cleft. Any narrow place to hide, from behind which he could rope the stallion! All Chane's force went into the idea. A deep long pool lay just ahead. Brutus charged into the pool, and plunged through

shallow water. To his knees, to his flanks he floundered on—then souse, he went into deep water, going under all but his head. How icy the water to Chane's heated blood!

Fifty yards ahead the straight wall heaved into a corner, round which the stream turned in a curve. If Chane could find footing for Brutus behind that corner, Panquitch would have no chance. What a trap! Chane reveled in the moment. The wildest dream of his boyhood was being enacted.

He did not spare Brutus, but urged him, spurred him, beat him into tremendous action. Brutus reached the corner—turned it. Chane reined him into the wall. There was a narrow bench, just level with the water. But that would be of no help unless Brutus could touch bottom. He did. Chane stifled a yell of exultation. Brutus waded his full length before he reached the ledge. He was still in five feet of water, and on slippery rocks. Chane had no time to waste. The cracking of hoofs up the canyon rang like shots in his ears. Panquitch and his band were coming. Chane needed room to swing his lasso.

He turned the horse round. Brutus accomplished this without slipping off the rocks into deep water.

Chane was left-handed. He threw a noose with his left hand, and in the position now assumed he was as free to swing his rope as if he had been out in the open.

The trap and the trick were ready. Chane's agitation settled to a keen, tight, grim exultation. Nothing could save Panquitch if he ever entered that deep pool. Chane listened so intensely he heard his heartbeats. Yes! He heard them coming. Their hard hoofs rang with bell-like clearness upon the boulders. Then the hollow muffled sound of hoofs on rock under the water—then the splashing swish!

Soon the narrow canyon resounded to a melodious din. Suddenly it ceased. Chane realized the wild horses had reached the pool. His heart ceased to beat. Would the keen Panquitch, victor over a hundred clever tricks to capture him, shy at this treacherous pool? —*Clip—clop!* He had stepped out into the water. Chane heard his wild snort. He feared something, but was not certain. The enemies behind were realities. *Clip—clop!* He stepped again. *Clip —clop!* Into deeper water he had ventured. Then a crashing plunge!

It was following by a renewed din of pounding hollow hoof-cracks, snorts, and splashes. They were all taking to the pool.

Chane swung the noose of his lasso round his head, tilting it to evade the corner of wall. It began to whiz. His eyes were riveted piercingly upon the water where it swirled gently in sight from behind the gray stone. Brutus was quivering under him. The plunging crashes ceased. All the wild horses were swimming. The din fell to sharp snuffing breaths and gentle swash of water. A wave preceded the swimming band.

A lean beautiful head slid from behind the wall, with long black mane floating from it. Panquitch held his head high.

Now the stallion saw Brutus and his rider—the swinging rope. Into the dark wild eyes came a terror that distended them. A sound like a horrid scream escaped him. He plunged to turn. His head came out.

Then Chane cast the lasso. It hissed and spread, and the loop, like a snake, cracked over Panquitch, under his chin

and behind his ears. One powerful sweep of Chane's arm tightened that noose.

"*Whoopee!*" yelled Chane, with all the power of his lungs. "He's roped! *Panquitch!*—Oh—ho! ho! He's ours, Brutus, old boy! After him, old boy!"

Panquitch plunged back, pounding the water, and as Chane held hard on the lasso the stallion went under. Chane slacked the rope, and urged Brutus off the rocks. Pandemonium had begun round that corner of wall. As Brutus soused in, and lunged to the middle of the stream, Chane saw a sight he could never forget.

Upward of a score of wild horses were frantically beating and crashing the water to escape back in the direction they had come. Some were trying to climb the shelving wall, only to slip, and souse under. They bobbed up more frantic than before, screaming their terror. Some were trying to climb over the backs of those to the fore. All were in violent commotion, and uttering whinnies of fear.

Panquitch, hampered by the lasso, was falling behind. Chane pulled him under water, then let him come up. Brutus had to be guided, for he tried to swim straight to the stallion. Chane did not want that kind of a fight. It was his purpose to hold Panquitch in the pool until he was exhausted. With that noose round his neck he must tire sooner than Brutus. This unequal struggle could not last long. Chane had no power to contain his madness of delight, the emotion roused by the feel of Panquitch on the other end of his lasso.

"Aha there, old lion-mane," he called. "You made one run too many! You run into a rope! Swim now! Heave hard! Dive, you rascal! You're a fish. Ho! Ho! Ho!"

But when Panquitch plunged round to make for his adversaries the tables were turned. Chane's yell of exultation changed to one of alarm, both to frighten Panquitch, if possible, and to hold Brutus back. Both, however, seemed impossible. Brutus would not turn his back to that stallion. His battle cry pealed out. Chane hauled on the lasso, but he could not again pull Panquitch under.

Despite all Chane could do, the stallion and Brutus met in head-on collision. A terrific melee ensued. Chane was thrown off Brutus as from a catapult. But he was swift to take advantage of this accident. A few powerful strokes brought him round to Panquitch, and by dint of supreme effort astride the back of the wild stallion.

Chane fastened his grip on the ears of the stallion, to lurch forward with all his weight and strength. He got the head of Panquitch under the water.

"*Back! Back!*" yelled Chane to Brutus.

It was a terrible moment. Chane preferred to let Panquitch free rather than drown him. But if Brutus kept fighting on, crowding the stallion, Chane saw no other issue. Under him Panquitch was shaking in convulsions. Chane let go of his head. The stallion bobbed up, choking, snorting. But if terror was still with him it was one of fury to kill. He bent his head back to bite at Chane. His eyes were black fire; his open mouth red and dripping; his teeth bared. Chane all but failed to keep out of his reach.

In his cowboy days Chane had been noted for his ability to ride broncos, mean mustangs, bucking horses, mules, and even wild steers. The old temper to ride and conquer awoke in him. Fight-

ing the stallion, beating Brutus off, keeping his seat, Chane performed perhaps the greatest riding feat of his career. He had, however, almost to drown the stallion.

At length Panquitch, suddenly showing signs of choking, headed for the shallow water. His swimming was laborious. Chane loosed the tight rope, then plunging off he swam back to Brutus and got in the saddle. He urged Brutus faster and faster, to pass the sinking Panquitch. Not a moment too soon did Brutus touch bottom, and plunging shoreward, he dragged Panquitch after him. The stallion could no longer breathe, yet he staggered out of the shallow water, to the sand, where he fell.

Chane leaped off Brutus to fall on Panquitch and loosen the lasso. The stallion gave a heave. He had been nearly choked to death; perhaps the noose had kept water out of his lungs. His breast labored with a great intake of air. Then he began to shake with short quick pants.

"Aw, but I'm glad!" ejaculated Chane, who for a moment had feared a calamity. Panquitch would revive. Chane ran back to the heaving Brutus, and procuring a second lasso from the saddle, he rushed again to the stallion and slipped a noose round his forelegs.

"Reckon that's about all," he said, rising to survey his captive.

Panquitch was the noblest specimen of horseflesh Chane had ever seen in all his wandering over the rangelands of the west. But in these flaming black eyes there was a spirit incompatible with the rule of man. Panquitch might be broken, but his heart would ever be wild. He could never love his master. Chane felt pity for the fallen monarch, and a remorse. He was killing something, the like of which dwelt in his own heart.

"Panquitch, it wasn't a square deal," declared Chane. "I played you a dirty trick. I'm not proud of it. And so help me God I've a mind to let you go."

So Chane missed that crowning joy of the wild-horse wrangler—to exhibit to the gaze of rival hunters a captive horse that had been their passion to catch and break and ride.

"Wo—hoo! Oh—h, Chane, I'm coming!" called a girlish high-pitched voice.

Sue appeared at the mouth of the cleft, standing upon a boulder, with her hair shining in the sun. Then Chess's voice rang down the canyon.

"What you-all doing, Chane Weymer?"

He caught up with Sue, and lending her a hand, came striding with her over the rock benches.

Chane heard them talking excitedly, out of breath, wondering, tense and expectant. Then Chess and Sue came out of the shadow, into the strip of sunlit canyon. They saw Panquitch lying full length on the sand. Chess broke from Sue and came rushing up.

"Good Lord!" he screeched, beside himself with excitement, running to grasp Chane and embrace him. "*Panquitch!* And you got him hawg-tied!"

He ran back to the stallion, gazed down upon him, moved round him, gloated over him. "Hurry, Sue! Come! Look! Will you—ever believe it?—We chased—Panquitch right—into Chane's trap! Of all the luck! Hurry to see him! Oh, there never was such a horse!"

Then he strode back to Chane, waving his hands.

"We climbed that slope—back there,"

he went on. "Just for fun. Then from up on top—I spied the wild horses. Sue saw Panquitch first. We ran down—having fun—seeing how close we could get. Then Sue said, 'Run down ahead, Chess. I'll stay here. Turn them—chase them by me—so I'll get to see Panquitch close.' So I ran like mad. I headed them. They ran back—up over that hollow—behind the big knob of wall. Right by Sue! I saw her run down the slope—this way. But I made for the canyon. Just wanted to see them run by. Couldn't see them. I ran some more. Then the whole bunch trotted out of the cottonwoods. Panquitch lorded it round. He was prancing. He didn't know which way to run. I heard Sue screaming at him. Then Panquitch bolted this way—and his bunch followed. Chane, you owe it all to Sue. She drove Panquitch to you."

"I reckon," replied Chane, conscious of unfamiliar riot in his breast.

Sue had held back, and was standing some rods off, staring from the prostrate Panquitch to Chane. Her hands were pressed over a heaving bosom. Her eyes seemed wide and dark.

"Come on, Sue," called Chess. "Nothing to fear. Panquitch has ropes on him."

"Oh, it's all my fault—my fault," cried Sue pantingly, as again she hurried toward them. "Is he hurt? He breathes so—so hard."

"Reckon Panquitch's only choked a little," replied Chane. "You see, I roped him in the water."

"You're all bloody! You're hurt," replied Sue, coming to him.

Chane had not noted the blood on his hands and his face. Evidently he had been scratched in the struggle.

"Guess I'm not hurt," he said with a laugh, as he drew out his wet scarf. "Here, Chess, hold the rope while I tie my cuts. If Panquitch tries to get up just keep the rope tight."

Chess received the lasso and drew it taut. "Hyar, you king of stallions," he called out. "You've sure got tied up in the wrong family. We're bad hombres, me and Chane. Just you lay still."

Chane became aware that Sue had come quite close to him.

"Let me do it," she said, taking the scarf. And without looking up she began to bind his injured hand. She was earnest about it, but not at all deft. Her fingers trembled.

Chane, gazing down upon her, saw more signs of agitation. Under the gold-brown of her skin showed a pearly pallor; the veins were swelling on her round neck. Her nearness, and the unmistakable evidences of her distress and excitement, shifted the current of Chane's mind. How momentous this day! What was the vague portent that beat for entrance to his consciousness?

Sue finished binding his hand, and then she looked up into his face, not, it seemed, without effort.

"There's a cut on your temple," she said, and untying her own scarf she began to fold it in a narrow band. Her blouse was unbuttoned at the neck, now exposing the line where the gold tan met the white of her swelling bosom. "Bend your head," she added.

Chane did as he was bidden, conscious of mounting sensations. The soft gentle touch of her hands suddenly inflamed him with a desire to seize them, to kiss them, to press them against his aching heart. Stern repression did not, however, on this occasion, bring victory. He had no time to think. It was like being leaped upon in the dark—this attack of incomprehensible emotion.

"There—if you put your sombrero on carefully—it will stay," she said.

"Thanks. You're very good. Reckon I'm not used to being doctored by tender hands," he replied, somewhat awkwardly, as he drew back from her. That was what made him unsure of himself—her nearness. Strange to him, then, and growing more undeniable, was the fact that as he retreated she followed, keeping close to him. When she took hold of the lapel of his vest and seemed fighting either for command of herself or strength to look up again, then he realized something was about to happen.

"I'm all wet," he protested, trying to be natural. But he failed.

"So you are. I—I hadn't noticed," she said, and instead of drawing away she came so close that her garments touched him. Even this slight contact caused Chane to tremble. "Chane, come a little away—so Chess won't hear," she concluded in a whisper.

Chane felt as helpless in her slight hand as Panquitch now was in his. She led him back a few paces, in the lee of a slab of rock that leaned down from the wall.

"What's—all this?" he demanded incredulously, as she pushed his back against the rock.

"It's something very important," she replied, and then she fastened her other hand in the other lapel of his vest. She leaned against him.

"Yes?" he queried doubtfully.

She was quite pale now and the pupils of her dark eyes were dilating over deep wonderful shadows and lights. He felt her quiver. His response was instantaneous and irresistible, but it was a response of his heart, not his will. He would never let her know what havoc this contact played with him.

"Would you do something great for me?" she whispered.

"Great!" he ejaculated. "Why, Sue Meberne, I reckon I would—for you—or any girl, if I could."

"Not for any other girl," she returned swiftly. "For *me!*"

"I'll make no rash promises. What do you want?"

"Let Panquitch go free."

Chane could only stare at her. So that was it! Sudden relief flooded over him. What might she not have asked? How powerless he was to refuse her most trivial wish!

"Are you crazy, girl?" he demanded.

"Not quite," she replied, with a wistful smile that made him wince. "I want you to let Panquitch go. It was my fault. I was his undoing. I longed to see him close—to scream at him—to watch him run. So I drove him into your trap."

"Quite true. I'd never have caught him save for you. But what's that? I don't care. Once in my life I had a wrangler's luck."

"Something tells me it'll be bad luck, unless you give in."

"Bad luck? Ha! I reckon I've had all that's due one poor rider," he replied. "And the worst of it, Sue Melberne, was on your account."

"You mean—about Manerube?"

"Yes, and what went before," he returned darkly.

"Chane, did something happen before that?" she asked softly.

"I reckon it did," he answered bitterly.

"Tell me," she importuned.

"You know," he said, almost violently. "Chess gave me away."

"Then, what Chess said was—is true?"

"Yes, God help me, it *is*— But enough

of talk about me. You wanted me to free Panquitch?"

She did not reply. He had a glimpse of her eyes filming over, glazed, humid, before she closed them. Her head, that had been tilted back, drooped a little toward him, and her slender body now lent its weight against his. Chane had no strength to tear himself away from her, nor could he bear this close contact longer.

"Sue, what ails you?" he demanded sharply, and he shook her.

His voice, his rudeness, apparently jarred her out of her weakness. It seemed he watched a transformation pass over her, a change that most of all nonplused him. A blush rose and burned out of her face, leaving a radiant glow. She let go of his vest, drew back. And suddenly she seemed a woman, formidable, incredible, strong as she had been weak, eloquent of eye.

"Something did ail me, Chane, but I'm quite recovered now," she replied, with a wonderful light on her face.

"You talk in riddles, Sue Melberne."

"If you weren't so stupid you'd not think so."

"Reckon I am stupid. But we've got off the trail. You asked me to let Panquitch go."

"Yes, I beg of you."

"You're awful set on seeing him walk off up that slope, aren't you?" he inquired, trying to find words to prolong the conversation. Presently he must tell her that her slightest wish could never be ignored, that Panquitch was hers to free.

"Chane, I'll do anything for you if only you'll let him go."

He laughed; almost with bitter note. "How careless you are with words! No wonder Manerube got a wrong hunch."

She flushed at that. "I was a silly girl with Manerube. I'm an honest woman now. I said I'll do anything for you, Chane Weymer—*anything*."

"Reckon I hear you, unless I'm locoed," he said thickly. "I'm not asking anything of you. But I'm powerful curious. If you're honest now, suppose you tell me a few of the things you'd do for me."

"Shall I begin with a lot of small things—or with something big?" she inquired, in so sweet and tantalizing a voice that Chane felt the blood go back to his heart. She was beyond him. How useless to match wits with any woman, let alone one whom a man adored madly and hopelessly! Chane felt he must get out of this.

"Well, suppose you save time by beginning with something big," he suggested, in a scorn for himself and for her.

She stepped close to him again. She seemed cool, brave, and honest as she claimed to be. But her dark eyes held a strange fire.

"Very well. The biggest thing a woman can do is to be a man's wife."

Stupefaction held Chane in thrall. It took a moment to recover from the shock of that blow. Laying powerful hands on her shoulders he shook her as he might have a child.

"You'd marry me to save that horse?" he demanded incredulously.

"Yes."

"You'd throw yourself away for Panquitch?"

"Yes. But—I'd hardly call it that."

"Sue Melberne, you'd be my—my *wife!*"

"Yes, I will, Chane," she said.

"You love Panquitch so well? I remember you risked much to free the wild horses in the trap corral. But this is beyond belief. Yet you say so. You

don't look daft, though your talk seems so. I can't understand you. To sacrifice yourself for a horse, even though it's Panquitch!"

"I wouldn't regard it as—sacrifice," she whispered.

"But it is. It'd be wrong. It'd be a crime against your womanhood. I couldn't accept it. Besides, you're doing wrong to tempt me. I'm only a poor lonely rider. I've always been hungry for a woman. And I've never had one. It's doubly wrong, I tell you."

Chane stamped up and down the narrow place behind the rock. Hard violent action in the open had been his life: he brought it to bear on the conflict in his breast. With a black, hot, tearing wrench he got rid of the spell.

"Sue, I brought this—on myself," he said, gentle of tone, though his voice broke. "I wanted to hear you beg for Panquitch. I wanted you to be close to me. It was madness. All the time I was lying. From the moment you asked me to free Panquitch I meant to do it. You helped me catch him. You can free him."

Sue walked straight to him, closer than before, almost into his arms. The poise of head, the radiance of face, the eloquence of eye—these had vanished and she seemed stranger than before, a pale thing reaching for him.

"That will make me happy, but only —if I can pay—my debt," she faltered.

"What *do* you mean?"

"If you free Panquitch you must make me—your wife."

Chane clasped her in his arms, and held her closer and closer, sure in his bewilderment of only one thing, that if she persisted she would break him down. But now she was in his arms. Never could he let her go now! It was all so astounding. He was realizing what he could not believe., The stunning truth was that Sue Melberne lay in his arms, strangely willing. That was enough for his hungry heart, but his conscience stormed at him. Then, last of all, he felt as in a dream Sue's arms go up round his neck and fasten there.

"My God!" he gasped. "Sue, this can't be for Panquitch."

Her face came up, white like a flower, wet with tears. But strain and strife were gone.

"If you had any sense you'd have known I—I loved you!"

"*Sue Melberne!*"

"Now, my wild-horse hunter, take your rope off Panquitch—and put it on me," she replied, and raised her lips to his.

A little later Chane took the rope out of Chess's hands and held it to Sue. Then he knelt to slip off the noose of the other lasso, the one that was tied to the saddle on Brutus. Swiftly Chane stripped this from the stallion. Bending over, he loosed the knot round the forelegs.

"Pull it—easy," he called to Sue.

Sue drew the lasso taut, and slid it gently from the stallion. He gave a fierce snort. Then he raised his head. Actually he looked at his legs, and then with muscles knotting all over his body he heaved hard and got up. He was free and he knew it. Hate and fear flamed in his bloodshot eyes.

Chane thrilled when he met that look and knew in his soul what he was giving up. Panquitch stood for a moment, with his breathing audible. Thus Chane saw him close, standing unfettered, in all his magnificent and matchless beauty. Indeed, he was a lion of wild horses. Perfect in build, perfect in color, the rarest combination and the only

one Chane had ever seen in a tawny shade of yellow, with flowing mane and tail black as night. He had not a scar, not a blemish, not a fault. He represented the supreme handiwork of nature—a creature too beautiful, too proud, too noble, too wild for the yoke of man.

Panquitch shook himself and moved away. He was still weak, but his spirit showed in his prance. He snorted fiercely at Brutus. And Brutus returned the challenge.

"Run—oh, Panquitch, run!" cried Sue, with rich and mellow sweetness in her voice.

But the stallion did not run. His slow action was that of a spent horse. Keeping to the middle of the canyon, he trotted on, by the sand patch where lately he had pranced so proudly, by the cottonwood grove and the wavy slope of rock, and on, out of sight.

Chapter Fifteen

Hidden Guns

CHANE strode up the canyon as one in a dream, leading Brutus, with Sue in the saddle. From time to time he looked back to see if she were a reality. Her dark eyes shone, her lips were parted. There was a smile on her face, an exquisite light, a spirit that must be the love she had confessed. Life had become immeasurably full and sweet for him.

Chess passed from every manner of congratulation, boastfulness as to his bringing about this match, delight in Chane's good fortune, to despair at the loss of Panquitch.

"Now you two have each other, you don't care for nothing," he growled with finality, and forged on ahead to leave them alone.

Many times Chane halted to let Brutus come abreast of him, so that he could look up at Sue or touch her. And all at once something which had been forming in his mind coalesced into an insupportable query.

"Sue, when will you marry me?"

She laughed happily. "Why, we've only just become engaged."

"Darling, this is the wild canyon country of Utah," he protested. "People only stay engaged in cities or settlements. Tell me, how long must I wait?"

A rosy glow vied with the gold of Sue's warm cheek.

"Surely until Uncle Jim comes," she said shyly.

"Your uncle! I remember now—he's a preacher. And he may come yet this fall, certain in the spring?"

"I wish I could fib to you," returned Sue, "and say spring. But Dad is sure Uncle Jim will come by Thanksgiving."

He pressed her hand, unable to utter his profound joy and gratitude. Then he took up the bridle and strode on, leading Brutus.

The time came when ahead the canyon made a curve into brighter light. Beyond this point was the junction of the four canyons where camp had been made. As Chane turned the corner Brutus shied so violently that he tore the bridle from Chane's grasp.

"Hands up, Weymer," called a rough, husky voice.

Chane's dream was rudely shattered. He was unarmed. He raised his hands, and at the same instant he saw a dark-bearded man, with leveled gun, stride from behind the cliff.

"Up they are," he said, and ground

his teeth in sudden impotent anger. "Howdy, Slack."

"Same to you, Weymer," replied the other, sidling round in front of Chane toward Brutus.

"Reckon you see I'm not packing a gun."

"Yep, I shore was glad you wasn't wearin' any hardware. But just keep your hands up an' a respectable distance. I'm a distrustful feller," replied Slack, and presently, getting within reach of Brutus, he secured the bridle.

Chane's line of vision, as he stood rigidly, did not include Sue, until Slack led Brutus forward. Then she appeared, white of face and mute in her fear.

"Mosey on in front, Weymer," ordered the outlaw.

Chane had no choice but to comply. He had been in such situations before, and this one would not have greatly perturbed him if Sue had not been there. He lowered his hands and strode on toward the camp, intensely curious to see if what he found there would be identical with what he expected.

The triangular space of intersecting canyons presently came unobstructed to his view. A camp-fire was burning, and several men surrounded it, one of them sitting. Even at considerable distance Chane recognized the hard lean face of Bud McPherson.

Chess sat on a stone to one side, with his hands tied behind his back. Melberne did not appear to be present.

"Oh, there's Panquitch!" burst out Sue in shrill distress. "*Manerube*—he's got a rope on Panquitch!"

The content of her words flashed on Chane just as he espied Manerube hanging to two lassoes that were fast on Panquitch. The great stallion was holding back with a spirit vastly in excess of his strength.

Many as had been the bitter moments of Chane's life, that was the bitterest. The wild horse which Sue had loved and freed was now in the power of a hated rider. Panquitch, spent from his fight in the canyon pool, and expending what little strength he had left to catch up with his band, had fallen easily into Manerube's clutches. The cheap and arrogant rider was crowing like a gamecock over his prize, with his braggart's and bully's air more pronounced than ever. He whipped the ropes that secured Panquitch, making the horse flinch.

"Oh-h!" cried Sue. "He's hurting Panquitch. I won't stand it."

"Sue, keep still," ordered Chane sharply. "We can do nothing."

"Hyar, you squallin' bobcat," growled Slack, "stop walkin' your hoss on my heels."

They reached the campfire, with Chane a little in the lead. One of the other men, whose face was familiar, drew a gun and pointed it at him.

"Bill, he ain't got no gun, but your idee is correct," drawled Slack, and turning to Sue he laid a rough and meaning hand upon her, which she repulsed in anger. Then Slack swore at her and pulled her out of the saddle.

"Say, wench, if you know when you're well off, you'll be sweet instead of catty," he declared.

"Howdy, Weymer," said Bud McPherson coolly. "I'm savin' some of your good grub."

"Howdy, Bud. It's a habit of yours to help yourself to other people's property," rejoined Chane.

Back of the campfire, near where Chess sat bowed and disconsolate, crouched another man, also tied, and he appeared a pretty worn and miserable object. Chane at last recognized the unshaven and haggard face.

"Loughbridge!" he ejaculated. "Well, what're you hawg-tied for? Reckoned you'd thrown in with this outfit."

"Weymer, I was fooled worse'n Melberne," said Loughbridge. "I took Manerube at his brag. I had no idea he was a hoss thief—"

"Stop your gab!" yelled Manerube stridently. "You're a white-livered liar. I'm not a horse thief."

"Bud, give it to me straight," said Chane. "What's the deal with Loughbridge?"

"Wal, it ain't so clear to me," replied McPherson, rising to his feet. "Somebody gimme a smoke— Fact is, Weymer, I wasn't keen on havin' this man thrown in with us. Wal, when he found out our plan to appropriate Melberne's stock—which shore come out at this camp—he hedged an' began to bluster. You know I never argue. So we just put a halter on him."

"Where's Melberne?" added Chane.

"Shore you ought to know. We're waitin' fer him."

"Then what?" demanded Chane.

"Weymer, you allus was a hell-bent-pronto hombre," declared McPherson with good humor. "Reckon you want to know bad what the deal is. Wal, I'll tell you. We've been loafin' in camp waitin' for you-all to ketch the last bunch of hosses before fall set in cold. Then we seen them two Piutes prowlin' around, an' we figgered they'd fetched you another bunch of mustangs. Wal, the deal is hyar. When Melberne comes we'll rustle back to his homestead an' relieve you-all of considerable hoss-wranglin' an' feedin' this winter."

"Then, next summer, you'll look us up again," asserted Chane with sarcasm.

"Haw! Haw! You shore hit it plumb center," rejoined the ruffian.

"Bud, you're no fool," said Chane seriously. "You can't keep up this sort of thing. Somebody will kill you. Why don't you cut loose from these two-bit wranglers you've been riding with? I've known horse thieves to go back to honest ranching. It paid."

McPherson had no guffaw or badinage for this speech of Chane's. It went home. His frankness relieved Chane. McPherson would hardly resort to blood-spilling unless thwarted or cornered. Chane felt greatest anxiety on behalf of Sue. The outlaw leader, however, had never struck Chane as being a man to mistreat women, white or red. Slack was vicious, but under control of McPherson. It narrowed down to Manerube.

This individual swaggered into the camp circle. He had stretched two ropes on Panquitch, in opposite directions, and for the time being the great stallion was tractable. Manerube shot a malignant glance at Chane, and leered. The true nature of the man came out when he was on the side in control. As he turned to look Sue up and down, Chane saw the surge of blood ridge his neck. Chane also saw a whisky flask in his hip pocket and a gun in his belt.

"Bud, I heard you weren't boss of your outfit," said Chane, whose wits were active.

"Huh! The hell you did. When an' whar did you hear thet?"

"Reckon it was in Wund, when we drove Melberne's horses in."

"Wal, you heerd wrong," replied McPherson gruffly, and his glance fell on

Manerube with a glint that fanned a flame of cunning in Chane's mind.

"Bud, I trapped Panquitch in a deep hole down in the canyon," went on Chane. "It was a dirty trick to play on such a horse. I roped him. We had an awful time. He nearly drowned Brutus and me. But we got him out. And then—what do you think?"

"I've no idee, Weymer," returned the outlaw eagerly. He had the true rider's love for a horse, the true wrangler's ambition and pride.

"Bud, I let Panquitch go free!" declared Chane impressively.

"Aw now, Weymer, you can't expect me to believe thet," said McPherson, with a broad smile. "You're a wild-hoss wrangler. I've heerd of you for years."

"I was. But no more. Bud, I'm giving it to you straight. Panquitch was the last wild horse I'll ever rope. I let him go free."

"But what fer? You darned locoed liar!"

"Ask Sue Melberne," replied Chane, recognizing the moment to impress the outlaw. He was intensely interested, curious, doubtful, yet fascinated. He turned to Sue.

"Girl, what's he givin' me? Guff?"

"No, it's perfectly true. He let Panquitch go. I watched him do it."

"Wal, I'll be damned!" ejaculated McPherson. "Shore, girl, I don't see any reason for you to lie. But I gotta know why, if you want me to believe."

"It was my fault," replied Sue deliberately. "I told Chane—if he'd free Panquitch—I'd be his wife."

"An' he took you up!" shouted McPherson in gleeful wonder. "Wal, I've seen the day I could have done the same, even if it had been Panquitch."

From the rough, hardened outlaw that speech was a subtle compliment to both Sue and Chane. It hinted, also, of a time when McPherson had not been what he was now. Suddenly he lost that shadow of memory, and wheeled to Manerube, who stood derisive and rancorous, glaring at Chane.

"Didn't I tell you that hoss was tuckered out? Didn't I say he was all wet?"

"Yes, you said so, but I don't have to believe you. And Weymer's a liar," retorted Manerube.

"Sure I'm a liar—when you've got a gun and I haven't," interposed Chane stingingly.

"Huh! You wouldn't call the little lady a liar, too, would you?" demanded McPherson.

"She would lie and he would swear to it," snapped Manerube.

"Wal, that's no matter, except where I come from men didn't call girls names. But what I gotta beat into your thick head is this, that Panquitch was a spent horse. An' you never seen it. You thought you roped him when he was good as ever. You never *seen* it!"

"Suppose I didn't," returned Manerube furiously. "I roped him, spent or not. And he's mine."

"Hell! You're a fine wild-hoss wrangler!" exclaimed McPherson in disgust. "You don't even get my hunch. In this heah Utah there's a code, the same among hoss thieves as among wranglers. It's love of a grand hoss. An' I'm tellin' you it's a damn shame Panquitch fell into your rope."

"Say, Bud, are you going to let Manerube keep that horse?" demanded Chane ringingly, sure now of his game.

"What-at?" queried McPherson, as if staggered.

"If it's your outfit—if you're the boss, Panquitch is yours," asserted Chane

positively. "That's the law of the range. But even if it wasn't would you let Manerube keep that grand stallion? He'll ruin the horse. He couldn't break him. He couldn't ride him. He never was a wrangler. Now, McPherson, listen. You may be a horse thief, but you're a real rider. You have a rider's love for a grand stallion like Panquitch. You have a wrangler's pride in him. You'd never beat Panquitch, now would you?"

"Hell no! I never beat any hoss," shouted the outlaw hoarsely.

"There you are," announced Chane with finality, and he threw up his hands. How well he knew the state into which he had thrown McPherson!

"Reckon you're talkin' fine, Weymer, but ain't a little of it fer your hoss Brutus?" queried McPherson shrewdly.

"No. I never thought of my horse. But now you mention him, I'll say this. You stole my last bunch of mustangs. Brutus is all I have left. A horse and a saddle! That's the extent of my riches. You'd not be so mean as to rob me of them?"

"Wal, Weymer, I reckon I wouldn't now," he replied significantly. "Brutus ain't so bad. But what'd I do with him now? Haw! Haw!"

Manerube grew black with rage. "Bud McPherson, you mean you'll take Panquitch?"

"Wal, you heerd Weymer's idee of the code of the range," replied the outlaw calmly.

"Code be damned!" yelled Manerube fiercely. "Panquitch is mine. I roped him."

"Shore. But you're in my outfit, an' what you ketch is mine, if I want it. An' I want Panquitch. Savvy?"

Chane, watching so piercingly, saw a break in Manerube's quivering rage.

"You're a—horse—thief," Manerube panted, suddenly crouching.

"Wal, wal, wal!" guffawed McPherson, and he bent double with the mirth of the joke. When he straightened up it was to meet the red flame, the blue spurt of Manerube's gun. He uttered a gasp and fell limply, as if his legs had been chopped from under him.

Manerube did not lower the leveled gun. Smoke issued from the dark hole in the barrel. All the men seemed paralyzed, except Chane, who stepped aside, with eyes roving for a weapon in the belts near him. But none showed. Chane read Manerube's ferocious face. It was now gray and set with murderous intent.

"Jump aside, Slack, or I'll kill you," he hissed. "I want Weymer."

Slack frantically leaped aside, leaving Chane exposed. But Manerube did not fire. The smoking gun shook in his nerveless hand, and fell. At that instant, perhaps a fraction of a second before, Chane heard a tiny spat. He knew what it was. A lead bullet striking flesh!

Chane's gaze shot over Manerube's outstretched hand to his face. It was the same, but fixed. Then from the ragged brushy cliff above rang out the crack of a rifle. The echoes clapped back and forth. Over Manerube's glazed blank eyes, in his forehead, appeared a little round hole, first blue, then red. He swayed and fell, full length, face down.

This action was incredibly swift. Before Chane could make a move to rush to Sue he heard another spat. The bullet spanged off bone. Slack was knocked flat. Again the sharp crack of a rifle rang out. It broke the rigidity of that group. Frantically the three left of McPherson's band rushed for their horses.

Slack leaped up, bloody of face, wild of mien, and he bellowed:

"It's them hell-hound Piutes! Bud swore they was trailin' us. Get on an' ride!"

Not far behind was he in a leap to the saddle. The horses plunged madly and broke up the canyon. Another shot sounded from the cliff, deadened by the trampling hoofs. Then the swiftly moving dark blot of riders disappeared.

Chane's first thought was for Sue. He ran to her, took her in his arms. She seemed stiff, but her hands suddenly clutched him.

"Come away, Sue dear," he said gently, half carrying her. "Over here where Chess is. You're safe. I'm all right. We're all saved. They went up a different canyon from the one your father took. They won't meet him."

"How — terrible!" Sue whispered hoarsely. "All so—so sudden! Let me sit down. I'm weak and sick. But I won't faint."

"Sure you won't. Just keep your eyes away—from over there," replied Chane, and releasing her he ran to untie Chess's bonds.

Chane's next move was to release Loughbridge, who sat up with popping eyes and incoherent speech. From him Chane ran to the dead men, who had fallen close to each other. He covered them with a canvas. After that Chane gazed up at the cliff whence had come the rifle shots. Clouds of blue smoke were floating on the still air, gradually thinning. The cliff was broken and ragged, green with brush, and marked by a wildness of ledge up to the rim. It was not far to the top. Full well Chane knew who had fired that shot fatal to Manerube. But he would never tell, and no one else would ever know.

He hurried back to Sue, finding her recovered, though she was leaning on Chess's shoulder. Chane promptly relieved him of the burden.

"Humph! I thought she was in the family now," protested Chess.

"Boy, you wander in mind," returned Chane softly.

"If only dad would come!" exclaimed Sue, in anxious dread.

"Well, he's coming," said Chane gladly. "Look up the canyon. Did you ever see your dad run like that? He's scared Sue, either for himself or us."

Chapter Sixteen

Sunset on the Mesa

MELBERNE'S relief at sight of Sue safe and well, though pale, was so great as to approach collapse. When Chane pulled aside the canvas to expose Manerube and McPherson, lying so ghastly and suggestive, he cursed them under his breath.

But the amusing part of this sequence was the argument between Melberne and Loughbridge.

"I'm sorry, Jim, you shore have queered yourself with me," declared Melberne. His demeanor, however, was not in harmony with his hard words. He strode to and fro nervously.

"But, Mel, this here Manerube made a damn fool of you, same as me," persisted Loughbridge.

"Shore I acknowledge that. But he didn't make me double-cross you."

"I didn't. We couldn't agree, about money mostly, an' you fired me out of your outfit. I leave it to Chess, here. You ain't fair."

"Boss, if you'll excuse me, I think it was more temper with you than jus-

tice," replied Chess with immense gravity.

"Huh! Wal, I'll be darned!" said Melberne, surveying the boy in great disfavor. "I reckon you'd like to see Loughbridge homestead with us over there at Nightwatch Spring."

"That'd be fair and square of you," returned Chess.

"An' fetch Ora along to live with him, huh?" went on Melberne ironically.

"I should smile," answered Chess.

"See heah, young man, you've got good stuff, but you talk too much. I've a mind to fire you."

"Aw now—Boss," appealed Chess abjectly.

"Wal, if you don't marry Ora before spring I *will* fire you," growled Melberne.

Then he turned to his former partner. "Jim, I reckon I've no call to crow over you. I've had my lesson. An' if you've had yours, mebbe we'll both profit by it. My fault is temper, an' yours is a little too much fondness for money. Let's begin over again, each for himself. It's a new country. You're welcome to homestead in my canyon. There's room for another rancher. Some day before long there'll be a settlement west of Wund. An' that'll make our problem easier."

Panquitch startled Chane, and all the others, with one of his ringing neighs; and with head, ears, and mane erect he faced up the canyon.

Shrill whistles answered him. Chane espied a troop of wild horses coming out of the shadow.

"By golly! there's Panquitch's band," said Chane, pointing. "They're looking for him. They'll pass us. Everybody lie low."

Chane crouched behind a rock with Sue, who whispered that Panquitch should be free to go with them. It did seem to Chane that the straining stallion would free himself from Manerube's ropes. For some moments the wild horses could not be seen, owing to the fact that Chane and Sue were low down. At last, however, they came in sight, trotting cautiously, wary as always, but not yet having caught scent of the camp. At the junction of the canyons the space was fully a hundred yards wide, and owing to the stream bed, somewhat lower on the side opposite the camp. The wild-horse band worked down this side, trotting, with heads erect, until they caught scent of the camp, then burst into headlong flight, and in a dusty cloud, with a clattering roar they sped by, and down the canyon to disappear.

"Sue, wasn't it great?" queried Chane, as he got up.

But Sue had not been looking at the fleet band of wild horses; her startled gaze was fixed on Panquitch.

"Oh, Chane, look! He's broken one of the ropes!" cried Sue.

Chane wheeled in time to see the remnant of broken lasso fall off the superb tawny shoulder. The other lasso was round the noble arched neck of the stallion and had now become taut. Panquitch reared and lunged back with all his weight. As luck would have it, the rope broke at the noose. The stallion fell heavily, then raised on his forefeet, with mouth open. The broken noose hung loose. He was not yet sure of freedom.

Chess broke the silence: "Oh, the ropes were rotten! They broke. He'll get away— Gimme a rope. A rope! A rope!"

"Boy, keep still," shouted Chane sternly. "Can't you see Panquitch was

never born to be roped?"

The stallion painfully got to his feet. As the broken noose slipped from his neck he jumped as if stung. Then he walked through camp. He shied at the canvas covering the dead men, and breaking into a trot he headed down the canyon.

"Wal, I cain't pretend to savvy you, Chane," observed Melberne, scratching his head in his perplexity. "But shore I will say this. Somehow I'm glad you let him go."

"Damn it. So'm I!" yelled Chess, suddenly red of face, as if he had been unjustly accused. "But I—I was so crazy to keep him!"

Chane turned to Sue with a smile.

"He's gone, my dear. Suppose we ride down to the slope where he'll climb up to the mesa. There's work to do here that I'd rather you didn't see."

To and fro, across and around, up and down, far to this side, and back to the other, onward and upward they rode over the smooth waves and hollows of red sandstone. As they climbed, the purple and amber lights grew brighter, and the shadows of the canyons below grew deeper. They reached the zone of cream and yellow rock. Out of the dark depths they rose to the sunset-flushed heights.

"Oh, where is Panquitch?" Sue kept calling. But he had always just gone over a wave of rock.

All above the corrugated world of wind-worn stone streamed fan-shaped bars and bands of light, centering toward and disappearing over the height of ridge they had almost attained. Broken massed clouds floated in the west, dark-purple, silver-rimmed, golden-edged, in a sea of azure blue. The lights of sunset were intensifying. Sue felt that she rode up the last curved wave of an opal sea. She saw Chane shade his eyes from the fires of the sun. Like a god of the riders he seemed to her, bareheaded, his face alight, his sharp profile against the background of gold. Then she mounted to Chane's side, and it was as if in one step she had surmounted a peak.

All the forces of nature seemed to have united in one grand spectacle—the rugged canyon country of colored rock waved level with the setting sun, and above it, from west to north, loomed the cloud-piercing bulk of Wild Horse Mesa.

"Panquitch! I see him, Sue," said Chane, his voice ringing deep. "He's all alone. His band has gone up. Look! the fold in the wall! What a trail! Even the Piutes do not know it. Hard smooth rock over the bench, and then the zigzag up that crack. See, he shines gold and black in the sun!"

At last Sue's straining gaze was rewarded by clear sight of Panquitch climbing, apparently the very wall of the mesa. With bated breath Sue watched him.

"He's almost on top," said Chane joyfully.

Panquitch came out on top of the rim, sharply silhouetted against the blue sky, and stood a moment looking down, with his long mane and tail streaming in the wind. The lilac haze lent him unreality, but the uplift of his head gave him life. Wild and grand he seemed to Sue, fitting that last stand of wild horses. He moved against the sky; he was gone.

"Oh, Panquitch, stay up there always!" called Sue.

Chane smiled upon her. "Sweetheart, I'd stake my life he'll never feel another rope."

"We alone know his trail to the heights. And we never will tell?"

"Never, Sue."

Slowly the transformation of sunset worked its miracle of evanescent change and exquisite color. Gold and silver fire faded, died away. The sun sank below the verge. Then from out of the depths where it had gone rose the afterglow, deepening the lilac haze to purple.

"Chane, you have made Wild Horse Mesa yours," said Sue. "Millions of men can never take it from you. As for me—Panquitch seems mine. He's like my heart or something in my blood."

"Yes, I think I understand you," he replied dreamily. "We must labor—we must live as people have lived before. But these thoughts are beautiful— You are Panquitch and I am Wild Horse Mesa."

THE END

EYES OF THE ARMY—*A Western Quiz*

By Eric Manders

FLOUNDERING in an environment that was as strange as it was hostile, an embarrassed Army of the West found itself obliged to rely on civilian aid in such matters as reading sign, finding water, and explaining Indians in general to its proud commanders. Ergo—the scout. The first scouts were generally retired mountain men; ultimately they were replaced by others quite as competent and daring—come-latelies made trail-wise through personal experience as prospectors, hunters, and the like. The ten scouts listed below in the left-hand column represent about fifty years of Injun-fighting with the U. S. Cavalry. See how many you can identify correctly from the clues given in the right-hand column. Five right will pass you on this toughish quiz. Answers on page 138.

1. Captain Jack Crawford	_____contemporary and messmate of Kit Carson
2. Alexis Godey	_____famed Apache scout convicted of murder in Wyoming
3. Pete Kitchen	_____played on the Broadway stage with Buffalo Bill Cody
4. Al Seiber	_____died in the San Juan Mountains while guiding Fremont
5. Frank Grouard	_____went under with Custer at the Little Big Horn
6. Tom Horn	_____chief of scouts for General Crook
7. Charley Reynoulds	_____discovered the Tombstone Lode while scouting against Geronimo
8. Old Bill Williams	_____called "the Daniel Boone of Arizona"
9. Ed Schieffelin	_____chief of scouts in the Apache campaigns
10. Texas Jack Omohondro	_____the scouts' "poet laureate"

THE KID *wanted to keep moving, but his pard just had to ride the grulla with the sarco eye— First publication.*

THE PEELERS

By WILLIAM J. GLYNN

IF WE could have moved right along and crossed the Little Heart before dark, we'd have hit Mandan the following night. Once in the timber along the Missouri there would have been plenty of time to think of fresh horses.

But you could never plan ahead with a man like Frank. When we topped the rise and saw the little ranch in the coulee, he called a halt.

"Horse outfit," Frank said, hitching around in his saddle. "Mustanger. See that wing-corral? He'll have green broncs ain't never been rode."

I said, "All right. It's a horse ranch. We'll ride a wide circle around it. We'll get down off this rise before they spot us."

Frank shook his stubbled face. He spurred his black up close to the bay I was riding and reached out to grab my arm. His lips got tight over his teeth.

"Listen, Kid. We need fresh horses. We're riding down there."

Our horses weren't too tired. When Frank saw a bronc he liked he had to try and ride him, and buy or steal him. And he was always looking. I couldn't afford to rile him, so I said all right and we rode down and pulled up in front of the soddy barn.

To the bearded old man who came out of the log house, Frank said, "How about some grub, old-timer?" He dis-

mounted without waiting for the rancher to ask us to get down.

"Frank," I said, "we haven't time to stop. I've got plenty bacon and flour in my slicker."

But I stepped down, and when Frank put his reins in my hand I led the horses over to the barn and turned them in with the work team there.

Frank had spotted the one saddle horse on the outfit. Trust him for that. He walked over to the corral, taking in the points of the shaggy mustang.

"Want to sell that grulla?" Frank said to the old man.

The rancher looked us over and said, "No. You punchers riding grub line?"

Frank said, "No, we ain't riding grub line."

"Frank," I said. "We can't buy anything. Not with the money we're carrying!"

"Old man," Frank said, "you want to maybe trade that grulla, for the bay?"

The rancher turned to look at the grulla as though he had never seen him before. He shook his head. "Saving him to sell to the Bill Cody show. He's hell on four feet."

To Frank that was a challenge. I was worried. The grulla had a sarco eye that looked as wild and glassy as a white door knob. That slate-gray devil would pile Frank, for he wasn't a top-hand peeler. You couldn't tell him that, though. He was plenty quick with his fists; faster with his gun. He was big, too, lean and bony, with little black eyes that could look a pair of holes right through a man. But he wasn't a good bronc rider. I went up to him, took him by the arm, turned him around.

"We got to move along, Frank."

"I'll give the word when to move on," he said. "First we're going to eat."

"All right. And you can look at the mustang after we eat."

To the old man Frank said, "You rustle us some grub."

The rancher looked pretty sour, but he jerked a thumb at the house. "Come along," he grunted.

We followed and inside the kitchen he pointed to the table and turned to the door that led to the other room.

"Tony!" he called.

Frank said, "What the hell?" and drew his gun, covering the old man.

I stepped away from the window and pulled my Colt, pointing it at the door.

Then the girl came into the kitchen. She walked as if the floor was covered with broken glass and she was afraid of cutting her feet. Frank put his gun away. He went over and took the Winchester off the pronghorns on the wall, levered out the cartridges. He shoved the old man down into a chair.

"You stay there," he told him.

I was watching the girl. She was worth looking at. Mostly, it was her eyes. They were big and brown with long lashes. Prairie-lonesome, I'd say. Or maybe she was scared. I guessed she had been watching us from a window and had made up her mind about us, for she didn't smile. She just stood there, her buckskin riding-skirt almost touching her beaded moccasins.

The old man said, "Better rustle up some food for these two, Tony."

"Sit down," she said.

We ate warmed-over steak and cold biscuits and washed it down with coffee. Good Arbuckle. The girl didn't say anything, but once I saw her flash those brown eyes at her father, right after I pulled out the big gold watch I had taken from the stage hostler at Gall and showed Frank the time.

"Frank," I said. "Let's go right along. We don't need fresh horses. We can take it easy and still make the crossing on Little Heart before dark."

"I ain't got any fresh horses caught up," the rancher said. "But I heard the hostler at the Gall stage station has a couple of good saddle-broke geldings, a bay and a black. I sold my last gather of mustang broncs to the re-mount over at Fort Lincoln last week. Tony and me took some of the rough off 'em. Tony can ride mighty fine, can't you, honey?"

Tony nodded and her tanned cheeks colored up a little when she caught me smiling at her. But when Frank got up and tipped his hat to her, she went white and backed up beside her father.

I saw the old man look sharp at Frank. He said, "Maybe—you can have that grulla, if you want to take the kinks out of him. You can leave that bay your pard's riding."

Frank said sure without even asking me if it was all right. I didn't like it, and on the way back to the corral Frank said:

"Hell, Kid. Don't get to chewing your bit. I'll see you get a good horse soon as we hit Mandan. Go strip your Cheyenne rig off the bay and slap 'er on the grulla. I'm going to ride that damn glass-eye if it's the last thing I do."

"And have that sarco maybe break your leg, or fall on my new saddle and mash it," I said.

Frank's big dally-welter fingers dug into my shoulder. "Don't get your neck hair up, Kid," he said. "We're both in this, all the way." His eyes got flinty. "You try to back out now and you're a dead man."

I shook off his hand. "I'm not backing out. I just want to get along. That stage isn't too far back our trail."

Frank was waiting for me when I rode into the corral. I had switched saddles, put his on the bay and carried my Cheyenne. I handed it over, then I shook out a loop and threw a Mangana, forefooting the grulla. We put a hackamore on him and I tied my bandana over his eyes. And when that snorting bundle of horseflesh got back on his feet, Frank eased the saddle onto his humped-up back.

It took a time or two to thread the latigo through the cinch ring, for that devil could strike like a bull moose. He sure wasn't much on beauty, but he was all there with brains. Frank got mad when he held his wind. He kicked him two, three times before he'd let out the air he'd taken on. I figured that horse had been ridden, but I didn't say anything.

When the cinch was tight Frank stepped up. I crawled my bay, riding up close to jerk off the blind. When Frank yelled ready all hell broke loose, just like I knew it would. That white-eyed devil swallowed his head and broke in the middle. When he came down I could hear Frank's teeth click away over on the other side of the corral. Frank hollered like a hostile and there was a sort of wild joy in it.

But he wasn't going to stay. That first bad jump had loosened his hold, and though he dug his spurs into the cinch, he never did regain his tight seat. Each stiff-legged, pile-driving buck inched him out a little more. The horse screamed like a cougar and every time he came down the corral shook. Then he sunfished and that extra twist did it.

Frank hunted the clouds and came down hard. I rode in quick so he wouldn't get stomped, but the grulla didn't want anything more to do with

Frank. He circled the corral, kicking at every jump and rubbing my saddle against the rails.

Frank hollered. I turned and saw him get to his feet. He was groggy. Blood showed on his lips from the jarring he had taken, and his right arm hung down limp at his side.

"Kid!" he shouted.

Then I saw where he was pointing, to the riders outside the corral. There were a half dozen. They had their saddle guns leveled. There wasn't a chance and when the one with the star on the front of his vest yelled, "Put up them hands." I did.

Frank made a fool play and tried to grab his gun. He had forgotten about his right arm. By the time he had reached across with his left to drag the six-shooter free, those riders had opened up. It sounded like the soldiers at range practice up to the Fort.

Frank stepped back a few feet and went down. His body jerked some, but it was the lead hitting into him. He didn't move when they quit shooting.

They rode into the corral and the bald little gent from the stage station at Gall came over, took back his gold watch, and jabbed his carbine into my chest.

"You damn road agent," he said.

The sheriff dug the stage money out of Frank's saddlebags and put his cuffs on me. Another one tied my boots into the stirrups.

Tony climbed the corral about then and dropped down inside to take the grulla's hackamore rope. He didn't spook a bit and she mounted that devil in as pretty a leap as I ever saw and trotted him across the corral. The horse was as quiet and friendly as a house cat for her—a one-woman horse.

I was thinking of Frank and I was glad he wasn't there to see the grulla act so mild, for it sure would have made him fit to tie.

As they led me out the girl said, "What about your new saddle, Kid?"

"Keep it, Tony," I told her. "I bought it—with honest wages. Cowhand wages."

She gave me a nice smile and waved.

"So long, Kid," she said.

MOTHER-LODE SKIN GAME

WHEN IT WAS DISCOVERED that ground particles of lead, galvanized with small quantities of gold, could be passed off on unsuspecting storekeepers as pure gold dust, a new get-rich-quick scheme developed in the bonanza towns of the West. Riding up to a roadhouse, a swindler would produce several ounces of this counterfeit dust, requesting that it be held for payment to a friend at some later date—or perhaps he would simply say that he was departing on a hazardous journey and wanted the storekeeper to guard the dust for him until his return. In any case, the result was the same. The dust, after being carefully weighed out, was deposited in a large metal bin along with the deposits of other people and the daily profits of the business. Then a receipt was issued to the swindler. By the time, some weeks later, that an accomplice called to collect the deposit, or the swindler returned for it himself, the contents of the bin would have been changed several times as new deposits and withdrawals were made. When his dust was weighed out and returned to him, it was likely to be pure or nearly pure gold, most of the lead particles already having been given out to others, or so mixed into the larger quantity of genuine gold dust that they were negligible.

—GENE HAMMOND

ANVIL AGGIE'S *leap-year manhunt leads to a reign of terror for the flower of Apache's bachelordom. A ZGWM original.*

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn

Just Another (Black) Smith

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

LEAP YEARS held no horrors for the bachelors of Apache until this kind of matrimonial bureau was set up as a sideline by the new blacksmith who leased the shop over at the Mare's Nest Livery Stable. That percipitated a crisis of which there weren't no whicher in the history of Stirrup County, Ariz.

At the time this catasterphy started, all of 'Pache's single men was caught with their chances down, except Justin Other Smith, the young artist feller who is called the Paintin' Pistoleer hereabouts, on account of him being the champeen pistol shot of the hull Territory.

Smith was campin' over in the Sacatone foothills, making some sketches of wild West scenery he aimed to use for the pitchers he paints for calendars and almanac covers and such like, when his palomino hoss, Skeeter, throwed a shoe in some scabrock.

Rather than risk cripplin' such a fine hoss, Smith gives up his expedition and walks back acrost the desert in his cowboots, arrivin' in Apache plumb frazzled from muzzle to buttplate.

He drops in at the Bloated Goat Sa-

loon to fortify hisself with some cold buttermilk, and is surprised to find the place deserted except for Curly Bill Grane, the owner, and Doc Sigmoid Grubb, who is sleepin' off a drunk on a pool table out back.

When Smith mentions he had wanted Grubb to shoe his pony, Grubb bein' the only vetinary in town, Grane speaks up sly-like:

"We got a new blacksmith in 'Pache since you left, son. Pedicures a pony for half what Doc would charge, and does better work."

Well, seein' as how Grubb was technickle out of town nohow, and realizin' he orter git Skeeter fixed up without no more delay, the Paintin' Pistoleer takes up Curly Bill's recommend and leads his limpin' palomino over to the Mare's Nest blacksmith shop.

A hammer is makin' music on a anvil inside the shed, and when Smith looks in he sees that Apache's new blacksmith is by far the biggest hombre who ever threw a shadow in these parts. His back is turned to Justin, but it was as wide as a wagon sheet. He had redwood tree trunks for laigs, and used a tug strap for a belt.

"My hoss is developin' a split hoof, Mister," Justin O. speaks up, when this anvil-beatin' mammoth flips a fifty-pound hunk of hot iron into a coolin' vat and racks up his tongs. "Reckon you could fix me up with a new hoss-shoe before– *Aaaak!*"

While Justin O. is speaking this blacksmith has been turnin' around slow and ponderous, like a locomotive on a turntable. Now he has a front view, Justin's mouth flaps open like a trap. This mountin in the leather apron and outsize overhalls ain't no man. She's a female woman, built like a grain elevator, with a juttin' chin like a snowplow and eyebrows like awnings.

It taken cornsiderable ogglin' to survey this spectacle between blinks. She's wearin' a sleeveless shirt which she fills out like a haybarn after a bumper crop. When she flexes her biceps it's like a couple whales surfacin' in the ocean. Her hair is a kind of excelsior yellow, cut short. At the moment she's busy chawing the knots out of a cud of eatin' tobacco the size of a cake of soap. She twists her mouth slanchways and cuts loose with a splat of juice which whups past the Pistoleer's off ear like a .22 slug.

"Don't duck," she booms. "I never miss at short range."

Smith turns around to see that she has tallied a pore lizzard which had been careless enough to shinny up a hitchin'-post twenty foot past where Skeeter was waitin' in the doorway. Short range!

"Prime-lookin' specimen," this blacksmithess rumbles in a bass voice that reminds Smith of a runaway freight pilin' up at the bottom of a grade. "Trifle puny-built, though; prob'ly wouldn't last long in harness. Just fryin'-size, as my third husband, Chauncy Ringwart, used to say–bless his sainted bones."

Smith recovers from his shock somewhat, but he's still too dazed to be his usual courteous self where ladies is concerned. What she's said riles Smith, and he comes back fast-like, in his soft Alabama drawl:

"I'll have you to understand that Skeeter ain't a plow horse, ma'am. He's a pureblood palomino, with more speed and bottom than any four-laiged critter in the Territory. If he looks puny it's because he threw a shoe two days ago and–"

The blacksmithess has been ap-

proachin' Smith whilst he's defendin' his bronc, and she brushes him out of her path like he was a fly on her shirt. Only Justin O. can't fly; he sprawls tail over tincup in a series of somersaults which winds him up in a pile of old harness at the far side of the shop, stunned and gaspin', with a couple hoss collars draped over his ears.

"I wasn't referrin' to this *hoss*, dearie," she chuckles, and her laugh is enough to make Smith's hair take up and walk off. "I was tickin' off yore own lack of manly attributes. You—"

Just then this she-giant spots the foldin' easle and paint box strapped ahint Justin's cantle, and she busts off pronto, sizin' up Smith with new interest as he painfully hauls hisself up.

"Why, you're the Paintin' Pistoleer!" she booms out, hunkering down on the rim of her brick forge. "Mebbe I misjudged you at first look. Like my first husband, Eustace, used to say—you cain't blame an hombre fer lookin' like he was made of leftovers. Step over here, little feller, where I can size you up."

The Paintin' Pistoleer don't want to, but he finds hisself hopping over to this lady blacksmith as meek as a whipped pup.

"Yes'm," he says in a mousy whisper. "Er—have we met?"

"Name's Agatha Q. Fleegle, better knowed as Anvil Aggie," she says, proddin' his briskit and pinchin' his arms and peelin' back his lips to look at his teeth. "Nope. Sorry. You ain't the man." She sighs, and the suction like to removed Smith's eyelashes. "Which is a pity, seein' as how I come to Apache on a man-hunt."

Smith gulps, feelin' as pawed-over as a bustle at a barn dance.

"You mean—you're a lady detective?" he asks.

This Anvil Aggie throws back her head and guffaws like a Mizzouri mule, loud enough to rattle the shingles.

"Big sense o' humor for such a little cull," she wheezes, tears streamin' down her bushel-basket cheeks. "Bless yore heart, child, no. It's a man to marry I'm hunting. Like my second husbind, Prof. Crispenshlagle, used to say—it's better to have loved a short man, though, than never to have loved a-tall. Git it? Yak! Yak! But you don't fit my specifications, son."

With which Anvil Aggie waddles outside to have a look at Skeeter's sore hoof. The palomino spooks, thinkin' a hippopotamus is approachin', but Aggie don't waste no time calmin' him down. She hooks one stovepipe-sized elbow around the pony's neck, trips his front laigs with her knee, grabs aholt of Skeeter's white tail and next thing the Paintin' Pistoleer knowed, Anvil Aggie is settin' astraddle Skeeter's belly, examin' his lame hoof real thoughty-like.

"I'll have this animule re-shod in an hour, youngster," Aggie reports, making Smith duck fast to avoid bein' bull's-eyed with a sideways squirt of chawin' juice. "I'll do the job free if you fetch back an unattached male citizen with you—one I ain't already sized up and found wantin'."

Justin O. Smith never thought he'd live to see the day he'd desert his hoss in an emergency, but he does now, limpin' out of the blacksmith shop like he'd been beaned by a ten-pound sledge. He sees a crowd of menfolks watchin' from the winders of the O. K. Mercantile, acrost the street, and he rattles his hocks over there to find the whole town has been spyin' on his introduction to Anvil Aggie Fleegle.

"I feel like a cyclone had picked me up and set me down five counties up the line," Smith groans, gratefully acceptin' a pint of Scotch which Sol Fishman passes him acrost the counter. "What did I run into? Is she animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

Sol Fishman is doubled up with laughter. Likewise Jim Groot, the banker, and Lew Pirtle, the Overland Telegraph operator.

Swiggin' down a shot of forty-rod to fortify hisself after the ordeal he's just excaped from, the Paintin' Pistoleer turns to size up how the rest of 'Pache's citizens are takin' this thing. And right off he notices somethin' plumb peculiar.

Half of the boys are as long-faced and sober as Inky McKrimp's jenny mule, Queen Cleopatra; and each one of these hombres ain't married. The other half, includin' Heck Coddlewort and Clem Chouder, are hee-hawin' fit to split a gut. They are all fambly men.

"Will somebody please explain?" Smith begs pitiful-like, massaging a black and blue spot where Aggie had stroked him with the tip of her thumb. "What's so all-fired funny in this mayhem?"

"This is no time for levity," agrees Plato X. Scrounge, the local justice of the peaces, and likewise a bachelor. "We're glad you're back to lend moral support to us unclaimed blessings, Justin. It's been a mighty rough week for us single galoots."

Inky McKrimp, editor of the *Apache Weekly Warwhoop*, comes ridin' up from the back of the store on his jenny mule. Seein' as how none of the bachelors are up to bustin' the calamitous news to the Paintin' Pistoleer, McKrimp says:

"Young feller, a great tribulation has befell this me-tropolis durin' yore absence. That blacksmithin' she-devil acrost the street has moved in permanent. She's a menace to the security of ever unhitched man in Stirrup County, *et ux*. You see," Inky says, "she's buried five husbinds afore she hit Arizony, marryin' ever one of 'em on a leap year. She's come here with the public-avowed intention of annexin' Husbind No. Six to her list, leap year makin' such onfeminine ticktacks legal. Whoever she decides on will be all the same as doomed. There's no defyin' that lady juggernaut."

Well, for the first time since he bandied words with Anvil Aggie, the Paintin' Pistoleer manages to whomp up a grin like a undertaker after a wholesale massacree.

"Amigos," he says, heavin' a great sigh of relief, "I ain't got a thing to worry about, then. Anvil Aggie has sized me up for a cull and rejected me cold, as a prospective helpmeet. She says I'm the runt of a scrub litter, too puny to give a second thought to."

Sheriff Rimfire Cudd claps a hand to his beak and looks sick.

"You was our last resort, Justin O.," Cudd groans. "None of us bachelors been able to sleep a wink since that husbind-huntin' hairy-dan showed up, not knowin' which of us eligible ketches she aimed to dap her loop onto. Ifn she's shuffled *you* out of the deck, there ain't ary of us safe, one minute to the next."

Just then Doc Sigmoid Grubb come lurchin' into the O. K. Mercantile on the arm of Curly Bill. Neither of these yahoos are hitched to no squaw; they couldn't qualify for anti-matrimonial insurance on a bet. Grubb looks at the Paintin' Pistoleer hopeful, and then at

the row of bachelors. These latter shakes their haids in unison, like dummies jerked by the same string.

"She don't cotton to Smith for wholly matrimony, eh?" Grubb says. "Well, men, that settles it. We got to take steps."

By now the Paintin' Pistoleer realizes the full seriousness of the reign of terror which has panic-struck Apache.

"What's the matter with you yellerbellied cowards?" he jeers. "If Anvil Aggie makes herself obnoxious, Rimfire Cudd will jail her for disturbin' the peace. Plato X. can send her packin' and Apache will once more become the land of the free and the home of the brave."

The sheriff shudders. "Thank ye fer the complimunt," he says, "but even if I could entice that she-blister inside my jail, it wouldn't be fair to the taxpayers. Aggie would rip out every bar in the calaboose and weave herself a screen door with same. It'd taken a platoon of U. S. Army cavalry to back her into a stall, and I ain't so shore the military wouldn't withdraw with heavy losses."

Lawyer Scrounge says doleful, "Me, I'd resign my judgeship afore I'd face that Amazon in court. It looks like we bet on the wrong hoss, tellin' Aggie what a fine husbind Smith would make. She's just been waitin' for him to git back, before she makes up her mind which one of us she'll convert into a benedictine."

Justin O., knowin' he's safe from Aggie's mantrap, havin' already been shuffled into her discard stack, he finds hisself laughin' fit to split at the misery of his fellow bachelors. An hour or two later he sobers up enough to take a pasear back to the blacksmith shop, where he finds Anvil Aggie feedin' Skeeter some sugar, the palomino sportin' not one new shoe, but a full set.

Seein' Smith come in, Anvil Aggie scowls disappointed and rumbles, "You didn't fetch along no prospect, small fry? Then I'll have to charge you two bits for this hossshoein'. Fine animule. Don't hold a grudge for the henpeckin' I give him. All same as my third husband, Chauncy. Chauncy used to tell me—"

"Hey," Justin O. interrupts Anvil Aggie's reminiscences concerning the third martyr in her conjugal past. "I didn't exactly come back empty-handed. I been out doin' some spadework for you. What's the matter with Sigmoid Grubb? He's industrious—runs a barber and dentist trade, besides bein' our medico and coroner and—"

Anvil Aggie drowns him out by startin' to manicure her little fingernail with a sixteen-inch farrier's rasp.

"Dr. Grubb is out," she roars. "Fine man, but drinks, they tell me. Can't tolerate tipplers. Like my fourth husband, Tosspot Twigglebaum. He used to say, lips that touch likker should try wringin' out his beard—if they don't mind mixed drinks."

The Paintin' Pistoleer keeps needlin' Anvil Aggie concernin' her matrimonial intentions. He likes to live dangerous, that boy.

"I've known Sigmoid going on four years now and I believe his redemption from John Barleycorn depends on marrying some virtuous teetotaler like yourself, Missus Fleegle. If you say the word, I'll drop a recommend about you in Doc's good ear—"

Anvil Aggie absent-mindedly picks up one of the shoes she's tooken off Skeeter's hoofs, decides it ain't worth

salvagin', and usin' her left hand she twists it into the shape of an iron pretzel.

"Dr. Grubb is out," she insists. "My mind's made up. Couldn't endure the humiliation of callin' my man Sigmoid. I looked it up in the dictionary. Vulgar name. He's low-class trash. And besides, he drinks. I want my Galahads dry, and I don't mean house-broke. Nosir, you got to do better than that, laddie."

Well, that night is lodge meetin', but turns out when Smith shows up only the married brothers is present. Sol Fishman stops braggin' about this baby his wife Prunelly is goin' to have and tips off Smith that the bachelor members have organized what they call the "Self-Preservation Club" and are holdin' their first meetin' tonight over at Dyspepsia Dan's Feedbag Cafe.

Feelin' in the mood for some fun, Justin O. Smith hikes over to the restaurant and sure enough, finds a quorum of unwedded males gathered there, discussin' ways and means of dodging Anvil Aggie's threat to their independence and common welfare.

"Welcome to our charter meetin', Justin," quavers Chairman Cudd, who figgers he is the one man in 'Pache who is most likely to attrack Anvil Aggie's loving eye, on account of his authority as sheriff, to say nothing of his masculine charms. "We've about decided to leave the community in mass, before one of us is hawg-tied and stirrup-drug to the halter. Shall we adjourn?"

Smith's conscience gits to hurtin' him, when he seed how desprit and woe-begonst these potential targets for Cupid's darts have become in the face of this tragic leap-year menace.

"I got good news," Smith says. "Aggie tells me she has already crossed Doc Grubb off her list, for alcoholic reasons. That should also eliminate Curly Bill and Inky McKrimp, automatic. I figger the best way out of this mess is to impress on Aggie what rotten matrimonial timber you all are. Why not get sousin' drunk on Blue Bagpipe Scotch—or better yet, some of Inky McKrimp's home-brewed Essense of Tarantula Juice—and go outside and insult Aggie face to face? A few of you ought to survive the shambles."

The Self-Preservation Club busts out clappin' at this suggestion, but when Inky McKrimp slides down offn his jenny mule, which same he has tied to a lunch-counter stool, and starts to pass around his jug of Tarantula Essence, they find themselves facin' a difficult dilemmy.

"Hold off," Curly Bill Grane shudders, remembering what one sip of Inky's homebrew done to his gullet and former false teeth. "I'd as leaf have Anvil Aggie responsible for my funeral expanses as to pizen myself before I'm shore *I'm* the unlucky man."

Just then the front door of the Feedbag caves in offn its hinges and Missus Aggie Fleegle in person wedges her hips and shoulders through the four-foot openin'.

The bachelors is too petrified to run for cover, but Anvil Aggie is beamin' real benevolent-like as she lumbers over to the table where the boys have been augerin', and plunks down a big steamin' gooseberry pie with her initials in a heart on the crust.

"Evenin', gents," she says. "Like my fifth husbind, Goodberg Fleegle, always told me, the way to a man's gizzard is through his front teeth—bless his memory. I whomped up this little pie on my forge tonight. Thought you charm-

in' gentlemen might be hongry for a sample of my world-famous home cookin'."

The bachelors just stand there with their eyeballs bulgin' out like tromped-on toad-frawgs, unable to move a muskle. The Paintin' Pistoleer, the only man present who's shore he's immune to Aggie's passions, remembers his manners enough to say:

"Much obliged, ma'am. We was just thinkin'—Apache is too small a town for a woman of yore beauty and talents to be wastin' time fishin' for a mate in. You ought to try—well, some city like Tucson."

Aggie makes off to set down on a stool at the counter, but the iron upright bends over like it was a wet noodle. She waggles a scoldin' finger at the boys and purrs like a rockslide tumblin' down a mountain, "Tut-tut, gentlemen! Why stray into greener pastors acrost the fence, when the cream of the West's manhood is right here in this room, beggin' to be skimmed?"

Ever galoot at the table thinks Aggie is starin' straight at him as she rumbles on, "I've already made my se-lection, boys. The lucky one will receive my love token in due time. Until then, I must keep you all in suspenders as to which of you is to become the lucky Number Six in my leap-year list."

With which Aggie makes her exit, leaving a dent in the plank floor ever place she set a hoof. Outdoors there is a loud splinterin' crash, which means the Feedbag will need a new porch floor, to say nothing of some repairs to the plank sidewalk out front.

The Paintin' Pistoleer starts laughin' historically. He kin afford to, o' course, knowin' he's already been hazed out of the herd as a candidate for the glue works. Not the other boys.

"Well, it's been nice knowin' you fellers," Curly Bill Grane says. "We better go our sep'ert ways. You hearn what she said about a Token. One of us she's singled out fer brandin'. Adios!"

Follerin' Grane doorward, the sheriff yanks off his star. "I'm the obvious one she's set her cap fer," Rimfire says. "Reckon I'll hole up tonight at my brother Chewie's sheep ranch, to let my hoss rest up a bit, and then skedaddle south of the Border."

With which Cudd lights out like a turpentined terrier.

Inky McKrimp's mule picks her way through the debris outside and his remarks float back through the dark: "Noosepaper business is doormat hereabouts, Cleo. We'll hunt us a welcome elsewheres. Say in Ketch-as-Ketch-Can, Alasky. Rattle yore hocks, mule."

Inside of two ticks the Feedbag Cafe is empty except for Dyspepsia Dan and his Chinee cook. All this time the aroma of Aggie's gooseberry pie has been tantylizin' Dan's nose. He says to the Chinaman, "I'm deedin' my establishment over to you, Aw Gwan," he says. "Afore I light out, I might as well sample a slab of this pie. Might help my chronicle indigestion, *quien sabe?*"

The Paintin' Pistoleer drops by the Bloated Goat Saloon on his way up the street, figgering to roundside with the boys over his usual buttermilk nightcap. But he finds the batwings padlocked and a sign writ on the window with soap:

LEAVING TOWN INDEFINITE.
C. B. GRANE, PROP.

Well, Justin O. has laughed so much today his side aches, so he decides to skip the lodge meetin' and goes to his studio upstairs over the Longhorn Sad-

dle Shop. Fumblin' for the doorknob, he finds somebody has pinned a sheet of paper over the keyhole. Inside, by lantern light, he sees it's a pome, 2-wit:

OWED TO LEAP-YEAR
(By A. F.)

Under the spreading Yucca tree
Our 'Pache blacksmith stands;
Three hunderd lbs of charm is she
With muskles like ironic bands.
Her designs are matrimonial,
Her heart is as big as a hat;
Her past is her best testimonial
Five husbinds are proof of that.
She's shopped around the local field
And chose the man who's smartest;
By this Token is her choice revealed—
Aggie aims to marry an artist!

The wind went out of Justin O. Smith liken he'd played blindfold leapfrawg with a brimmer bull. He manages to drag hisself to a chair, and casts a longin' eye on his famous .32 on a .45 frame, which same is hangin' in its holster on a wall peg in easy reach.

"Murder's too extreme," he tells hisself, scairt sick. "And I'm too young for suicide." He pulls hisself together, eyein' his sickly reflection in the mirror he shaves with. "Who's afraid of a mere woman, even if she's big as Pike's Peak? Am I am man or a mouse? Hell's fire, just because this is leap year—"

But it's no use. The Paintin' Pistoleer's teeth get to clatterin' so loud he cain't carry on this discussion with the gibberin' paleface in the lookin'-glass.

Next thing he knew, Smith's sprintin' for the jailhouse, where Rimfire Cudd is busy packin' possibles into a gunnysack.

"Anvil Aggie give *me* The Token!" Smith caterwauls. "She's picked me for the slaughter! It's yore duty to protect me!"

Rimfire starts emptyin' his possibles out of his gunnysack.

"Don't pester *me* for help," he says, pinning his star on. "Corngratulations! When do you start passin' out the see-gars?"

Justin O. reels up the hill to the old Snodgrass Mansion where Inky McKrimp has his *Weekly Warwhoop* orifice and printshop. He interrupts Inky in the middle of dismantlin' his printin' press, fixin' to load up Queen Cleopatra's cart and head yonderward. Now, hearing what Smith has to say, Inky starts grinnin' like a loony tick and scrabbles around for his notebook.

"This'll make a fine headline for my next edition, son," McKrimp says. "Leave all arrangements to me, as yore best man. I'll brace the Ladies' Knittin' & Peach Presarves Society to desecrate the lodge hall for the weddin' ceremony. Who's goin' to tie the knot—Plato X. Scrounge? He's justice of the peaces—"

Smith got out of there fast. He locates Plato X. at the Wells-Fargo station, dickerin' for a ticket on tomorrow's stage for New Mexico and p'ints east. Smith thinks mebbeso Lawyer Scrounge can give him some legal advice on the constitutionality of his impendin' life sentence; but all the satisfaction that shyster would give him was an offer to perform the nooptial rites for six bits, which same is half Scrounge's usual fee.

By midnight Justin O. is fitten to be tied. He's aflounderin' around town like a turkey goblet with its head off. It's plain to be seed the hull town is agin him; but he hates the thought of leavin' 'Pache and all his fair-weather friends, besides which he has paid up his studio rent to Clem Chouder six months in advance.

The upshoots of all this was that the Paintin' Pistoleer spent the hull night pacin' the streets. When dawn's early light come acrost the desert, he finds hisself stairin' at the east wall of the Busted Flush Dance Hall, as if he's witnessin' a miracle. What's ketched his eye is a big gaudy circus poster.

"Glory be, I'm saved!" yells the Paintin' Pistoleer, and he's in sech high speerits over the scheme he's scum up that he don't even duck acrost the street as he's prancin' past Anvil Aggie's blacksmith shop on his way to the Overland Telegraph office.

Smith is scrooched down on the steps three hours later when Lew Pirtle, the telegrapht operator, shows up. By now the sad news has spread around town about Smith's terrible fate, and Lew is enough of a friend he don't make no faceshous remarks or hippercritical references on the forthcomin' marriage.

"I'll be at the funeral—er, the weddin'," Lew says, "a-prayin' for ye, son. It's plumb tooken for granite you won't jilt Aggie, determined as she is on becomin' yore lovin' bride. If you did you'd spend the rest of yore nacheral life on the dodge. It's a terrible thing to connemplate."

But the Paintin' Pistoleer is grinnin' like a boar monkey—proof right there that his sanity has cracked plumb complete.

"I want to send a telegram to Tombstone, Lew," he says, "and you keep this under your hat or you'll be worse off than if Aggie had culled *you* out of the herd for her spouse."

Well, Pirtle sent the telegram off pronto; and it warn't long before an answer come back, which made Justin Other Smith dance a jig of sheer joy right in front of Aggie's blacksmith shop. Aggie seen this demonstration and comes lumberin' out like a dinosewer leavin' the jungle, to smirk at the Paintin' Pistoleer.

"I take it," she foghorns, "that your unbounded joy is due to receivin' my tender little love token, dear?"

Smith grins like a cat lappin' up cream. "I'm yours," he announces for the whole town to hear, "and if next Friday is OK with you, the weddin' bells can start tintinabulatin' then."

Seems Friday is OK with Anvil Aggie, because at two o'clock on that fateful day, just as the stage was pullin' in from Tombstone, the lodge hall was jammed to the rafters with guests. Plato X. Scrounge was on hand, in his buryin' suit, to read the ceremony; and the Paintin' Pistoleer is all bibbed and tuckered out in his best bullhide chaps and rodeo shirt.

Meanwhile, Aggie is up in her room at the Cowboy's Rest Hotel, Guaranteed Bugless, primpin' up for her jaunt down the aisle to the strains of Low & Grin's weddin' march. She's curryin' her hair when all of a suddent the door slams open and in strides a woman as big as Aggie, if possible, and just as fierce-lookin'.

"If you're pertifyin' yoreself to marry up with Justin Other Smith," this stranger bellers, "just fergit it. If you're wonderin' who I be, that's my pitcher on the circus poster on the wall of the Busted Flush Dance Hall out yander. It so happens Justin O. Smith painted the original o' that poster, a few years back."

Aggie swallers her annoyance long enough to have another look at this circus poster. It shows a big lithographt of a woman in a tiger skin, heftin' a pair of dumb-bells marked *1,000 lbs.* This sideshow freak is billed as MA-

DAME HERCULES, THE WORLD'S STRONGEST WOMAN, and it seems she's appearin' this week with a travelin' circus in Tombstone.

"I've heard o' you, d-e-a-r," Aggie purrs sweet as vinegar, beginnin' to roll up the sleeves of her weddin' gown. "I been hopin' our trails might cross sometime. You're maskeradin' under false pretenses, girlie. I want you to meet The World's Strongest Woman, bar none. How d'yuh do?"

Madame Hercules spits on her ham-sized palms and the whole buildin' shakes as she starts shadder-boxin'. "That's just my circus name," she explains. "In private life I am Mrs. Justin O. Smith, although my dwarf-sized husbind deserted me four-five year ago when he was doin' his trick-shootin' act in the same circus ring with me. Want me to prove same afore I pulverize you into hashmeat, honey?"

Aggie chuckles, "Nothin' like a short, easy fight to put the blushes on my cheeks for the weddin'— WHAT WAS THAT YOU SAID?"

Madame Hercules stops her footwork an' thumb-lickin' long enough to perduce a newspaper clippin', showin' her standin' in front of a circus tent with the Paintin' Pistoleer huggin' her.

"Looks like you win the verbal part of our bout," Anvil Aggie admits, grinnin' like the good sport she is. "You make yoreself to home, Madame, while I go down and discuss a certain tecknickle matter with that would-be bigamist I was all set to get hitched up with. I'll be back and whittle you down to size, later."

Well, when Anvil Aggie tore down the front door of the lodge hall in her hurry to get to the altar, the Paintin' Pistoleer dove out a winder and disappeared. Warn't long after that he was seein' Madame Hercules off for Tombstone on the stage.

"Thanks for savin' my bachelorhood, Fifi," Justin O. grins. "Too bad you ain't got time to stick around and reminisce over old times. Remember me to that midgit you're married to."

Madame Hercules chuckles. "Glad to help, kid. If that octopusk bullies you any more, telegraph me agin. She's got the redickilous notion she kin whup me." She sighs. "And mebbe she could, at that. I ain't the man I used to be when you and me and my midgit were troupin' together with Ringworm Bros. Circus."

Just as the stage pulls out, Justin O. hears a big ruction down the street. He turns around in time to see Anvil Aggie bargin' out of the lodge hall with Dyspepsia Dan on her arm, him about as noticeable as a flyspeck on her dress. Apache folks is a-peltin' 'em with rice and tin cans and old cowboots.

Plumb puzzled, the Paintin' Pistoleer shuffles over for a cautious look. Missus Hernia Groot, between blubberin' and blusterin', explains that when Smith jilted Aggie at the altar, Dyspepsia Dan had the gallantry to perpose marriage on the spot, and seeing as how it was Aggie's first genuwine perposal, she accepted Dan as a substitute. Plato X. Scrounge has made them man and wife, official.

Whilst Dyspepsia Dan is bringin' around a team and buggy to start on their honeymoon, Anvil Aggie spies Justin O. Smith tryin' to sneak off.

She bellers, "All is forgiven, my sawed-off suitor. I'm perty shore you run a sandy on me at the last minute, ringin' in that phoney wife o' yourn, but it's O. K. by me. I reckon Danny boy will make a good husbind an' per-

vider. As my first has-been—er, husbind, Eustace, used to say—you cain't assume there ain't a fire in the stove because there's snow on the chimbley."

Dyspepsia Dan, all flushed up lobster-color like one of Sigmoid Grubb's five-buck embalming jobs, he drives up in a rented surrey. The blushing bride starts to clamber aboard, and all four wheels bust off flush at the hubs, droppin' the surrey ker-plunk.

"Makes no never-mind, Danny boy," Anvil Aggie coos. "We'll skip the honeymoon. They git monopolous after the first four or five, no-how." With which she remembers to toss her bridal bouquet of cactus blooms toward the waitin' wimminfolks. Her pitch is a mite high and wide, though; the boquet streaks through space like a bird's nest in a tornado and explodes on the roof of the Stockman's Bank half a block away.

The Paintin' Pistoleer helps the groom onhitch his team from the wreckage of the rig. Dyspepsia Dan snickers bashful-like and whispers cornfidential:

"It was that gooseberry pie o' hern that turned the trick, Justin. I'm a lucky cuss. All my life I been slavin' over a hot stove in my restrunt. Now I'm married up with the world's best cook, I'll never have to rustle up vittles or wash another dish to the end of my days. Thanks, pard."

Inky McKrimp is busy interviewin' the bride for his *Warwhoop*.

"You can say in your noosepaper artickle," Anvil Aggie titters, "that I'm lookin' forward to never havin' to cook another snack of bait as long as we both shall live, amen. For a girl who despises kitchen work as much as I do, what could be perfecter than bein' the lovin' wife of a rest'runt chef? My joy is unconfined."

Whereas Dan's was unconfirmed.

"Now, the first one to get nicked, cuts t'other's hair!"

MURDER AT THREE ORPHANS

By EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

A PRETTY FACE *and a burning desire for justice lead young Ware to butt into something that isn't supposed to be Ranger business.*

"OLD PEGLEG" was all that Ware had heard him called. If he had another name, it seemed entirely unimportant to the male population of El Atajo. Ware, who had come to the little 'dobe town only because it lay on his road as he moved upon a patrol of the Burro Mountain country, was mildly interested in the leathery-faced old fellow, but no more than that.

It was now noon and old Pegleg had jogged into town upon his saddle mule shortly after the townspeople of El Atajo had finished an early breakfast. In Curly Harter's saloon Pegleg was buying drinks for all who would accept and occupying the center of the floor with a discussion of mules in general and the particular sagacity of "Geronimo," his own mount. They listened to his maunderings but to Ware it

seemed that this attention was no more than prelude to something else.

Ware sat in a corner somewhat aloof from everyone else; an untouched drink was on the small pine table before him and he smoked with mind wholly at ease, untroubled—for the first time in months—by any problem of his profession. Curly Harter came over and leaned against the whitewashed wall, with a sardonic blue eye upon his customers.

"What's she all about?" inquired Ware half-idly. "Who's this ol' hairpin, Pegleg? Yuh might figure he was apt to write his will an' leave all the town somethin', way they're millin' around him."

"Well, they're lookin' fer just about that same," Curly grunted thoughtfully. "Me, I ain't got a bit o' use fer that ol' hellcat; I figger he'd cut his brother's throat in a minute fer the sum o' ten centavos Mex money. He's been kickin' around these-yere hills fer thirty year an' he's shore bad medicine from the forks o' the creek, Pegleg is.

"Used to be a muleskinner fer freight contractors an' later on fer the stage company. An' he's prospected a heap, too. All time, a mightily pizen customer to cross—Lord only knows how many he's rubbed out in his time, fer he ain't whut yuh'd call a six-gun man; rifle's his pet an' bushwackin' a man is his idee o' the easiest way. I reckon if yuh could squeeze a confession out o' the ol' sidewinder, yuh'd just about clear up ever' murder mystery in this country."

"What're they expectin'?" pressed Ware, a slight curiosity rising in him as he studied the leathery brown face and tiny black eyes—vicious, both, as a desert sidewinder's—of the one-legged old-timer.

"Well, two month or so ago, he come a-ridin' in on that outlaw mule o' his'n, just like he come today. Nobody paid him no mind; he was always joggin' in an' joggin' out an' Tim Rafferty, the freighter, he says later that *he* see Pegleg on the aidge o' town just the night before this, anyhow. Though I reckon Tim was mistook, an' Pegleg he says Tim couldn't have, him not bein' there. Anyhow, he piled off in front o' 'Silent' Smith's assay place an' went in.

"They say he was packin' a tow-sack. He stayed inside three-four hours an' when he come out he hit straight fer here an' he had money an' he was grinnin' like—like the devil. Ever'body was right curious, o' course, to know what was goin' on, but he just kept on grinnin' an' them that went to see Silent Smith, they shore found out how-come Smith was called 'Silent.' But, couple days later, Smith did admit that ol' Pegleg'd stumbled onto some mighty rich placer ground an' had follered up till he come to a vein where yuh could just pry out gold with a knife point."

"Nobody else ever find free gold around here?" inquired Ware.

"Shore! But not a lot an' not lately. Talk is, ol' Pegleg, he's stumbled onto the ol' Spanish mine. Folks've been huntin' that fer fifty year now. Well, Silent Smith, he says all he knows is whut Pegleg's told him an' that ain't much. He's buyin' nuggets an' dust from Pegleg. Folks, o' course, are tryin' to git Pegleg drunk so's to make him spill directions."

"They've followed him, o' course," said Ware.

"Shore—a piece!" grinned Curly with an amused sniff. "Huh! Yuh might's well set out to foller a tumbleweed or —or a puff o' smoke! That ol' devil—an' his mule, too—they just evap'rate

some'r's in the foothills o' the Burros. I hear as how somebody went up-country an' fetched in a couple Injuns fer trailers. Well—mebbe that's how-come a couple dead warwhoops was found over in a canyon clost to Jornado Triste."

"How was that?"

"Simple enough! They'd both been shot in the back with a .45-90. 'Course, lots an' lots o' folks use a .45-90 Winchester; Pegleg does, just fer instance."

"Well!" grinned Ware with a shrug, pushing back the bullion-embroidered sombrero from his still, brown face, "all this ain't nothin' in my life."

"Nary thing!" nodded the saloon man agreeably, but with a shade of hesitancy that caught Ware's attention. "Listen to the ol' hellion, will yuh!"

One of the men of El Atajo was insisting upon buying Pegleg a drink. He wore a broad, artificial-seeming grin of camaraderie; he had the wicked-faced old ragamuffin by the arm and apparently Pegleg was regarding him as a boon companion. They edged in to the bar and the bartender set bottle and glasses before them, then spun glasses along to the others in the barroom.

"Yuh know, Pegleg," said the fellow with the friendly grin, "lots o' folks laughed at yuh fer huntin' them ol' Spanish diggin's. But me, I always says, we-ll, mebbe yuh folks is right, but—I do' know, I says. If 'twas anybody else but Pegleg mebbe I'd think she was plumb foolish, but that man, I tells 'em, he ain't like most. He figgers out whut he's goin' after an' he sees ever' little sign an' so, one day—Well, he'll just foller up his sign an' there'll be the gold. Ain't it so, Pegleg? Didn't yuh find her just like that? C'mon, now! Take another one; tell the folks!"

Pegleg nodded owlishly, but to Ware, watching him intently, it seemed that a flicker of malicious amusement showed for a flash in the little black eyes.

"Sho' was!" agreed Pegleg, refilling his glass and emptying it in a single smooth motion that ended with the clink of the empty on the bar. "Started out, I did, an' scallyhooted all around the country. Come to a pile o' rocks—"

"What kind o' rocks was these, Pegleg?" inquired the man of the grin. "Yuh don't mean that-there big pile over clost to Jornado Triste, do yuh?"

"These was a kind o' reddish rock," Pegleg said with the expression of one attempting to report exactly, "an' they has, mebbe, li'l streaks o' blackish in 'em. Not in all, o' course; just in some. They was shaped—oh, some was kind o' pointed an' others was round. Anyway, yuh'd know 'em by the yuccas!"

"Yuccas!" repeated the spokesman of the crowd. "How d'yuh mean, Pegleg? What was peculiar about them yuccas?"

"Why—" Pegleg hesitated while deathly stillness gripped the throng around him—"she's kind o' hard, mebbe, to make this just ex-actly clear, but—well, the main thing about all them yuccas I'm mentionin' is that their roots, yuh know, well—"

"Yeh! Yeh! Roots!" nodded the man of the grin. "Their roots—"

"All went straight down into the ground!" cried Pegleg, then hung with both hands to the bar as he wrestled with an overpowering fit of yelling laughter.

Even Ware's shoulders shook at sight of the disgruntled faces around the old man. But Curly Harter seemed hardly to have heard any of the business. Ware lifted his glass and drained it, then got up leisurely, slapping smooth the

front of his fringed jacket of soft-tanned goatskin—that masked the twin white Colts in their John Wesley Hardin holsters. He fished a dollar from his pocket and laid it upon the table.

"Well, I got to be lookin' things over up the line," he grunted to the saloon man. "See yuh comin' back, I reckon."

"Got to go, huh?" said Curly absently. "Uh-huh. I see. But—uh—before yuh ramble, Ware, like to have yuh—uh—meet somebody. C'm'on out. Yo' nag's at my hitch rack, ain't he?"

"Who's it?" inquired Ware, with thoughtful narrowing of green eyes. It was suddenly apparent to him that his departure had been purposely delayed by Curly Harter until this moment.

But Curly, humming somewhat overenergetically, Ware thought, kept a full pace ahead on his way to the door and seemed not to hear the question. So they came out of the press in the barroom and through the front portal onto the wide, 'dobe-pillared veranda.

Curly was still in the lead. He moved down the veranda until he came to the wooden bench against the building wall. Ware followed at awkward, high-heeled horseman's gait, frowning a little. And around the corner of the building, onto the veranda, came a girl, flushed of clear face, bare of sleek, dark head, a slender figure in plain gingham apron the sleeves of which were rolled high upon rounded arms. Ware stopped short, instantly, with the beginning of a scowl.

"Marie," said Curly Harter, "this is Ranger Ware top cutter o' the whole blame' outfit. An' I know mighty well he'll be tickled stiff to do anything he can to he'p yuh-all out."

Ware nodded jerkily, inwardly cursing Curly Harter. Everywhere he went it was this way—a ranger was supposed to be some sort of fix-it-up. Everybody brought the Ranger his—or her—troubles, expecting him to drop any business he might have and settle the mystery of a strayed cow or a wild-riding son or some such thing.

"I don't know how much Mr. Harter has told you," the girl began hesitantly.

"Nothin'," shrugged Curly. "Pegleg's been makin' too much noise inside."

"Then, here's the situation, Mr. Ware: first, my brother is in jail, charged with murder and robbery—neither of which charge is true. Second, my father has disappeared. I'm—I'm just about mad with worry."

"But," Ware frowned, "yuh see, Miss, I'm—"

"Now, now," said Curly quickly. "I know whut yuh're aimin' to say: a ranger ain't s'posed to mix into county affairs until county authorities has asked him to. I know that; I used to be sher'ff o' this county. But the way things stand in this business, Billy—Marie's kid brother—he's due to be tried an' found guilty an' hung, on the evidence the county attorney's got. An' no outside he'p'll *be* sent fer. She looks like an open-an'-shut case, way she is."

"Then the sher'ff an' county attorney'll likely raise Cain about my bein' here," retorted Ware.

"Umm—mebbe so," nodded Curly. "O' course, that skeers yuh half to death. Like the Mexican Gov'ment's howl when yuh went acrost the river at Leesville an' toted back Hawssface Gomez."

Ware grinned faintly at this, recollecting, as he did, how the adjutant general had, with fingers crossed, as it were, severely reprimanded him for a breach of international law.

"What's the trouble?" he asked resignedly and somehow, with the girl's frank eyes so trustfully steady upon

him, he could not feel irritated at being thus thrust into a problem that did not officially concern him. "I mean, what's the real run o' this boy's snarl?"

"Billy was stage-station keeper out at Three Orphans," explained Curley Harter, when the girl had nodded at him to tell the tale. "Been out there nigh a year, hadn't he, Marie? Yeh. Well, one evenin' kind o' late the stage pulled into Billy's station from Falby up in the hills. Nobody aboard her but the driver an' shotgun guard. An' she was packin' twenty-five thousand in gold bars.

"Billy, he comes out to tell 'em the's no change o' mules fer 'em; somehow, he says, ever' last mule got out o' the corral an' led off his saddle hawss, too, so he couldn't go chase 'em back. Ben Dyer, the driver, he reckoned he'd go on. An' about then the' come a bunch o' shots back in the mesquite an' some howlin' fit to raise a body's scalp, Ben says afterward.

"They all hightailed it out back to see what was the row about—yeh, even Slim Church, the shotgun man. Couldn't find a blame' thing. Come back to the stage an' it was all right, but when Ben Dyer was aimin' to push on, one o' the mules was so lame he see he couldn't make them grades between Tres Huerfanos an' Atajo, yere. Nothin' to do but bed down with Billy at the station house. Ben Dyer, he was shore peevish, too. Slim Church, he never liked the idee none, either. An' Ben, he told Billy Bowers—Marie's brother, yuh *sabe*—that the whole blame' business was goin' to git Billy's job, if whut Ben Dyer could say'd git it.

"Well, Ben says they et supper in the house—it sets on the front face o' the corral, yuh see, with a five-foot high 'dobe wall joinin' onto it an' inclosin' the corral—an' all turned in early. Slim an' Ben, they brung in the treasure an' Slim, he laid down alongside it with his sawed-off Winchester riot gun by him.

"Ben Dyer says he woke up onct an' the' was a li'l moonlight an' he could see Billy's bunk was empty. Wondered about it fer a minute, but he could hear Slim a-snorin' away, so he figgered ever'thing's all right an' mebbe Billy was outside a-lookin' fer the mules or somethin'. So he went to sleep an' he never woke up ag'in till a sort o' thud roused him. He says he come wide awake just like somebody'd yelled in his ear that he was about to git killed!"

"Wait a minute," grunted Ware, who found himself keenly interested in the recital of this mystery. "Where's the hostler all this time? How-come the's no hostler there?"

"He'd got mad that very day an' rode off, Billy told 'em when they come up. He says he'd told the Mex he was goin' to git him fired an' the Mex went right on off. An' the Mex tells the same story. A'right. Ben says Billy's standin' on the floor clost to his bunk; standin' right still. Ben listened an' first thing that struck him was that he couldn't hear Slim Church a-snorin' no more. Well, then, he figgered Slim was listenin' too. But right then, acrost the wooden floor that was lit up by a li'l patch o' moonlight from the door, he happened to see a tongue o' red cre-epin'—"

"God!" breathed Marie Bowers and caught her lip between her teeth.

"He struck a match an'—Slim Church was lyin' in a pool o' blood an' the gold was gone slicker'n a whistle! He saw somethin' else, too: clost to Billy's socked foot was the butcher knife that belonged to the station; that'd been hangin' on the back wall when they had

supper. Ben says he noticed the knife partic'lar on account o' the' not bein' much left o' the blade—not more'n a third-inch wide, it wasn't—an' bein' sharp's a needle.

"Ben took one look at Billy. Says the boy was white's a sheet. Then he swung his gun muzzle onto Billy an' tied him up right then. Went out an' hitched up his mules. Lame or no lame, he was comin' in to Atajo. An', sir, when he come to look at that lame mule ag'in closter, he found a horsehair tied around the blame' mule's laig, right around the cannon-bone! No wonder he'd gone lame!"

"Hadn't been lame before, o' course," nodded Ware, with narrowed eyes showing their greenish war-flame, forgetting, in the consideration of the crime, the human element represented here by Marie Bowers, who watched him with expression of blended hope and fear. "Kind o' makes it open-an'-shut: somebody wanted that stage to stay overnight at the station, a'right: mules let out; shots back behind to let somebody have a chance to lame a mule."

"That's whut the county attorney says, when he was examinin' Billy yere. Billy, he just says he do' know howcome. He woke up when he heerd a noise an' saw Ben Dyer standin' up with a gun in his paw. Never noticed Slim Church, or the money bein' gone, till Ben struck a match."

"Sher'ff find anything?"

"Nary thing! The's loose sand, yuh see, all around the station at Tres Huerfanos; wind'd smoothed any tracks the' might've been. Yuh see, they figger Billy, he done the killin' an' packed out the gold to somebody waitin' with pack animals. An' that's why Manuel Ortiz, he's in jail along o' Billy—Manual bein' the hostler Billy says quit that very day. Albright, the county attorney, he's 'reconstructed the crime,' like he puts it.

"He figgers Billy an' Manuel framed the job. Manuel done the shootin' out back, then hightailed it. Come around an' lamed a mule an' rambled. That night Billy packed the bars out to where Manuel was waitin' with a couple stage mules an' they loaded the gold an' Manuel took her off an' hid it, then come on into town. Billy killed Slim fer fear he'd wake up shootin'."

"He didn't do it! He couldn't have done it!" cried the girl suddenly. "I know him better than anyone in the world knows him. And I know that a cold-blooded crime like that just isn't in him. He might kill a man in a quarrel, but to deliberately knife Mr. Church, in order to rob him—I know he didn't; couldn't have!"

"It's mighty hard on Marie, yere," said Curly Harter. "That's why I've dragged yuh into the deal, Ware. When I see that Mex outfit o' yo's comin' into town, I thought to myself: looks kind o' like predestinatin', she does! Yonder comes the slickest li'l ol' puzzle buster in the Rangers. So I kept yuh talkin' an' listenin' till I could send word over to Marie.

"She's all by herself, now, Ware. Ol' Bill, her pa, he's gone some'r's, an' even if he couldn't do nothin' much toward clearin' up this business, anyhow, he could make her feel like she wasn't packin' the whole load single-harness. But he left Atajo the very day Ben Dyer brought in the stage with Billy tied to her an' Slim Church ridin' inside an' not watchin' the scenery."

"Why d'yuh reckon he never come back?" frowned Ware. "What kind o' work's he been doin'?"

"Prospecting," shrugged the girl. "For a good while he was in partnership with Pegleg, but they didn't find anything and Pegleg says, now, that it was Papa's stubbornness that kept them from locating this placer ground he found alone. He says he wanted to go one way and Papa insisted on going over the country around Dos Hermanos instead. He claims that when he finally set his foot down and wouldn't go with Papa any longer, Papa grew angry and dissolved the partnership. Then, three days later he—Pegleg—found the rich placer."

"When'd they bust up?" grunted Ware quickly.

"Well, they were still partners, so far as I know, when Papa left the last time. That was six weeks ago. It was about a week later that Pegleg came in with word of his find, wasn't it, Mr. Harter?"

"Just about," nodded Curly. "G'on, Marie."

"Pegleg told me very little," shrugged the girl. "Most of what I've learned, I had from Mr. Smith, the assayer. Pegleg told him about the disagreement. He says that Papa went on off into the wild country around Dos Hermanos and he went—to wherever it was he found the gold."

"Yo' dad often stay out this long?" Ware asked evenly, brown face blank.

"No-o, this is a little more than he ever stayed away, before. Still, that is easily explained by the wild nature of the country he went into. And he had plenty of supplies. But I need him so, Mr. Ware! Mr. Harter and his wife have been wonderfully kind and helpful, but Papa ought to be here to stand by Billy. Everyone believes him guilty; aside from Mr. Harter, you don't hear a kindly word about the boy. You might think that he'd always worn a brand of some sort!"

"Way o' the world!" shrugged Ware. "Well, I do' know. She does look sort o' snarled up. O' course, this old devil, Pegleg, he ain't offered to help yuh-all none, now that he's got so much?"

To his surprise—and apparently to the surprise of Curly Harter, as well—a flood of color rose to stain the girl's smooth throat and face. She dropped her eyes swiftly; her red lips trembled. Then, catching hold of herself again, she looked up at Ware and shook her head vehemently.

"He—won't help. I—talked to him—this morning."

"Listen!" began Curly Harter. "What did that ol' tarant'ler say to yuh? If he made ary bit o' talk yuh never liked, why—I'll git that double-barrel' Greener off my wall an' I'll shore make it plain to Pegleg why she's named 'Angel-Maker.'"

And Ware, hearing his slow, thickened voice, knew that the grizzled, kindly saloon man meant every word he said. But Marie Bowers shook her head swiftly.

"No, no, no! Forget him! It's Billy I'm thinkin' of, now. And as you said, Mr. Ware is the best detective in the Rangers. If he will help—"

Out of the door Pegleg came lurching, the rough two-by-four that served him as artificial left leg clumping weirdly on the floor planks. As he came abreast of the trio his tiny, bloodshot eyes bored into each face in turn. He stopped beside them and beneath straggling, mustard-gray mustache thick lips parted malevolently.

"So ye're the ranger, are ye!" he greeted Ware sneeringly. "Well, they sho' do git a lot o' nice li'l Sunday-school mamma's boys onto the fo'ce

these days."

Ware merely eyed him steadily, no flicker of expression showing on his lean face. Apparently Pegleg was emboldened by this stillness. Up and down he looked Ware, from wide Mexican sombrero to the polished boots showing beneath the wide bottoms of the *charro* trousers. Then eloquently he spat, missing Ware's feet by no more than the fraction of an inch.

"Fella," drawled Ware, "yuh git! An' next time yuh see me, pull clear around a buildin' an' take the other side where I can't see yuh a-tall! For if yuh don't, I am goin' to make yuh break down the timber howlin' like a scared pup—a yaller one!"

"Whut!" snarled Pegleg. "Ye—"

His hand flashed up to his neck; slipped around it. A long-bladed bowie appeared from its sheath between his shoulder blades.

Ware's hand shot out; he rapped the wrist of the knife hand sharply with the hard edge of his palm, caught the falling knife neatly with a boot toe and sent it spinning through the air into the street. Before Pegleg had moved again, Ware snatched off the old killer's own hat and with it began to slap his face. Back and back Pegleg gave, but even in his fury—evidenced by the terrific profanity that was punctuated by the *slap-slap-slap* of the hat brim—he made no move toward the gun at his hip. Evidently, as Curly Harter had said, he was not particularly a six-gun man.

At the edge of the veranda he stumbled and Ware dropped the hat and seized him by shoulder and pants leg. He lifted him with a swift jerk and hurled him bodily into the sandy street, almost under the hoofs of two horses the riders of which had pulled up to gape at the spectacle. The horses went into a paroxysm of bucking, and from the swirling dust cloud came the fierce oaths of the riders addressed to their mounts, mingled with the shrill yells of Pegleg, who was rolling over and over to escape the flashing hoofs.

Curly Harter leaned against the wall with hands clasped to his sides and gasped brokenly, tears running down his cheeks. Even Marie Bowers showed a small gleam of amusement, but as Ware returned with solemn face she regarded him anxiously, expectantly.

"Reckon I'll drift down to the jail a spell," he shrugged. "No, don't need company. Want to augur a li'l bit with yo' brother, Miss Marie, an' I reckon I'll think better if I lone-wolf it."

"Watch out for Pegleg!" Curly Harter warned him with swift return to gravity. "He was skeered to go after his short gun, but he'll shore bushwhack yuh sudden an' do her right yere in town, first chanct he gits."

"Yuh might tell him for me that if he does try bushwhackin' me, he better make a center shot. For if he misses, I'm comin' after him an' comin' smokin'. An' that goes even if she looks like he maybe might'nt have done it."

"I'll tell him!" Curly nodded with grim smile. "I'll tell him before all hands an' the cook, with heaps o' pleasure. Now, jail's down yonder at the end o' the street."

"I'll walk a little way with you, Mr. Ware," Marie Bowers said quietly. "Our house is just this side of the jail."

So, while Curly Harter turned back to the saloon door, Ware and the girl went together along the line of wooden galleries, or verandas, that made a sort of roofed sidewalk to the main

street of El Atajo.

"What'd Pegleg offer to do–bring in the real murderer, or bust into the jail an' let yo' brother out?" inquired Ware thoughtfully, after a few steps.

"How did you know that?" she cried amazedly, stopping to stare at him.

"Why," shrugged Ware, with a twinkle of amusement in his green eyes, "he could hardly offer to do anything but one o' those things. An', o' course, he made his proposition in a way that riled yuh–anybody could tell that."

"He–he made his help conditional; he said that he'd help me if–if I'd marry him!"

"So I figured," nodded Ware dryly. "This-here the assay place? Silent Smith's?"

"Yes. That's some of the Pegleg gold in that scale pan; nuggets and dust. Mr. Smith said that he put it out so that someone wouldn't be breaking into his house and wrecking it to see what the gold looked like. A lot of the men here said, at first, that they could tell where the gold came from by looking at it. But apparently that was a mistaken idea; nobody has seen any difference in this."

Ware stared through the grimy little window at the litter of objects strewn helter-skelter over the floor of Silent Smith's small showcase. There was pinchbeck jewelry and a row of watches, beside the old scale pan in which lay yellow nuggets and coarse dust, the whole labeled *Pegleg Gold.*

"Yuh talk a good deal to this-here Smith, don't yuh?" asked Ware, turning his eyes suddenly on the girl.

"Why–yes!" she said slowly, flushing once more. "Mr. Smith is–very kind. If he can help Billy, I know he will."

"Same terms as Pegleg's?" Ware's tone was dry.

"Why–I suppose I have to tell you everything, Mr. Ware, so–Mr. Smith has asked me to marry him, but he hasn't made my consent a condition of a bargain."

"Goin' to marry him?" persisted Ware. "If yuh are–when? Only if he gits yo' brother clear or beforehand?"

Again she stared at him amazedly and he knew that his feeling had been correct; both Pegleg and Silent Smith wanted this girl–and small wonder! Each in his own way was trying to persuade her to marry him. Smith, though, as might have been expected, was playing the more skillful game.

"I–don't know. If you hadn't come and offered to help, why–I would have married Mr. Smith tomorrow!" she finished the halting confession with a rush.

"Um-hmm! D'yuh really want to marry him?"

"He's pleasant; I–I like him very well, but–of course I don't! What girl would want to marry a man more than twice her age? But I've been desperate; absolutely at my wits' end. My little brother to be hanged–"

"Don't yuh worry!" Ware said abruptly, though with the words he knew that he had no business making promises that perhaps he couldn't fulfill. "Yo' brother won't be–won't be found guilty. An' yuh won't have to marry Smith tomorrow or any day!"

"Do you really promise that?" she cried. "Oh–I believe you and–"

Somehow, instantly, strain seemed to leave her. And for the first time he saw the real Marie Bowers, as she must have looked before her brother's arrest. Into her eyes crept amusement and–something else.

"Is this–this help of yours contin-

gent upon—the same condition as that of the others?" she asked, looking up sidelong.

Ware's face went furiously red as ever a girl's could be. He stared blankly at her and she regarded him with widened eyes.

"Why, I didn't know a man could blush like that!" she said. "I—I'm sorry!"

"Not a bit!" he told her violently. "I'm a Ranger an' a Ranger's got no more business with a wife than a pig has got with a white collar! But I don't mind tellin' yuh that if things wasn't like that, why, I do' know what I'd say."

A big square-shouldered man had appeared soundlessly in the door of the little office, three or four feet to their left. Ware saw him instantly and he wondered how much this white, still-faced man had heard of their exchange before the window. But he revealed nothing of his thoughts as he studied the assayer-jeweler of Atajo.

"Mr. Smith!" cried the girl nervously. "This is Mr. Ware, of the Rangers."

Both men nodded without speaking. Then Ware touched his sombrero rim.

"Got to go," he grunted. " 'By."

He left Marie standing beside the assayer and himself went to the sheriff's office in the squat adobe jail. To the sheriff he introduced himself—his name was all that was needed—and asked about the charges against Billy Bowers.

"It's hell," shrugged the sheriff. "I wisht somebody else had my job fer a spell. Fer he's goin' to be found guilty an' I'm goin' to have to hang the kid. No two ways about it. I ain't got a thing ag'inst him an' I like the ol' man an' the gal. But as shore as yuh're a foot high an' able to take nourishment, Billy knifed Slim Church an' passed out the gold to his Mex pal."

"Does look thataway," nodded Ware, with eyes on the floor. "Still—circumstantial ev'dence is kind o' tricky. Damned if I'd hang a man on it."

"In which yuh're shore different from ary jury that'll try Billy!" the sheriff assured him grimly. "Atajo County'll find him guilty without leavin' the jury box."

"Mind if I see him? His sister asked me to kind o' look around an' try to put a loop over somethin' that hasn't been found."

"Son," said the sheriff a little scornfully, "yuh got quite a rep', I know, but all the fancywork in the world ain't goin' to make black white. Shore yuh can see him, but he's turned sulky last week or so. Sits over in a corner o' his cell an' just sulks."

He got up and led the way through a sheet-iron door into a gloomy corridor between two rows of three iron cages each. At the far end, where light came into the jail through small loopholes high in the end wall, Ware saw a slim figure upon a cot, moveless as a dead man.

"Billy!" called the sheriff. "Yere's a Texas Ranger come to look yuh over."

"Go to hell!" a faint snarl from the cot answered him.

"Now, Billy, son, yuh don't want to act thataway! Come an' talk to him."

No sound from the cot, nor any move. Ware moved to the cell end.

"Listen to me, fella!" he snapped. "I come here to hear yuh say one thing. Now, d'yuh want me to have to come inside an' shake yuh to make yuh talk? I'm askin' yuh just one question an' I'm askin' it fair an' square, not givin' a damn about the ev'dence the sher'ff's got. Did yuh do it?"

"No," came the apathetic denial from the boy. "But what's the use of talking. They'll hang me just the same."

"They promised him life if he'd plead guilty an' tell 'em where the money is," the sheriff told Ware in an undertone. "But he wouldn't!"

"Where's the Mex hostler? Like to talk to him—an' by myself, if yuh don't mind, Sher'ff. He's likely scared o' yuh an' I can sling Mex like a *pela'o*."

"Well, if yuh don't want me to hear, o' course, I don't want to butt in!" shrugged the sheriff somewhat peevishly. "I'll put yuh in the cell with him an' lock yuh in. Yuh can call when yuh want out."

He unlocked a cell nearer the front and Ware stepped inside. A squat shape reared up in a corner and the door clanged to behind Ware.

"Manuel?" said Ware, when the sheriff had gone out into his office. "I am that Ranger called Ware. Perhaps you have heard my name?"

"*Si*, señor," grunted the Mexican calmly. "I have heard much of you."

"Very well! Now, I have come to say that, in my opinion, you are a he-mule of great stubborness—and of a foolishness as great. Why should you hang with that boy yonder?"

"Why, because the sheriff will hang me," replied Manuel with a touch of grim humor. "Certainly it is not because of any fondness of mine for the death—for any death just now."

"Perhaps I can show you how to slap aside the rope."

"I shall be pleased, but I think that is not possible."

"Certainly it is possible—and simple! That is, if you will be truthful with me. Mind, I do not promise you complete freedom. But escape from the rope I do promise you—and money for your family."

"How?" inquired the Mexican eagerly. "But tell me, señor!"

"Tell me where you hid the money—the gold—and I promise you that you will receive but a prison sentence and that half of the reward offered by the stage company will be paid to your family."

"I feared that!" grunted Manuel. "Feared that your offer was made with belief that I helped to steal the gold. And I knew nothing of it, being very drunk that night and lying on the desert north of this town. Perhaps the boy, Billee, killed the guard and with someone's help stole the gold. I do not think so, knowing him. But perhaps he did. If so, it was without my help."

Even in the darkness, his fatalistic shrug was plain.

"So, señor, I fear that I will hang. Will you have a cigarette? The señorita is most kind; but for her I could not smoke."

Ware stood up with polite refusal and called to the sheriff. Outside, the officer regarded him, at first curiously, then with a shade of malice.

"Clear it all up?"

"Tried to make him tell where he'd hid the gold," shrugged Ware. "But he says he do' know a thing about the robbery."

"Kind o' disappointin', huh?" grinned the sheriff.

"Does kind o' shut one trail," Ware nodded. "Well, thanks; see yuh some more."

He went out and quietly back toward the assayer's. Marie was not visible, nor was Pegleg. He was a good deal more curious about the old killer's whereabouts than about those of the girl, and he kept alert watch for token of Pegleg as he walked.

"Wonder if I can turn the trick?" he muttered to himself. "No doubt in my mind about it. Trouble with these people here, they see these things a' right, but they don't look at 'em in connection with other things."

And so he turned into the dusky door of Silent Smith's place and found himself in an empty front room which looked as if it had never known the touch of a broom. Cobwebs rounded every corner of the leprous gray ceiling. A dusty and ancient showcase was on one side of the room, its contents barely visible through the grimy curved glass. Along the other wall were mineral specimens heaped upon the floor.

"Hey!" called Ware and the greenish war flame was very bright in his eyes now. "Hey, Smith!"

Came a startled-seeming grunt from the dusk of the back room. Ware slid like a cat to the door and peered through. There was the squat figure of the assayer, half stooping over some apparatus in the rear, his white face gleaming in the dusk as he stared toward Ware.

"Can I come back?" asked Ware tonelessly. "Want to augur with yuh a spell."

Smith made a wordless growling sound of negation and came hastily forward. Ware stepped back and so they faced each other in the dirty front room.

"Yes?" said Smith.

"Lady told yuh I was a Ranger. Now, I'm tellin' yuh that—the jig's up. Looks like yuh'd have figured that ever'body wasn't such a blame fool as the sher'ff an' county attorney. Yuh ought've sort o' set back in the breechin' an' kept old Pegleg from blowin' money right here."

"What d'you mean?" Smith said evenly. "Are you crazy?"

"If folks around Atajo are in their right minds, then I shore am!" grinned Ware. "To be hornswoggled by so plain an' simple a deal as yo's an' Pegleg's. Hell! All I needed to know was that Billy Bowers never done the murder an' robbery an' I could see who did. Pegleg slipped in an' lamed the mule; then that night he waited outside an' yuh packed out the bars to him; yuh knifed Slim Church when he roused up. Then yuh brought in the bars, melted 'em up, an' put some nuggets an' dust out o' yo' safe in yo' window.

"I reckon—" thus Ware in indifferent tone, after a long minute of silence, in which Smith's face still did not change —"we won't need to cuff yuh. Pegleg was different; the old sidewinder like to chewed off the sher'ff's hand before we got him started to the jail. But—shucks! These killers that bust down when yuh swing a rope in their faces, they gi' me a pain! Pegleg, just for instance. Bust' down an' spilled the whole tale. An' he wants to turn state's ev'dence an' hang yuh, Smith. Oh, yuh're in a jackpot, a' right!"

Inwardly, he cursed. He had not the slightest evidence against either Pegleg or Smith. No matter how certainly he had convicted them by remorseless logic of this crime—and guessed that Pegleg had also murdered the elder Bowers for some reason or other—he could not prove his charges before a jury unless he forced this tallowy-faced, self-controlled man to crack. And Smith merely watched him.

He turned his head slightly, as if hearing a sound from the street door; as if forgetful of his prisoner, moved a half step in that direction, offering the back of his head and the side of his

body to Smith. It was a desperate game he played, and with eyes wide open he took every chance.

Out of the tail of his eye he caught the flash of movement that told him he had won: that Smith had cracked. He skated sideways and his arms moved in the flashing cross-hand draw that brought twin Colts out like snake heads from a hole. But before he could fire there sounded the terrific roar of a shot that set his ears ringing, and a bullet sang close by. He whirled and drove a bullet through the street door, another at Silent Smith, who was swaying on his feet with a double-barreled .41 derringer in each hand.

Pegleg came crashing inside, his heavy Winchester rifle clattering on the plank floor. He coughed once and—like the sidewinder Curly Harter had called him—his body moved in a writhing, curling loop, then straightened. Smith, with the bullets of both Pegleg and Ware through his body, slumped on suddenly hinged knees. But on the floor he lifted himself painfully, propping himself up on one hand; feebly he lifted a derringer—and pointed it at Pegleg!

"You damn squealer!" he breathed.

Ware kicked the weapon out of his hand and regarded them both. Running footsteps sounded outside; the door was suddenly thronged.

"Yere! Le' me inside! Out o' the way!" the sheriff bellowed.

He came pushing in with a gun in each hand. He gaped down at Pegleg, on whom he had almost stepped, then over at Smith, who was breathing in bubbling groans.

"What d'yuh call this, anyhow?" he demanded of Ware.

"Put yo' guns down, mister!" Ware told him quietly. "Yuh don't need 'em for these fellas, I reckon, an'—they wouldn't do yuh much good with me!"

Something in the contemptuous expression with which he regarded the sheriff seemed to penetrate the lawman's consciousness. He reholstered his weapons mechanically and slowly his hand went up to rub his head.

"Never thought, did yuh, to hook up the disappearance o' three bars o' gold with Pegleg's mysterious mine?" Ware's drawl bit like a whiplash. "Yuh just took things as they come in downright good faith. Somebody'd accused Billy Bowers o' murder an' robbery, so yuh figured he must be guilty. An' Pegleg, he says he found a mine, so—he must've done just that. An' Smith here, he shakes a couple nuggets in yo' face, so they must be from Pegleg's mine, like he says.

"Still, I reckon the's worse sher'ffs, at that. I heard about one down in the Big Bend that was worse—he was ninety year old an' had just one arm! Yuh'll find the famous Pegleg Mine in that back room, underneath that brick furnace table. I'll lay a bet on that, even if I never saw it. But Smith was tinkerin' there when I come in an' he like to throwed a fit when I wanted to come back."

Several citizens dashed through into the dirt-floored rear room and a whoop attended the lifting up of one and a half heavy gold bars from the cavity at the table's foot.

"Now, le's manhandle Pegleg a minute!" snapped Ware.

He bent and shook the prostrate figure; made swift demand for a flask and when one was handed him, poured whisky down the dying man's throat.

"What'd yuh kill Old Man Bowers for?" he snapped roughly, when Pegleg opened his eyes. "What'd yuh kill him

for? Answer up or I'll take the hide off yuh with yo' own knife!"

He jerked the weapon from its sheath and brandished it before Pegleg's eyes. But the old man grinned ferally at him; weakly gestured with one hand.

"I'm goin' out, so I just as soon tell ye-all ever'thing. Ye're a pack o' jugheads! Ye couldn't, none o' ye, find either end o' yo'selves in the dark! I pulled it over ever' one o' ye but thisyere li'l devil, an' I damn near got him from the door.

"I got the gold out o' the station an' nobody never helped me, neither! Ol' Pegleg, he never needed no help! I let out the mules from the corral. Then I let go a couple shots out back an' a couple howls an' 'loped around front an' put a tail hair onto a mule. I could've took the bars then. That night I sneaked in an' got the bars an' loaded 'em onto a pack mule. Slim Church never stirred, but him an' me'd had words, so I give him his ticket with the station butcher knife!

"Silent, he melted up a bar an' gi' me money. An' I laughed at ye the whole time. Bunch o' jugheads! None o' ye could git into a crazy asylum without takin' a college course! This Ranger—bend down, feller; I'm goin' an' I got somethin' to tell ye first. Ye're the only'n'—"

Ware bent, then suddenly flung himself sideways and the knife which Pegleg had snatched up from the floor whipped past him narrowly. Pegleg slumped and the knife dropped. Ware kicked it aside and poured more whisky down Pegleg.

"Why'd yuh kill Old Man Bowers?" he repeated, and the thick lips curled.

"He come—a day sooner'n I expected him. Caught me with the bars. Couldn't let him git away. Soon's he heerd about the robbery— So I drilled him—over by Signal Rock. Ye—blame' —jugheads—"

Ware stood up and regarded the sheriff. That official looked at the floor and up at the ceiling.

"Well," he said slowly, "ain't nothin' like hearin' the Almighty's truth about yo'se'f, I reckon. An' we shore done just that today. Ranger, I reckon Atajo County sort o' owes yuh one. How yuh figgered it, I do' know. But I see we ought to've guessed it, too."

"It's nothin'," shrugged Ware. "Reckon yuh can handle things a' right. Goin' to be hard on the girl, though; gittin' her brother back, but hearin' about her pa."

He was nearest the door. He lifted his head now, a little, then moved swiftly toward the rear room, the crowd giving way before him. He was slipping through the back door, preparatory to streaking it along the rear of the buildings to the hitch rack where Rocket waited, when he heard Marie Bowers's voice asking for him.

"Why, he stepped out back a minute, Miss Marie," the sheriff answered her. "I reckon he'll be back in a shake. Yuh better not come in, right now."

"Yeh, I'll be back—I bet!" grunted Ware to himself, when he was in the saddle and had swung Rocket's head toward the out trail. "Yeh, I will not—so long's the's no law against ridin' around this town!"

He spurred on, with head lowered; suddenly he laughed outright.

"Still—she was about the purtiest thing I ever see walkin'. An' if I'd wanted to take her up on that proposition —Rocket, honest, yuh just do' know how close yuh come, today, to havin' a stepma!"

THE "CUT-OFF" *that the Bennett-Arcane party followed to the gold fields proved to be a short cut to slow death. First publication.*

A NAME TO LIVE BY

By W. H. HUTCHINSON

THE central overland was the best known and most direct of the gold-rush trails to California. This was all you could say for it, and the other trails to El Dorado were even longer and more hazardous. The trail Bill Manly took in '49 was the worst of them all, because he tried to short-cut the inexorable distance between the Mississippi and the Pacific—not once, mind you, but twice. Because he tried these short cuts and because he lived up to his name doing it, that name is kept alive around the fires at night in the minds and hearts of those who know the true measure of a man.

He was born William Lewis Manly near St. Albans, Vermont, when the memory of the Green Mountain Boys was still a living presence. By the time he was two years old, in 1830, his family put their faces toward the west and followed the Erie Canal to the new lands of Michigan Territory, to settle in Jackson County. When he came of age, Bill Manly left the family farm and went on his own, in the lead mines near Mineral Point.

When the mines were closed, he trapped, or cut cordwood for thirty-five cents a cord, and he was his own master and master of himself. Seven years passed in this fashion while Bill Manly developed the traits of self-confidence and self-reliance, and toughened his frame; he had these characteristics all of his life.

During the latter part of this period, he became friendly with a farmer named Asabel Bennett, married and with a steadily growing family. When the fateful news from California reached the lands between the two great lakes, Bennett and Manly decided to seek a

golden fortune together when the weather cleared in the spring.

This was easy enough for Bennett, who had livestock and land from which to realize his financial needs for the journey, but Manly needed a stake, and there was only one way to make it in winter. Manly left his trunk and other belongings with the Bennetts and took to the woods with a trap line. He ran it all winter, and when he showed up at the Bennett farm in the mud-season of '49, he found Asabel Bennett long gone—and Manly's trunk with him.

The neighbors told him that Bennett had grown tired of waiting; he seemed possessed of a fever that only gold could cure. He had sold his place, harnessed his wagons, loaded his family, and rolled out for the Missouri settlements, leaving word for Manly to follow him.

Manly sold his fur catch, shouldered his pack, and cut stick for the emigrants' rendezvous along Wokaruska Creek. If he didn't find Bennett in Missouri, why then he'd find him in California. This was the spring of '49 and a young man's fancy turned to thoughts of gold, not trunks, or girls, or a whilom partner of the trail.

Manly didn't find Bennett in Missouri, and his own stake was not large enough to get him to California on his own. Hitch-hiking west is not as new as some may think. Bill Manly joined up with a Mr. Dallas from Lynn, Iowa, and headed west, punching the Dallas oxen in return for his board. There were other young adventurers working their way west in the same train, and among them was a burly Tennessean named John Rogers. He was a few years younger than Manly but with the same general outlook on life—*eat anything once*—and the two became fast friends.

The emigrant train rolled west over South Pass in good season and dropped down the Big Sandy to the crossing of Green River. Here they halted to rest and recruit the stock and to fill the water barrels, and Bill Manly took stock of his surroundings. The sand-filled hulk of a plank scow rested near the river bank, used as a ferry and then abandoned. The river itself rolled invitingly toward the southwest. Manly put these two things together and saw no earthly reason to buck the western deserts beyond the Green when here was a golden opportunity to go west by water.

He found John Rogers eager to follow where he led, and word of what he planned got around among the unattached single bucks in the wagon train. When the wagons rolled out again, Bill Manly headed a baker's dozen of adventurers who waved a confident good-by to the wagons and turned to repairing the scow with eager hands. When it was fixed, they elected Manly captain of the craft and blithely embarked upon the most hazardous river passage in the world. They didn't know this, but it wouldn't have deterred them if they had known it. They were bound for California in style, with plenty of drinking water on the way.

Manly himself described the first portion of their voyage as "a floating picnic." The river was clear and cold and not too swift, with at least four feet of water to float the scow. Little parks and benches along the river were rich with wood and teemed with game: deer, bear, elk, and antelope. Thirty miles was just an average day's travel, with nothing to do but shoot, cook, eat, and take turns sleeping. This was the way to go to California!

Now Green River knows where it

wants to go, but the rugged, sawtoothed Uintah Range bars its way. Wherefore, the Green bends sharply east below the Utah line and courses against the northern escarpment of the mountains, cutting canyons that are hell for white water, until it turns the flank of the range and heads southwest again to join the Grand and become the roaring, muddy Colorado. The carefree pilgrims captained by Bill Manly came to grief in Flaming Gorge.

They got ashore, none the worse for their involuntary bath, with their passion for river travel undiminished. They hacked two crude dugouts from the pines that grew to the water's edge and shoved off again. The river got worse and more of it. They ran Red Canyon safely, where General Ashley had left his name a quarter century before them, but they came to final disaster in Hells-Half-Mile.

The roar of the river below them spoke of worse to come. Manly shrugged his shoulders and led his followers out of the river canyon to make their way overland by guess and by God. It should have warned him for all time that short cuts in this raw, wild land were dangerous.

With Manly in the lead—thirty dollars in his pocket, a long rifle in the crook of his arm, and a heart in his breast as fancy-free as a country swain at a husking—the Green River boys skirted the south slope of the Uintahs, breasted the savage Wasatch Range, and came down to the shores of Utah Lake in the new Mormon colony of Deseret. Along with the wide-scattered Mormon habitations, they found a queer assortment of "gentile" emigrants camped beside the lake.

Bill Manly must have been surprised when he found Asabel Bennett and his family camped with the family of J. B. Arcane among the three hundred souls around the lakeshore. The reunion, however, was matter-of-fact. Bennett explained his departure satisfactorily enough, and explained why he had not already reached California by saying he had trouble on the trail. Manly, on his part, was never one to probe too deeply into the actions of those whom he called friend.

The Bennett children, Melissa, George, and baby Martha, welcomed him with gleeful shouts, and the Bennett dog, Cuff, wagged his tail, perhaps, and curled up at Manly's feet. Little Charley Arcane liked him too. So, when the queer assortment of mixed pickles who called themselves "The Sand Walking Company" pulled out to try a new trail to California on September 30, 1849, Bill Manly and John Rogers were traveling with the wagons of Bennett and Arcane.

The Mormon Trail to California was a pack-saddle trail. No wagons had ever traveled it before, and seven toil-filled weeks slid by before the wagons reached Mountain Meadows of massacre fame in later years. It was decided to lay over here and recruit the stock against the dry desert trail to Cajon Pass, and it was then that the smoldering discontents in The Sand Walking Company flared into open flame, particularly against their Mormon guide. *Hell, we done paid him ten dollars a waggin to git us to Californy in nine weeks and we ain't halfways there yit!*

The possible fruit of their grumblings was killed in the bud by an overtaking wagon train under a man named Smith. He was a Mormon, some say a fraud, some say a deliberate instrument of Brigham Young's policy.

No matter what he was, Smith had a map of a cut-off to California.

The precious map showed a general northwest course from Mountain Meadows across Nevada to Owens Lake at the eastern foot of the Sierra Nevada; thence down that monoclinal mass of granite to Walker's Pass and then—*Ho for California!* It was a truly beautiful map, with distances, bearings, water, grass, and mountains clearly marked. Best of all, it showed how to save five hundred miles of the worst travel still ahead.

The map split The Sand Walkers into two groups, and their previous discontent with their guide twisted itself into violent opposition toward one another. The larger group determined to stay with their guide and the known, longer trail. The smaller group decided for the cut-off and the promises of the map.

The short-cutters numbered almost a hundred souls initially: the Jayhawker party of thirty-six young men from Illinois, the Coker party of twenty-odd young men, some Georgians and Mississippians in mutual concert for the trail, and some families. The Reverend Brier with his wife, three small sons, and several semi-attached men; the Wade family of six, four of them children; and the Bennett-Arcane party, two families, four children, four hired teamsters—and Bill Manly and John Rogers to be their last resource against slow death.

Bound together by the precious map, these various and ill-assorted groups traveled as a body for the first few days. Then the map proved wrong, dead wrong. Where an easy trail was shown, a deep canyon barred the way, with no water on the rimrock. Manly packed water out of the canyon for his families. The faint-hearted turned back to follow the Mormon Trail, and to reach Los Angeles after nothing worse than a dry desert drive. The die-hard short-cutters went on—they'd make their own cut-off, by grab. It was a cut-off to Eternity for many of them.

It took them three days to cross that first unmarked canyon, and from then on, the short-cutters traveled as individual fragments, never as a unified whole. Each group veered in whatever direction seemed best for them to take, and the devil and the desert could take the others. Sometimes the Bennett-Arcane party were making tracks, sometimes following them, but whichever they did Bill Manly made it possible. This was no party of carefree young bucks such as had sided him down Green River; these were families and children, a fearful responsibility.

The Great Basin is corrugated with mountain ranges that run from north to south, one after the blessed other, in never-ending succession. Manly realized that he could not go over them without tearing the heart out of the oxen, so he twisted and turned with the valleys that separate the burned-out ranges, obeying some instinct that led him ever southwest. He knew that he did not know the distances between the water holes, the desert seeps that ooze by night, but it didn't show in word or action. He turned a brave face toward the women and children, and a brave heart toward the great unknown. The men he handled in a way they could understand, and John Rogers was a pillar of strength behind him.

He led the Bennett-Arcane party into Nevada without knowing where that was, and found an Indian corn patch that had been robbed by those ahead of them. He took what was left for his families and pressed on down

the Delamar Valley, west of Caliente, where the Joshua trees marched in almost forest array and the creosote bush scorched food before it cooked it. This was true desert country, the land formed from the slag-heap of God-His-Foundry, and the little desert sidewinder was the only living thing that disputed their right of passage. The inanimate things were worse than the snakes, the *mescal*, and the *ocotillo*, the *mesquite* and the *palo verde*, and cactus of all sizes, shapes, and sharpness. Clothes were torn to shreds, livestock went lame, sickened and died from bad water, woodwork shrank and fell apart, and to kill an ox for rawhide bindings was learning the law of diminishing returns under desperate conditions.

The grinding days became weeks, and only the fact that it was winter in the desert made life possible. A winter snow storm howled down on them and they shivered while they spread wagon sheets, even blankets, to catch the precious snow for water. They crawled doggedly on, tiny specks beneath the bowl of the sky, and when they turned south along the valley before the Timpahute Range, they entered upon great and final travail.

When the valley petered out, they swung west again into another valley between the Spotted Range and Skull Mountains, to swing toward the Armagosa River. The river lived up to its Spanish name—it was bitter—and they drank it and they were sick. All the scattered groups seem to have assembled here by the Bitter River for a short-lived community of purpose. From a high plateau west of the river bed, they could see snow peaks above another valley, and to their fevered hopes these peaks became the Sierra gateway to gold.

They caught two Indians skulking about the camp, and when they asked these waifs of the desert where lay the "big water," meaning Owens Lake, the Shoshone pointed southwest across a great pit of desolation mottled under the sun like a Gila Monster. The Indians called it by a name as expressive and as unintelligible as Welsh—*Tomesha*, The Ground That Burns—and that night through careless guarding, the Shoshones got away.

The Jayhawkers found the first trail leading into this pit, and they took it forthwith and without bothering to tell anyone else. The fragments had fissioned again and it was a case of dog eat dog for survival. Before the Bennett-Arcane party moved out, Manly scouted the trail, as was his custom. He followed the Jayhawker tracks down a boulder-strewn wash and came upon their camp inside the pit beside a straggly oasis of grass and warm, bubbling water that was wet without satisfaction.

Manly was well liked by the Jayhawkers and they importuned him to join them and make a quick exit from this place of desolation. They told him that he had no call to stay with those querulous weaklings, he ought to be with a bunch of men who could take care of themselves. Only his gods know what ran through Manly's mind—but he went back to guide his families into the wash.

During his absence, Indians had jumped the Bennett-Arcane wagons and arrowed three oxen before they were beaten off. It was well after dark before they made their first camp in Tomesha, and the day was December 24, 1849. Their Christmas present was a grim one. The snow-capped peaks they had believed to be the Sierra turn-

ed out to be the western wall of Tomesha, whose lowest point was six thousand feet below the mountains' crest. When sunrise, then sunset, on Christmas Day turned the peaks to gold and royal purple, the mockery became almost too much for tortured minds to bear.

From the first oasis in Tomesha, Manly led the Bennett-Arcane group south down the valley of the pit itself and made their base camp at another pitiful pot-hole, now called Bennett's springs. They explored every likely canyon, every spur ridge that might provide an uninterrupted way to the top of the prisoning western range, but every search was in vain. While this activity was going on, the Jayhawkers moved north from the first camp site and explored that end of Tomesha, but there was no cohesive or united action between the two main groups. Instead, there was a gradual shifting and fluctuating of the other individuals between the two—the hired teamsters of Bennett and Arcane left to join the Jayhawkers; the Wade family came down the floor of the pit to join Manly's group and add the burden of additional children to an already desperate situation; Reverend Brier abandoned his individual efforts and took his family to the Jayhawker camp, where, be it to their everlasting credit, they were allowed to remain; a Captain Culverwell aligned himself with Manly's little band, and this is the final disposition of the scattered groups who had tried a shortcut to California, as they nerved themselves for the final effort.

As was only natural, the Jayhawkers made the first successful attempt, but they paid a fearful price. They were all young men, barring Mrs. Brier and her children, and they had the strength of numbers. They burned their wagons, buried what they would not burn, killed their oxen and dried the meat after eating what couldn't be dried, and then they forced a passage across the prisoning range. Had they but known it, the life-giving waters of Owen's Lake were a scant two days' march away, but the Jayhawkers were sick to death of mountains and they turned south to leave the bones of some beside the bitter waters of Searles Lake, and the bones of others to bleach forlornly in the white-hot hell of the Mojave Desert. Thirteen of them died before they won through to a safe haven where Newhall, California, stands today.

Behind them, as they staggered across the deserts, the Bennett-Arcane party, seven adults and eight children, camped beside their water hole in Tomesha, trusting only that Manly and Rogers would return before it was too late. Manly had appraised the situation and knew that the whole party could never get across the range in their weakened condition—a weakness of mind and body both, even of the spirit. Only he and John Rogers had the strength or the will to try the perilous trek to California, wherever that was, for the food that would buoy them up to make the effort for self-preservation.

On an estimated basis, arrived at by some obscure reasoning, Manly determined that he could make the round trip in twenty-one days. Accordingly, he divided up the food between those who would remain and himself and Rogers, who would go. They killed an ox, and dried the meat in the sun, after giving the liver and lights and the brains to the women and children. They saved the bladder to carry water in, and the meat from one whole ox

did not fill the knapsacks that Manly and Rogers carried; there was room to spare for a tin cup, a quart pot, and two spoonfuls of rice and tea. It was scanty fare on which to buck two hundred and fifty miles of the damnedest desert country in the world.

It is just as well, perhaps, that Manly didn't know the distance or the nature of the country, or even his stout heart might have failed. They knew the Mojave and the rugged San Gabriel Mountains well enough before they won through to Mission San Fernando, but even this knowledge could not deter them from starting back as quickly as they could.

Manly's thirty dollars, or what was left of it, went for such supplies as they could purchase, and the good fathers gave him some oranges for the children. They also got two horses and a one-eyed pack mule for the coarse wheaten flour, the beans and the other meager provisions they could carry.

They were almost frantic as they put their outfit together, driven by a terrible sense of responsibility. They had no ties of blood or kin to call them back to Tomesha; they lacked even the transient loyalty of paid hirelings; they owed those who waited for them absolutely nothing, because Manly and Rogers, too, had carried more than a fair share of the load ever since they joined the Bennett-Arcane party. They could have stayed at San Fernando, and no man in all that land could have cried, "Shame." These two were young men, eager for life and all it promised them, but they turned their backs upon the orchards, and the green things growing, and the shady pools beneath the tall cottonwoods along the *acequias* to plunge back into the desert.

They went back as they had come out, because the livestock played out and were abandoned. They cached what they could, and their packs were as heavy as they could manage them. Their moccasins wore out and they robbed their leggings for patches. They came up over the crest of the Panamints and started down the grade toward Tomesha, and an ill-omen met their eyes. Captain Culverwell was stretched lifeless on the sand, eight miles from the wagons, his empty canteen beside his body and a smile of final surrender on his face. Twenty-six days after they left it, five days over their schedule, they sighted the camp by Bennett's well, and their hearts sank. The Wade wagon was gone and no sign of life stirred about the wagons that remained.

Manly and Rogers halted and could not go on, the oranges for the children mocking them like the golden lure of California. They could not rush headlong to find the grim reminders of their failure to come back in time. Manly fired one shot and waited.

Something stirred under a wagon, as a mole stirs the ground that shelters him. A crouched figure stood up, stooped with hunger and despair, and other figures followed it, as if reluctant to leave the wagon beds, the only shade.

Bill Manly counted them on his fingers until he knew that all the members of the Bennett-Arcane families were still alive. Then the four children sucked greedily at the first oranges they had ever seen.

As Manly rationed out the stock of provisions from San Fernando, he learned the story of the Wade family. Wade had gotten sick and tired of waiting for succor to return: "If those boys ever get out of this accursed hole, they would be fools to ever come back to

help anybody." Wade took his family and his lack of faith and struck out one morning and the other two families had not seen him since. Manly couldn't waste time or effort searching; he had to get his plans executed before the return of hunger.

There were six oxen left alive, and these he intended to use as riding-stock until they dropped; then the tough, stringy flesh would afford some sustenance. They shod these six with shoes made from the hides of their dead yoke mates. Then they made ox-saddles from wagon covers for the women and children, and saddle pockets for little Charley Arcane and Martha Bennett. When all was ready, they had one note of comedy to give them heart.

Mrs. Arcane was a "city" woman, proud of her wardrobe and her cultured manners. When she appeared to mount her steed, an ox called "Old Crump," everything she wore, from beribboned bonnet to high button shoes, was her best and reflected her standards of taste and refinement. Carefully she was lifted into the saddle and "Old Crump" swallowed his head and left Mrs. Arcane clutching a handful of thin dry air. There was a moment of dismayed silence, while they feared the worst, and then gusts of nervous laughter as Mrs. Arcane proved by her remarks that she was not seriously damaged. It had been a long time since they had any excuse to laugh.

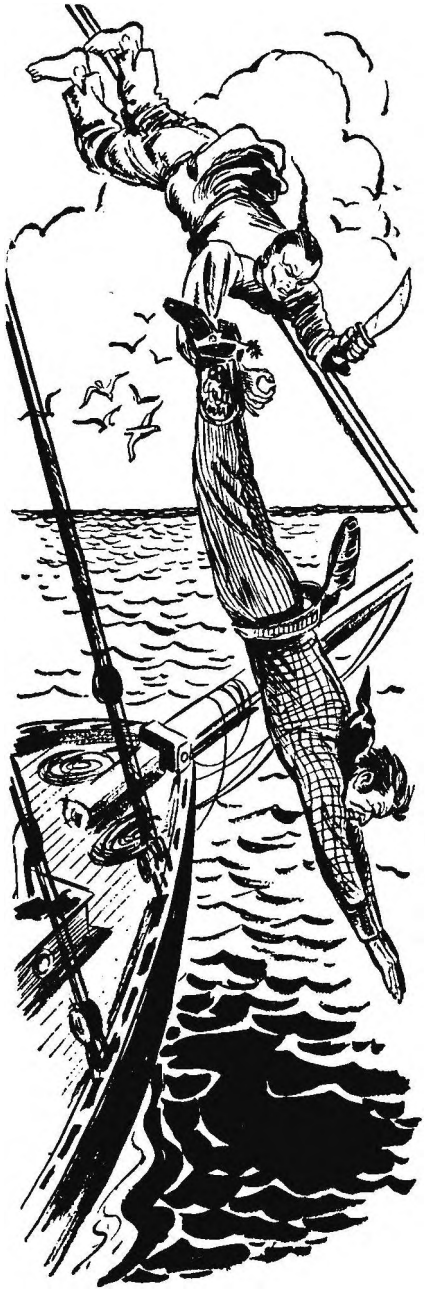
It took them three painful days to make the summit. When they did, they stopped and looked down into the pit whence they had climbed. What thoughts were theirs, what dead dreams they had buried beside their abandoned wagons, what self-reproaches rode them, no man may know. They bowed their heads in instinctive silence for a moment, and when they raised their eyes, one of the women spoke their prayer—"Good-by, Death Valley." Tomesha had been re-named.

Thanks to Bill Manly and his burly friend John Rogers, the families named Bennett and Arcane came out of the the valley of the shadow, and reached the end of their short cut to California. Arcane gave Manly his gold ring, Rogers his silver watch, and counted himself lucky to have ten dollars left.

Bennett may have given them thanks, but whether he did or not, no man can diminish the legacy to the West of William Lewis Manly of Vermont and his follower, John Rogers of Tennessee.

Answers to "Eyes of the Army" Quiz on page 101

1. Crawford was the scouts' "poet laureate." 2. Godey was Carson's messmate while guiding Fremont. 3. Kitchen was "Arizona's Daniel Boone." 4. Seiber served as chief of scouts against the Apaches. 5. Grouard commanded scouts for Crook. 6. Horn was hanged for murder. 7. Reynoulds died with his boots on at the Little Big Horn. 8. Williams went under in the San Juans. 9. Schieffelin found the Tombstone Lode. 10. Omohondro joined Buffalo Bill in his dramatic venture.



"MILE-A-DAY" MANDON *figures on getting the S. L. & W. branch line laid in little more than a jiffy, but he hasn't allowed for such annoyances as Dingo Erle and Gwen Hinshaw. A ZGWM original.*

The Octopus Had A Daughter

A Novelette

By JOHN E. KELLY

CHAPTER ONE

Lay of the Land

"YOU know the type, Cal," Hinshaw said, biting deeply into a fresh plug of fine-cut. "Short, fat, walks likes he owns the earth. Damn near does, too, around here!"

"Dog in the manger, eh?" Mandon asked, peeling off his tight black citified coat. He followed Hinshaw's example, cocking his heels comfortably on the superintendent's desk.

Hinshaw snorted. "I like dogs!" he said explosively. "Say sea sarpint or octypus and you'd come closer to naming our laddybuck. And gold-plated! Crann's worth a cool two million and willing to spend it all to keep us from building down the Coast."

"Doesn't make sense to me," object-

ed the younger man. "Crann stands to make a fortune, shipping in the ties and steel we'll need for a hundred miles of main line."

"Not as big as the bankroll he'll miss when the Salt Lake & Western Railroad connects with the Bay," the superintendent explained. "Look how it stacks up. Ab Crann owns the only pier here in Mendocia; you saw the river's too narrow for a second, even if Crann didn't have all the waterfront for miles. No ships dock here without Ab's say-so, and that costs a pretty penny. Outbound cargo pays storage in Crann's warehouse waiting for Crann's ships—or it ain't shipped. That's his bus'ness. But he horns in on the railroad, knowing he's got us where the hair is short. With no port, we haul no through freight. Crann talked cold turkey to our Old Man; he wanted a ten-percent divvy on our revenue."

"Nice boy!" grunted Mandon. "And then?"

A taut smile creased Hinshaw's thin bearded face. "Our directors hocked their watches to build on to the Bay, where we'll have a pier of our own and handle all comers," he replied. "When Crann saw how he'd outfoxed himself, I looked for him to blow a cylinder head. But he figgered he was still sitting pretty, with an ace in the hole. He owns all the flats along the Coast—that's his Temblosa Ranch—and refused us a right of way. We had to law him to cross his land."

"All right," Mandon conceded. "Lean days are coming for Crann when the S. L. & W. reaches the Bay. But why shouldn't he grab all the business in sight, meantime? His ships are still running to Mendocia. The one bringing me had a deckload that near swamped us."

"Sure," nodded the superintendent, "but Crann savvies something you ain't wise to yet. The legislature gave us the charter with a hobble to it. Our time for building to the Bay is mighty short; Crann saw to that. If we don't meet the deadline, our franchise is forfeited. The rest is plain like them blueprints you engineering fellers use. Crann works up a newspaper shivaree until Salt Lake & Western stock goes to hell in a handbasket! One guess says whose two millions buy control of the road dirt-cheap. Meantime, Crann's making sure we won't finish on schedule, boycotting our supplies, making us lose time deadheading 'em plumb from Salt Lake."

Mandon was unperturbed. "We'll raise the ante, work faster, and freeze Crann out of the game," he said.

"That's why you're here," Hinshaw commented succinctly.

Cal raised sandy eyebrows inquiringly. "I was hired and got away in such a rush I didn't get the whole story."

The superintendent shifted his quid, dyed a spider darting over the depot floor, and drew the back of a lean hand across his lips. "When Judson got cold feet and quit," he said, "Charles Crocker gave you a bang-up recommend, saying you was one of his best when he was building the Central Pacific over the hill to Ogden. Mile-a-Day Mandon, he called you. Wisht you could do that good here."

"Why not?" demanded Mandon, ruffled. "Your route is all flat land, nothing like the grades and tunnels we had over the Sierras. And no hostile Injuns to massacre the Chinese work gangs."

"Ever hear of 'Dingo' Erle?"

"Erle?" Cal repeated, frowning in recollection. "There was an Erle on the ship but his name was Angelo."

"His mother hung that monicker on him before she knowed how he'd turn out," Hinshaw said. "If you know what a dingo is, you've got Erle's hull description, better'n that Nevady sheriff's poster. Dingo knifed a floozie in Reno for holding out part of what she made, and sloped for California, rolling into Mendocia just after we started to build down the Coast. Crann figured Erle fitted his book, hired him, and hushed up the killing. He's got Dingo out at Temblosa as ranch foreman, but his real job is to stop us."

"How?" barked Mandon.

"When Crann wouldn't carry our supplies," Hinshaw related, "we set out hauling overland from the Bay by corn freight. Camping on Temblosa Ranch, our wagons were burned in grass fires, and stock run off. The muleskinners got their ears singed with flying lead until they quit."

"Lead flies two ways," snapped Cal. "What about the sheriff?"

"The sheriff lives in one of Crann's houses, his brother's a mate on Crann's ships; he couldn't find no evidence," the superintendent said drily. "But I don't rightly blame the lawdog so much, figuring the odds ag'in' him."

"Odds?" echoed Mandon. "Can't the sheriff stand up to Erle?"

"Man to man, I reckon so," Hinshaw rejoined, "but Dingo don't play that way. Was he alone on the *Racing Wave* yesterday?"

Cal shook his head. "He was thicker than thieves with a half dozen bully-boys, the kind that wear pearl buttons all over their coats. They'd never make gandy dancers or cowhands; I couldn't figure why they'd ship to Mendocia."

"Recruits for Temblosa," Hinshaw told him grimly. "When the vigilantes run cutthroats out of Bay City, Dingo brings 'em up here. He's got a young army out on the ranch. I reckon Crann's getting leery of Erle, but like the bear that caught his tail in a split log, he's got to sit tight and take what's coming."

"Which looks like hell with the hide off, for all concerned," said Mandon wryly. He resumed his coat and glossy beaver hat. "If you'll have someone give me a hand with my boxes, I'll be back after lunch and go over Judson's plans."

"We'll have to bunk you at the boarding-house," Hinshaw explained apologetically; "railroaders ain't welcome at Crann's hotel no more. We ain't got so much plush as the Mendocia Hotel, nor so many fleas, neither." He clapped sharply.

A stocky Cantonese in blue drill came through the door in the temporary plank partition walling off the construction office's encroachment upon the passenger waiting-room.

"Mock San," the superintendent said, "take Mr. Mandon's things to Miz Fenton's, chop-chop."

The Chinese eyed Cal's buffalo-hide trunk appraisingly. "Can do," he grunted, clamping a hand on the grip and deftly swinging the box upon his back.

CHAPTER TWO

The Girl on the Steps

DEPOT STREET was wide and rutted, ankle-deep in ecru dust. Directly opposite, chalky-white, boasting the only wooden sidewalk in town, stood the Mendocia House. The Chinese veered aside, plowing through the silt toward a straggling

one-story shanty bearing a sun-bleached invitation: *Fenton's Superb Lodgings & Table d'Hote.* The blaze of noon struck dazzlingly into Mandon's face. He rubbed the film from his eyes to see Dingo Erle cutting rapidly across the street.

Erle was rigged out like a mail-order cowboy. Twin gun belts sagging with capacity loads cinched his lean waist, long-barreled Frontier models protruded from holsters tied low about his thighs. Cerise wipes topped a canary shirt; a puma-pelt vest flapped with his stride. Dingo's flashily handsome features were framed by flamboyant ebony sideburns. Fresh from the barber, severed chin stubble made blue shadows beneath his transparent olive skin. *Lady-killer,* thought Mandon scornfully, his hackles rising.

Passing Mock San, Erle laid a hand on the trunk and thrust suddenly sideways. The Cantonese and his burden crashed in a cloud of choking dust.

"What—" began Mandon, amazement and outrage struggling within him.

Dingo cut him short. His tawny eyes stared arrogantly down on Cal's husky five foot ten.

"You come in on the *Racin' Wave,*" Erle said in a feline rasp. "She sails on the sunset tide."

"What of it?" snapped Mandon.

Dingo purred lethally. "If you've got the sense Judson finally showed, you'll be on board!"

Cal deliberately turned his back, giving the Chinese a hand up with the trunk and watching him shuffle away. Then he rounded on Dingo, fists clenched until their nails dug into his palms.

"And if I'm not?" he grated.

Erle's heavy eyelids drooped. His eyes were blazing slits in the narrow oblong of his sallow face. He flipped a long finger toward Cal's lapel.

"Them purty black clothes'll come in handy at your buryin'," Dingo spat out. His hands cradled the walnut butts of his guns.

"Angelo!"

The call came from the Mendocia House. Erle pivoted, taking a lithe sidelong step to keep his back from Mandon. But Cal had forgotten the gunman. His attention was fixed on the girl on the steps.

She was a figure from Market Street, from Paris, her modish silks and satins an alluring contrast to her homespun setting. Her pert chip hat tossed buoyantly on waves of shining hair, honey-brown. Lustrous taffeta confined a demurely rounded bodice, billowed below her supple waist. As the vision gathered her trailing skirts in cautious descent of the warped steps, tiny shoes peeped under the hem, gems of leatherwork.

Mandon stared and was stirred—and resentful. Such girls belonged back in Bay City, in the big houses on the hill overlooking the sea. They had no business out in the sticks distracting young men who must slap down a mile of steel daily despite Crann and Dingo Erle.

"Angelo, I want to speak with you!"

The girl's voice was contralto, assured. Evidently she knew Erle well and expected compliance from him. In the breast of the stranger who resented her presence, an incongruous spark of jealousy glowed.

Erle scowled, shoving his Stetson back on his balding brow. The engineer punk knew how the cards lay, he was thinking; leave him out of sight and he'd hole up in the construction camp where there'd be the devil's own time getting him. But Dingo wasn't

knocking him down to the dame—city gals gave tenderfeet the glad eye—and maybe build up a rival for himself. The girl solved his dilemma.

"Angelo," she called, her voice higher and edged, "didn't you hear me?"

Erle's words came to Mandon in a harsh whisper.

"Come on. But keep your mouth shut, if you know what's good for you!"

As the two drew up before the girl, Dingo caught the direction of her glance and seethed. She was glad-eyeing the dude! Approval shone in the girl's hazel eyes as she scanned the map of Scotland above Cal's collar, its twin blue tarns, sandy thatch, and crags of nose and chin. Angelo benefited by association.

"Introduce your new friend to me," the girl told him in a much warmer tone.

Dingo balked. "Ain't no use," he objected. "You won't be seein' him no more. He's leavin' on the *Racin' Wave*."

The girl stabbed Erle with a glare. "Angelo!"

"Your old man wouldn't want you to meet up with this ornery horn' toad," Dingo insisted doggedly.

The girl tossed her fair head. "You're not my guardian, Mr. Erle!" she cried indignantly. "I'm nineteen and choose my own friends."

In a lightning change of mood she beamed on the bewildered Cal. "I do hope you'll like us enough to change your mind and stay in Mendocia," she said, putting out a small firm hand man-fashion. "I'm Gwen Crann."

Cal's spirits sank, though subconsciously he had known she must be the enemy's daughter. His emotions did a quick turnabout. Forbidden though Gwen was, he no longer resented her presence. She belonged, not in Bay City, but here, the nearer the better. Dingo read Mandon's mind.

"You don't know what you're sayin', Gwen," Erle declared hotly. "This is the railroad skonk, Cal Mandon, that's fixin' to steal your Temblosa Ranch!"

"*Your* ranch, Miss Crann?" Cal cut in swiftly. "Doesn't Dingo mean your father's?"

"Dad runs it until I—" She broke off, blushing. "Until I marry. It's mine—Mother left it to me. Are you really planning to take it away?"

"Certainly not!" Cal replied emphatically. "We're satisfied with our right of way. The railroad will make your land much more valuable. You can ship steers by rail instead of walking weight off them by driving overland."

"It takes a greenhorn to learn us the cattle business," snarled Erle. "What was you wantin' to talk about, Gwen?"

"Dad went to Temblosa without telling me," the girl explained. "My new clothes—" Gwen spread her full skirts and dropped her audience a gay cursty —"just came and I want him to see them right away. Will you drive me out in the buckboard, Angelo?"

"Sure thing," said Erle eagerly, patently anxious to get the girl away from Cal. He whirled on Mandon, his face hardening. "Don't miss the *Racin' Wave* if you want to stay healthy! If I meet up with you again, and remember you called me outa my name, I'll burn your tongue out with hot lead!"

Giving the girl no chance to speak to Cal, Erle seized her arm and hurried her up the street. "Ab'll be ridin' the range if we ain't there in two shakes," he told her. "You come with me whilst I hitch up."

Mandon bristled impotently at Dingo's familiarity. He had no right to re-

sent it; perhaps the girl's blush signaled their engagement. Cal evicted the thought furiously. Crass as he might be, Crann would never marry his daughter to a killer. Yet—Gwen had gone docilely with the hectoring Angelo.

Reviewing the morning, Mandon unpacked in his lodging, changing into working cothes. This job promised few dull moments. As an afterthought, Cal strapped a small parlor gun under his armpit.

Chapter Three

Business Call

THE construction camp, a frowsy huddle of tents, wagons, and cars, moved often to keep close to the head of rail. An ancient boxcar with packing-box desk and built-in bunks provided working and living quarters for Mandon and his stripling timekeeper, Lafe Bradley. Cal commandeered Mock San as odd-job man, found him adept with a skillet and promoted him to private cook. The Cantonese hung a burlap hammock from the car's underframe, stuck an incense stick in a crosstie, and was at home. The engineer watched him sharpen a machete on the rail.

"For cut um meat?" Cal asked, smiling at Mock's concentration.

Mock San flourished the long blade. "Fo' cut um skonk!" he said ferociously. "You savvy Dingo? Him push Mock. Sometime he come. Me fix!"

As fast as Hinshaw could send supplies, Mandon drove his crews forward. The head of steel passed close to the Temblosa Ranch house without sign of Crann or Dingo.

"It ain't natural," fretted Bradley. "Them hellions is up to no good I tell you."

"We won't borrow trouble," Cal replied.

Privately he ascribed their peaceful passage to Gwen's influence. He loitered atop his boxcar office, searching the western prairie for sight of her, but the long low adobe ranch buildings and the home range appeared deserted. Only an occasional cowpoke rode the Temblosa trails; the private army of Bay City fugitives lay doggo.

The railhead moved on into a region of meandering waterways rimmed with cottonwoods. Deep, sluggish Revilla Creek, stretching its last mile before falling into the Pacific, doubled on its course, crossing the right of way twice within a thousand yards. Mandon's crews, his Dynamite Dans and powder monkeys, Chinese shovel gangs, tie and rail men, spikers and bolters, the rearguard true-up team, camped in the narrow crescent between the roadbed and the stream's miniature canyon, grateful for the rare shade.

The supply train puffed in with timber and steel. The conductor carried bad news from Hinshaw. A landslide in the Sierras had buried an S. L. & W. freight bringing Mandon a month's explosives. The superintendent's note was bleak.

—The only dynamite in Mendocia is in Crann's warehouse. His flunkies whooped and wished us luck chewing the rocks with our teeth. The old octypus is out of town, maybe at Temblosa.

Mandon boarded the locomotive as the train backed to Mendocia. Dropping off near the ranch house, he walked across the range, rehearsing an appeal to melt a businessman's heart. Cal

confidently expected to wipe out old scores and make the rancher his friend. Evenings with Gwen in the Crann parlor would take the rough edges off railroad building.

From the shadows of the wide portico a squat figure emerged, gun in hand.

"You huntin' trouble, Mac?" he asked with truculent hopefulness.

"I have business with Mr. Crann," Cal replied evenly.

"He don't want none with you," barked the gun toter, leveling his piece. "Me finger's itchin'. Hit the breeze while yore skin's whole!"

"Put your gun up, Sam!"

Muttering, Sam gave grudging obedience to the contralto command. He moved a few steps aside, holstering his gun, but kept a grip on it. A girl followed her words through the main doorway.

Mandon did not immediately recognize Gwen. Her hair was no longer waved but drawn tightly back from the slender oval of her sunkissed face. She was taller and slimmer in saddle pants and a soft blue shirt, open at the throat, snug in the right places. No one would mistake Gwen for a boy. Cal caught his breath and his carefully planned speech for Crann was completely lost to mind.

"How very nice!" cried Gwen, coming forward until the nooning sun picked out the dusting of freckles across the bridge of her short straight nose. She cut a fine figure in her molded costume and wasn't above appearing to best advantage. Her smile wide and welcoming, Gwen went on, "Now that we're neighbors, I was hoping you'd come to call."

Mandon cut his eyes at the glowering Sam, lounging within earshot.

"I'm afraid it's mostly business, Miss Crann," Cal said. "This time," he added *sotto voce*. "We lost a carload of powder and I came to see if your father would sell us some to maintain our schedule."

The girl caught the cue and matched Mandon's businesslike demeanor.

"I'm sure Dad has plenty," she assured Cal. "I'll tell him you're here." Her high-heeled custom-mades clicked briskly across the tile floor.

Spanish-fashion, the paneless windows were screened with jalousies to exclude heat and glare. Mandon heard Gwen's murmur of explanation quelled by an angry outburst.

"Damn it, no!" a man's voice shouted. "I'll sell him nothing. But I'll make him a free gift of powder to blow him and his tinpot railroad to hell and gone!"

Dingo's feline tones chimed in. "We've got the bastard dead to rights, Ab, without no witnesses! Me'n Sam can put windows in his skull right now."

A small scream from Gwen was drowned out by the older man's peremptory bark.

"Sit down, Ang', I'm giving the orders around here! Shooting this feller won't help; you saw how fast they hired Mandon when we ran Judson out of the country. Engineers are a dime a dozen. I'm playing for table stakes; don't horn in with your penny-ante tricks."

Dingo's snarl was plain in the sudden silence.

Waiting tensely, Mandon went cold in the blazing sunshine. Gooseflesh formed on his arms. Sam pulled his gun as Erle made his proposal, reluctantly sheathing it at Crann's veto. Gwen's returning steps were slow and heavy-foot-

ed. Her face was flushed, her eyes stormy.

"I'm sorry," she said, avoiding Cal's glance. "Dad hasn't been well lately. He was resting and I couldn't disturb him."

"He talks right loud in his sleep," commented Mandon acidly. Like father, like daughter, he told himself bitterly; there was nothing good at Temblosa. He had been a fool to think otherwise, taken in by huge hazel eyes and seductive lines.

Gwen made a helpless gesture with her hands. "I was afraid you'd hear," she surrendered. "I don't know what's gotten into Dad since Mother died. She wouldn't have allowed certain people on the place—"

She broke off, paling, as Sam shuffled his feet loudly. The girl pivoted to stare at the door behind her, then turned resolutely to Cal.

"There's no dynamite on the ranch," she said, "or I'd let you have it. The Mendocia store belongs to Dad. I can't help you, but I promise you'll get back to your camp safely. Nobody will shoot you." Her eyes were ice as she swung on the gunman. "You heard me, Sam!"

Sam scowled. "What Dingo says, goes with me," he muttered. "I ain't seen the day I'd take orders from a cow bunny—and scrawny at that."

The insult was flagrant, provocative. Mandon clenched his fists and took a step toward Sam, then halted uncertainly. He had no friends in Temblosa; this might be a scene staged to give the gunman a claim of self-defense. Nonetheless, he felt lower than a mud-puppy's dewlap when Gwen fought her own battle.

"Remember, I know why you and Angelo and all the rest came here," she told Sam spiritedly. "Do you dare me to tell?" The squat man stood mute. "Go back to the bunkhouse," Gwen snapped angrily. "Those are orders—from me."

Sam lost a duel of glares with Gwen, fiddled with his gun belt, shrugged, and moved rebelliously around the corner of the house. The girl gave Mandon no chance for comment.

"Please try to understand why I lied to you," Gwen said. Her eyes besought him. She put out a tentative hand. "I hope that someday we can be real friends."

Cal took her slim fingers briefly in his. "I will try to understand, Miss Crann," he said noncommittally. Swinging on his heel he strode away, the nerves in his back writhing as though Dingo were drawing a bead on him.

Chapter Four

Night Raid

BY THE time he reached the rails, understanding had come to Cal. Filled with self-loathing, he knew Gwen was real and honest. She had shielded her father, protected Mandon from the Temblosa gang at who knew what risk—and Cal had repaid her by doubt and discourtesy. But when he would have returned, braving Dingo's guns, to seek her forgiveness, he saw Gwen standing where he left her, flanked by Erle's lean height and a short stout figure in white who could only be Crann. Laughing at the fool they had made of him, Cal thought savagely, sending him away empty-handed. His thoughts in turmoil, he strode furiously down the track, stumbling over crossties, a miserable young man

in love.

In the boxcar office, Lafe Bradley looked up from his time sheets.

"The Dynamite Dans opened their last box this after'," he told Mandon. "What luck?"

"None," replied Cal sourly. "The boys can catch up on their fishing until Hinshaw scrapes us up some powder."

The crews were streaming back from work at sunset when Cal heard his name called.

"Feller here name o' Mandon?" A cowhand and his sidekick herded four steers toward camp.

Cal met them with a disclaimer. "We don't buy live meat."

The horseman chuckled. "You ain't buyin' these critters, bub," he answered. "They come free—from a lady."

Mandon felt his cheeks redden. He knew the answer but he must ask. "What lady?"

"The only one in drivin' range, Miz Gwen up to Temblosa."

Mandon's emotions somersaulted again. How he had misjudged her! The gift was Gwen's pledge of friendship, assurance that she was not leagued with Crann and Erle against him.

Cal was lost in daydreams, with Mock San's choicest fare cooling untasted on his plate, as Bradley slipped into his place across the desk that doubled as dining table. The youth was tense with excitement.

"Does it take four cowboys to herd four steers?" Lafe demanded.

"Shiftless lot, cattlemen. Maybe they'd nothing to do and came along for the ride," Mandon commented absently. Then as Bradley's uneasiness penetrated Cal's rose-colored mood, he roused himself and said, "I saw only two."

The timekeeper nodded gloomily. "Them two high-tailed it, soon's they turned the steers over to the butcher. But there was another pair, followin'. They kept clost to the cottonwoods, where it was nigh dark, and rode plumb around camp, eyein' ever'thin' in sight."

"Probably figuring on changing jobs; punching cows is the poorest pay there is," replied Cal tolerantly.

"Or gettin' the lay of the land, if old Crann is fixin' to bushwhack us," suggested Bradley.

"Nonsense," retorted his boss sharply. "Do you think Miss Crann would be in cahoots with dry-gulchers?"

"I ain't sayin' that," muttered Lafe, "but things has been too quiet too long."

Bradley shrugged and turned a young appetite on dinner. But he had destroyed Mandon's happiness. As Cal worked on his accounts, the sinister cowpunchers rode stirrup to stirrup with Gwen across the pages of his ledger.

Doubt roweled him sleepless in his narrow bunk. He had just made an uneasy truce with suspicion when slugs thudded into the car's side and a devil's tattoo of flying hoofs and whoops swept down upon the sleeping camp.

Mandon hit the floor gun in hand, scrabbling for his shoes. A second bound brought him outside. Bradley was at Cal's heels; Mock San came from his hammock under the car, moonlight glinting on the blade of his machete.

The gray night was filled with dim swirling shapes. Half a hundred horsemen swept across the tracks, trapping the construction crews in the bend of the sheer-walled stream. Iron-shod hoofs crashed through the flimsy shelters of the Chinese.

"Devils come!" screamed the dazed coolies, stumbling half asleep from their wrecked shacks to be ridden down by berserk riders galloping with loose rein while both hands emptied six-shooters into the milling crowd.

A horseman tore down the canvas windbreak of the open-air kitchen and tossed it on the coals of the watchman's coffee fire.

"Gotta have me a light; I'm missin' too many of these yeller bastards!" he yelled.

The flames licked eagerly at the grease-splattered cloth, flashed up a tinder-dry pole to the shake roof, and leaped to an overhanging cedar. The tree blazed like a giant candle, lighting the scene with a dazzling glare. Shading his eyes, Cal saw his cowed workmen herded by the implacable riders to the brink of the creek under the cottonwoods. Only the tents of the Dynamite Dans were untouched. A little removed from the other crews as befitted the aristocrats of labor, they spat lead, keeping prowling raiders at a wary distance. The rest of the camp was wrecked and lay lifeless as the bodies strewing its trampled sod.

"Come on," Cal said to his two companions, in a tense undertone. "Most of the killers are down at the creek. We've got a chance to make it to the Dans."

But no sooner were they beyond the car's shadow than Dingo's yell rose from the crowd under the trees.

"There's Mandon, now! Get him, somebody!"

"Mist' Cal, you look out!"

Mock San's high-pitched warning was blurred by the beat of racing hoofs. A single rider rounded the cars, behind them, spurring toward Mandon, to ride him down. The engineer's frantic leap aside carried him to safety as the horseman flashed past. Two shots merged in a single report. The rider's lead went wild; Mandon's grazed the animal's shoulder to plunk solidly in the man's chest. The rider reeled in the saddle as his goaded animal, unguided, headed for the Dans' tents. Following at a dead run, Mandon saw a giant powder man swing a pick handle like a flail against the horseman's gun arm, snapping it with the pop of a dry stick. *Score one for our side*, Cal thought grimly.

The tents of the Dans swarmed with muscular men clad mostly in full beards and cartridge belts.

"They caught us sleepin'," Matt Sexton, the powder foreman met Cal's inquiring look. "Time enough to get dressed after we beat them off."

"You figure they'll head here next?" asked Mandon.

"They know you're here," Sexton replied drily, peering through a bullet gash in the tent's side. "They aim to make a clean sweep. Look yonder."

Cal put his eye to the rent and groaned. The boxcars blazed. As he watched, fire caught at the shacks as firebugs raced among them. The cedar had burned to a glowing trunk, the tents were in shadow again.

"The varmints'll be creepin' up on us—less'n we go get them first," muttered a powder man. "I'm no mind to play sittin' duck—"

A screech cut him off. Long-drawn, blood-curdling, it grew in volume as new voices added their tale of unbearable agony.

"What the—" Cal began, staring at Sexton in stupefaction.

Mock San interrupted. "Dingo kill China boy!" he jabbered. "Me fix!" Waving his long blade wildly, the Can-

tonese rushed for the door. Sexton's hamlike hand clamped on Mock San's shoulder.

"Hold on!" the foreman ordered. "Dingo'd like nothin' better than you savin' him the trouble of comin' and getting you. We'll all go. Wait 'til I fix me stick."

From under his bunk Sexton drew a stick of dynamite. "The last one in camp," he explained, somewhat shamefaced at Cal's scrutiny. "I was savin' it to go fishin' in case we'd no work tomorrer."

Expertly the powder foreman affixed a blasting cap and two-minute fuse. Then to Mandon's wonder Matt inserted the dynamite in a widemouthed bottle and looped a short length of rope about the glass neck.

"'Twill carry better so," he said cryptically.

From long habit Sexton took command. "Come along, boy-ohs," he commanded. "Half a dozen of yez bring flares. But divil a one strikes a match nor fires a shot 'til I give Dingo a taste of me bottle."

The boy-ohs guffawed appreciatively, but none thought to share the joke with Mandon.

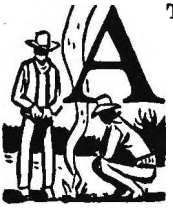
"We'll cut down by the crick," Matt went on, "and sneak along under the trees until we come to whar Dingo's torturin' them poor heathens."

Sexton was an old sergeant, dextrous in usurping authority but a stickler for form.

"Mr. Mandon, sir," he said deferentially, "we're ready to march." Matt dragged the grimacing Mock San to a place behind Cal. "Three paces in the rear of your officer, slant-eye!" he barked. "And mind ye keep yer place. Anybody ahead of our line catches hell this night."

Chapter Five

Strange Fruit



AT A crouching run, the powder men reached the cottonwoods undetected. Dingo was busy along the far side of the crescent where screams rising above a chorus of sobbing moans told of fresh victims. It was sooty black under the trees. A man stumbled over an unseen log, another swore suddenly and staggered against Cal.

"Damn thorns," groaned the staggerer, "I should've worn me pants."

"Hobble yer lip!" hissed Sexton. "The next man talks gets me fist in his teeth." He spread his great arms to halt the advance. "If yez make that much noise, Dingo'll be layin' fer us, 'steada us surprisin' him," he said in a rasping whisper. "We'll go single file, me leadin'. Give me yer hand, Mr. Mandon, sir, and you take the Chink's. Every man join on."

The line of powder men inched snakelike forward, weaving among the cottonwoods, guided by the flickering glow of the burning cars on their right. Interminably later Sexton halted. Beyond the trees a confused silhouette, black against the gray-black sky, broke down for Cal into a close-bunched group of riders, sitting their mounts.

Matt put his mouth to Mandon's ear. "Them's the hangers-on," he breathed. "The ones Dingo don't need right now in his devilin'. He's clost by, but we can't pass these without they'd notice, so here goes."

Under cover of a new outbreak of shrieks, Sexton drew a dozen powder men about him.

"Huddle around, boy-ohs," he ordered, "so tight no light'll show through."

Hunkered in the close circle, the foreman touched a match to the dynamite fuse. "Scatter," he told his men in a swift whisper. "When this baby pops, let fly with everythin' ye have!"

Behind the stout trunk of an aged cottonwood where no roving eye of a bored rider might catch the flash, Matt whirled his rope in a vertical loop. When the bottle spun so fast that the sputtering fuse drew a crimson circle on the dark, Sexton stepped into the clear and threw. Cal stared after the fiery speck as it rose in a steep curve, forty feet, fifty. For an instant it paused at the crest of its flight, then dove, ever faster. Trailing sparks, the foreman's bottle plummeted upon the somnolent killers.

Mandon held his breath, his pulse pounded. The two minutes must be up. The fuse was twenty feet above the silhouetted Stetsons—twelve—four. It was hidden among the shadowy riders. Cal knew an instant of disappointment, of pity. Matt's bomb would explode on the ground, maiming horses innocent of their riders' deviltry.

A startled cry heralded a flash of white light, brief and blinding as lightning, and a rending crash. The moans of Dingo's victims were drowned out by a nearer babel of curses and groans. The group of riders burst asunder. Men still mounted fled into the night, others thrashed on the ground.

Erle's roar rode the tumult, mistaking its cause. "When I get my hands on the damn fool who did that—!"

The dark shapes of running men came from the woods ahead. Hot lead met them; the six-shooters of the Dans flashed like fireflies as they took the field. Long-distance fighting irked the powder men; holstering their emptied guns, they charged the killers with clubs and rocklike fists. Cal found himself in a blind gangfight, slugged by unseen foes, firing wherever a broad-brimmed hat showed against the sky.

Battered and boogered, the killers gave ground. Dingo had promised them a sheep-killing. "Ain't more'n two-three of them gandy dancers got guns and *they* couldn't shoot fish in a bar'l," he had guaranteed. The mysterious explosion shook them— "It was a shootin' star, I seen it jest afore it hit," a survivor insisted. Their nerves, the always jittery nerves of a murdering mob, crisped at the sudden savage attack. "Injuns!" cried some. A mobster, firing wildly in the dark, saw in the flash of his piece a nude white giant within arm's length, whirling a club over his leonine head.

"Ghosts!" the killer howled, turning to flee. His first racing step ended in midair; the powder man's cudgel crushed his skull like a rotten egg.

The surviving killers didn't wait for horses; they made far-apart tracks getting away. A single mounted man spurred out of the woods. Cal emptied his gun at the tall blurred shape and prayed he had winged Dingo.

"All clear!" Sexton bellowed. "Light a couple o' them flares."

Leaving the others to search the battlefield and camp for stragglers, Mandon snatched a hissing fusee from the nearest Dan and followed the trail of moans to the brink of the bluff. Mock San overtook him.

"More better me hold," the Cantonese said, taking the spiked tube from Cal. "You see Dingo, you need hand to shoot."

"This is the one place he won't be," Mandon assured Mock. "Dingo's had

his bellyful of fighting for tonight."

The stout lower branches of cottonwoods bowed under the weight of strange fruit. Bound hand and foot with strips torn from their blue cotton jackets, a score of Chinese hung in writhing pairs, their smooth faces twisted into corrugated, agonized masks. By the flare's crimson light Cal stared in bewilderment at throats unnoosed by rope, then in rage and horror, he understood. Erle had knotted two pigtails together and hung their owners over a limb to gibber and faint with unbearable pain while scalps tore loose from their skulls, dragging cheeks over eyeballs. The victims were not gagged; Dingo "liked to hear 'em sing."

Mandon took Mock San's machete. "Drive the spike of the fusee into that tree where it'll throw plenty of light," he said. "I'll need you to give me a hand."

The Cantonese supported one of a pendant pair, while Cal put his free arm around the other and slashed the knotted queues. Lowering the sufferers gently to the ground, Mandon and Mock cut their bonds, then hurried on to the next.

When the last coolies were free, the engineer inspected his patients. The flare was burning low. In the dim light some lay inert, the stronger struggled to their feet.

A husky shovel hand, gingerly feeling his aching head, discovered his hacked pigtail. His cry roused every conscious Chinese. Groggily they came at Cal, clawing hands outstretched, murder in their slanting bloodshot eyes. The astounded engineer backed away, fending off their staggering rush with the flat of his blade.

"They've gone mad!" Mandon shouted to Mock San.

"You cut pigtail, make China boy lose face," the Cantonese replied.

He halted his raging countrymen with a torrent of sing-song, drowning their shrill protests. As the coolies sullenly retreated to huddle forlornly about their yet unconscious comrades, Mock San wiped his face on the sleeve of his drill jacket and turned to Cal.

"Too bad," he reported. "China boys hate you now all same Dingo."

Sexton appeared with a fresh fusee. "We've patched up our men, best we could," he said. "Shall we bury the dead?"

Mandon shivered. "Wait 'til morning," he replied. "I've got to try to identify them. Is it very bad?"

"Bad enough. There's nineteen from the railroad—and—"

"And?" echoed Cal.

"Eight stiffs wearin' spurs."

Mandon's civilized veneer peeled off. "Damned if we'll waste shovels on *them*," he cried savagely. "Throw their carcasses in the creek!"

"Yes, sir," replied Sexton matter-of-factly. He looked keenly into Cal's strained face. "You better bunk with us tonight," he said. "There's nothin' left of yer car but the wheels."

Chapter Six

Dog Eat Dog

IN THE morning Cal took bitter inventory. "Mile a day Mandon" would be a byword for failure on the Coast. It was the constructor's job to get his steel laid, no matter what. Resolutely Mandon shrugged off his mood. Until the S. L. & W. fired him,

he must keep the work going. With what? Mock San, walking in Cal's shadow and casting uneasy glances toward Temblosa, was the only Chinese visible. The Dynamite Dans and a handful of other whites dug graves under the cottonwoods; the rest were dead or putting miles between themselves and the fatal camp. Toolsheds, bunkshacks, and the camp train lay in ashes. The engineer would start again with bare rails and a handcar Dingo had overlooked.

Cal was kicking through the wreckage of the office car hoping to salvage the gold of his hunting-case watch when Sexton strode across the flat.

"We thrun them bastards in the crick like you said," he told Mandon, "but it didn't save no diggin'."

Cal's weary mind refused to solve the puzzle. "Why?" he asked blankly.

"There was about thirty Chinks floatin' in a backwater," the foreman said. "Likely some of 'em couldn't swim nohow and fell in gettin' away from Dingo." Though Sexton's voice was expressionless, his words hit Mandon like dumdum slugs: "The others' hands was tied."

The engineer saw red. A wave of rage seared his ribs and rose scalding to his brain.

"Dingo!" he cried hoarsely. "Dingo! Even a dingo dog wouldn't be that yellow! When I meet—"

Mock San plucked Cal's sleeve. "Dingo come!" he panted. "Him make look-see!"

The whites whirled, following the pointing yellow finger. A lone rider came at an easy lope over the slight rise that hid the Temblosa ranch house. Staring, Mandon felt himself trembling like a bird dog on a leash.

"I'll take Dingo on alone," he told Matt. "It's my turn, you did all the fighting last night."

Sexton's farsighted gaze focused on the mounted figure. "That ain't Dingo," he said slowly, studying the oncomer. "Ain't tall enough."

"I don't care who it is," snapped Cal. "I'll handle this!"

Matt recognized the rider. A dry smile stirred his bearded cheeks. "I wouldn't give odds on that," he said and went back to his grave diggers.

Mandon crossed the rails, loosening the light Colt in his holster. Only then did he remember that the gun was empty, his reserve ammunition burned with the office car. Not to save his life would he turn back, ask help from Matt, after his boast. With a dry mouth and cold hands, Cal forced himself forward.

The rider rounded a clump of brush and appeared near at hand. Mandon saw Gwen. His tension dwindled to contempt. Come to gloat, had she? He could not see the girl's expression change from happy anticipation to consternation as she surveyed the burned camp. Cal saw only an enemy. Safe from physical punishment by his code, she would feel the cutting edge of his tongue.

"Congratulations, Miss Crann!" he called, raising his hat high in insulting burlesque of courtesy. "Your spies didn't overlook a thing, as you see. We're burned out, complete. A very neat scheme, sending an extra pair of cowpunchers to case our camp while we were eyeing your steers. Didn't cost a cent, either, for Dingo stole your critters back."

Surprise and distress blurred Gwen's voice. "But I don't understand, Cal!" For the first time she used his name, but the angry young man ignored it.

"I knew you couldn't build your road without blasting, and I thought if you gave your men a big barbecue, they'd be satisfied until you got more powder. I told Blix Tenny to tell you, when he brought the steers. There was no one with him but Bud Sillman, when he left the ranch." Her eyes lifted to the wrecked camp. "I'm terribly sorry for your loss. Was anyone hurt?"

"Hurt?" Cal flared. "What do you think that crowd is doing back there, digging for gold?" He went on, determined to pierce what he considered her insolent camouflage. "Your gang murdered fifty helpless workmen. I hope you're home when we come to even the score, Miss Crann! You'll know what it's like to see your men killed, armed murderers though they are."

He wanted to hurt her and he did. Gwen slumped in the saddle. She put the back of her free hand to her mouth; above her clenched fingers her eyes glistened with unshed tears. The girl's voice came chokingly.

"You thought I'd be so—yellow? Oh!"

Gwen kicked her spurs and sawed on the bridle rein. Her bay mare reared, spun on trim hoofs, and bolted for Temblosa. Arms akimbo, Cal stared after the flying girl. He had routed an enemy, but he felt no surge of exultation. Rather, shame stirred within him, a tardy conviction that Gwen knew nothing of Dingo's raid. Driven by his conscience, though Gwen could not hear him, would not heed if she did, Mandon opened his mouth to call her back. He stopped, jaws sagging, as the brushwood erupted mounted men.

Dingo rode across Gwen's path. Two of his kind came swiftly from the rear, on either side. One seized the rein, the other wrapped a poncho about the girl's head. Erle's vindictive bellow reached Cal.

"You little stool pigeon!" Dingo cried. "So yer old man's boogered 'cause somebody dry-gulched the Chinks, and sent you to Mandon, blamin' me?" He struck Gwen hard, a full-arm slap across the shoulders that nearly unseated her. "I know how to handle double crossers!"

Erle's blazing yellow eyes took in the helpless engineer. "Vamoose, punk!" he snarled scornfully. "Stop moonin' about this dame; you can chop a better one outa a crosstie." Dingo emptied his six-gun at Cal. "If you ain't outa this country when I come back, I'll spread-eagle you on an anthill!"

Mandon stood rigid while lead ripped the sand and weeds around him, but as Dingo's gang galloped off with their blindfolded captive, he turned and ran. To follow Erle he needed horses and there was only one place to get them. Running as he had never run before, paced by his racing heart, Cal reached the rails in a dead heat with the Dans who had come up fast at the sound of the shots.

"Matt," Cal panted, "Dingo's kidnaped Miss Crann! We've got to save her!"

Sexton's blue eyes hardened. He shook his head. "I'm workin' up no sweat savin' a Crann," he said with finality. "Let dog eat dog, sez I."

The Dans growled approval. Mandon felt plunged into ice water. His plans of a posse went glimmering.

"Maybe you're right," he said at length. "This isn't railroad business. But it's mine!" Cal's glance flickered over the wreckage. "There's something you *can* do for the S. L. & W., Matt. You know the camp as well as I. When the supply train comes out today, ride it back to Mendocia and give Hinshaw a list of everything we'll need to get

started again. Now help me put the handcar on the track."

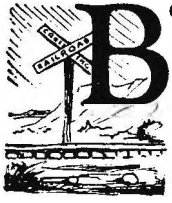
When the light four-wheeler was on the rails, Mock San slipped through the group of powder men and climbed aboard, facing Cal across the pumping handles.

"Mock," warned Cal, "I'm going after Dingo. It's likely to be dangerous."

The Cantonese nodded gravely. "Is so," he intoned. "Dang'ous fo' Dingo." He fingered the machete stuck through his snakeskin belt. "Me fix!"

Chapter Seven

Divide and Conquer



BOBBING like robots at the handles, Mandon and his helper rolled their vehicle across the creek and up a long slight grade. At what would one day be Temblosa Siding, they ditched the car and raced for the ranch house. Spurred by visions of Dingo beating Gwen, of worse to come, Cal outdistanced Mock San and pounded, flatfooted and gasping with his exertions, onto the porch. There was no one in sight. Scarcely slackening speed, the engineer dashed into the house. Along a shadowy corridor doors hung ajar on empty rooms.

Temblosa was deserted, Cal thought, seeking an exit to the corral. Speeding through the patio, he glanced perfunctorily into a large room fitted as an office. A short stout man in rumpled whites was slamming the door of a vault let into the far wall. He swung about, reaching for a gun on his desk, as Mandon stumbled over the threshold. Under a bristly crest of white hair, the fat man's face was square, clean-shaven, deeply etched by a domineering will. He stared at the engineer with impersonal hostility.

"Get out!" he barked.

Cal's heaving lungs smothered his words. "Crann?" he managed, "M-Mandon. Dingo—got—girl!"

Crann sat down at his desk, holding the engineer under his gun. His puffy features formed a mask of contempt.

"Your girl?" Crann hooted. "Don't take on so, you young squirt, Dingo's doing you a good turn. When he's tired of your floozie, he'll put her in a crib on the Barbary Coast. You can pimp for her, because you'll never get another job after I foreclose your streak of rust and blacklist you!"

The shock of Crann's incredible words turned Mandon calm and icy cold. He had the rancher's measure, understood how he could abide the woman-killer, Erle. Cal had come to borrow horses; he found two enemies instead of one and a way to play them against each other. Loathing Crann to the point of nausea, Mandon must put up with him until Gwen was safe. Then—!

Deliberately Cal pricked the bubble of the fat man's vanity.

"The only reason I don't take that gun away and beat you to death with it," Mandon told him, dragging out his words, staring Crann down, "is that you'll suffer more alive. How'd you like your name in the cribs?"

"What say?" yipped Crann, startled but uncomprehending.

"Dingo kidnaped your daughter," Cal hammered at him, "dragging her away blindfolded, beating her!"

"The cat-eyed s.o.b.!" Crann came up so fast that his legs caught in the kneehole of the desk, upsetting it with a crash on the tile floor. "He swore he'd

get hunk when we had a ruckus this morning—"

"What was the dust-up about?" Mandon put in swiftly. The fat man stood mute. "Then I'll tell you," pursued Cal. "Wiping out my camp was bonanza stuff, just like you planned it. But then you heard Dingo left evidence behind, eight Temblosa stiffs. You ordered him back to get them. He'd taken such a mauling from the Dynamite Dans that he was spooked and wouldn't go. You fired him. That won't whitewash you, Crann!"

The rancher's face was putty-hued. "If you know so all-fired much," he said, his words telescoping one another in their defensive haste, "you know Ab Crann always operates legal." He edged past Cal to the door. "That devil's got Gwen and you stand there palaverin'!"

"You're right, Crann," Cal said softly. He followed the hurrying portly figure through a side door into a space of hard-beaten earth bounded by corrals and bunkhouses. "Our talk can wait. There's no statute of limitations on murder."

"Blix! Blix Tenny!" Crann shouted to a cowhand roosting on the top rail of a round-pen. "Saddle my palomino! I'll want you and Bud Sillman to ride with me."

"And one for me," Mandon told the puncher. He caught a movement from the corner of his eye and swung toward the door; Mock San stood on the sill. "Can you ride, Mock?" Cal asked.

"Ho yiss!" The Cantonese nodded. "Hol' on like hell!" His hands encircled a phantom saddle horn.

"Like hell he will!" snorted Crann. "No yellowbelly forks a Temblosa hoss."

"Maybe you'd rather stay here and talk about murder," Cal suggested levelly. He gave the rancher no time to answer. "I'll lend a hand," Mandon said. From pegs in a harness shed he took two McClellan gear to the corral gate where a wiry middle-aged man with the bowlegs of a born rider was saddling a palomino gelding.

"You're the railroad feller, Mandon, ain't cha?" the cowhand greeted him. "I plumb forgit to tell you yestiddy, Miss Gwen wanted you should use them steers for barbycuin'. But I reckon you figgered that out for yourself."

"We were pretty busy last night," Cal replied drily. "Dingo dropped in and after he left, the steers showed up missing."

"That thievin' son," growled Tenny, "'d steal the pennies off his dead mother's eyes! I was sure tickled when his gang high-tailed it."

"When was that?" asked Mandon, keeping interest from his voice.

"Long 'bout first light," the puncher said. "They come in the bunkhouse, chewed up like they'd been grizzly-wrastlin', and madder'n a passel o' drunk squaws. I didn't cotton to that bunch—city tinhorns and wanted men, mostly—and they didn't say nothin' to me, jest took their warbags and hit the breeze. But I figger they'd been hellin' around and were headin' up-country to lay low until the fracas blew over. This mornin' at chuck there was only Pooch Dullen and Bije Morley, Erle's special sidekicks, and Dingo. Him 'n' the Old Man—" Blix cocked a thumb toward the approaching Crann—"musta broke up fer fair, fer Dingo put on airs and allus et with the family. Them three rode off together and the place's been real peaceful for the first time since Dingo showed up."

"Dally your tongue and get going, Blix," Crann ordered. He put a foot in

the stirrup and swung his jowls toward Cal. "Which way did Dingo head?"

"Downriver," replied the engineer.

"He's makin' for the crick mouth to hive off in your boat," Tenny suggested.

"She's drawn up out of water on the marine railway," Crann objected.

"Dingo can handle that. He's got to," argued Blix. "It's his only chance. All the way from where Mandon seen him down to the ocean, Revilla Crick's too steep-walled to ford. If he rode up the Coast, somebody'd see him, certain Sillman was out that way. You see Dingo anywheres, Bud?"

"Nor hair nor hide of the varmint," declared a gangling blond youth who came up as the party left the ranch.

"Where would Erle head in the boat?" asked Cal, passing Crann to ride beside Tenny.

"Fer Bay City," replied Blix confidently. "With the north wind blowin' this time o' year, he'd be hidin' in skid row a coupla days before we could get word to the John Laws."

Tenny took the lead, setting a steady galloping pace across country. Mandon gave his mount its head and rode absent-mindedly, cursing himself. He had made a mess of everything. His rebuff had driven Gwen into Dingo's ambush, carelessness had cost his camp and perhaps the S. L. & W. franchise. A burning hatred of Erle was a low hand for the final showdown—winner take all—that must mark their next meeting. Violence was Dingo's ace.

"I'll need beginner's luck," Cal muttered and came out of his brown study to find himself a poor last in line. He spurred to follow the others along a rarely used wagon trail winding down to the beach among a wind-whipped stand of scrub pine.

Chapter Eight

"Me Fix!"

REVILLA CREEK flowed from its canyon into a narrow triangular inlet, a nick in the coastline, edged with sand dunes. The wagon trail led to the only building in the cove, a small windowless warehouse at the water's edge. Beside the shed the marine railway stretched ladderlike, head above high-tide mark, lower end submerged.

Crann's craft rested at the top of the track, tethered bow-on to the ox-powered windlass that had drawn it from the water. Expecting a catboat or yawl, Mandon saw a stoutly built ketch of fifty tons burden, a miniature two-master. Two figures scurried about the hull; straining timber boomed drumlike under sledge-hammer blows.

Bud Sillman reined in to let Cal come abreast, pointing to the ship. "They're knockin' the chocks out from under the dolly's wheels," he said. "Dingo's fixin' to high-tail, sure 'nuf."

"I don't see any sign of him—or of Miss Crann," Mandon fretted. "Maybe he's given us the slip."

The lanky youth shook his head. "Not a chanct!" he said emphatically. "Dingo figgers to travel where we can't foller him. He brung Pooch Dullen to handle the boat, 'cause Dullen's an old-time sailor. He—"

Revolver fire stuttered in the cove.

"They done jumped Blix!" Sillman exclaimed. He pulled his cow pony off the trail and slithered hell-to-leather down the steep hillside.

Crann was on the last leg of the zigzag trail; Cal glimpsed the palomino's

golden flank intermittently through the low, ragged pines. Suddenly a black horse cut in close behind the rancher. Like a cougar watching a deer trail, Dingo had lain in ambush while his men readied the ketch for the getaway. He let Blix pass, waiting to trap Crann, whose testimony could hang Erle for murder. He came forth, guns leveled.

"I got the whole damn Crann family!" Dingo roared exultantly. His lead streaked down the trail.

The fat man heard his name and pulled up short. Turning his palomino sideways in the trail, he tugged at his gun. Dingo was a hard target, up the steep slope, half hidden behind his horse's head, but Crann would die fighting. He did just that. As Erle's slugs pierced his skull and lungs, Crann shot a gun from Dingo's hand.

Cal had seen Dingo break from cover and dug in his spurs. He rounded the curving trail at high speed as Crann and Erle exchanged lead. Mandon grabbed his gun, only to remember it was empty. He pulled it anyway, cradling the chamber in his palm. As a boy he had killed rabbits with accurately thrown stones. Praying that he retained the knack, the engineer half rose in the saddle and hurled the .32 with all the strength of his corded arm. The iron missile caught Dingo behind the ear as Crann's shot tore the six-shooter from his grasp.

Erle sagged forward, momentarily limp. Cal's mount crashed into the black horse, caroming off before Mandon could seize Dingo. Panic-stricken, the black galloped down the trail, Erle clinging to his seat with a horseman's instinctive knee grip. As the animal reached the beach, Dingo regained his senses, on a dismal outlook. On foot, their spike heels bogged in the soft sand, Dullen and Morley were quickly cornered by their mounted opponents. Hands high, their surrendered guns thrown into the bay, Erle's henchmen retreated sullenly as Tenny and Sillman herded them toward the warehouse. Cal saw Mock San disappear behind the ketch.

Dingo seized his opportunity. As his mount passed the windlass, Erle dropped to earth. The drum holding the ship's cable was locked by a hardwood peg. With the butt of his remaining gun, Dingo quickly hammered it out and spun the windlass backward. The cable slackened. The ship's weight caught at the freed drum, paying out the cable until the reel hummed. The small iron wheels of the dolly squealed on their rusty rails as they hurried the ketch down the incline. Erle seized the bobstay and pulled himself over the bowsprit into the vessel's prow. Sure of his escape and, that freed from the sunken dolly, the ketch would drift beyond pistol shot, Dingo moved to the rail and sprayed the four at the warehouse with lead.

Tenny turned to repay in kind. Staring incredulously he held his fire, lest on the speeding ketch he hit Cal. Knowing the engineer was unarmed, Dingo had ignored him, neglecting to look behind. Cal burst from the pines as Erle clambered over the bowsprit; running at top speed, heart in mouth that he trip on the crossties, Cal barely overtook the vessel, grabbing the bobstay as Dingo's spiteful fusillade roared on deck. When Cal peeped over the bow, Erle's back was turned, his attention fixed on a new enemy.

Cal saw Gwen. Bound and gagged, she lay in the scuppers amidships where Erle had stowed her to await his pleasure. Mock San knelt beside the

girl, carefully, calmly sawing at her rawhide bonds with his long knife.

"You goddam heathen yellowbelly," shouted Dingo. "I'll learn you to butt into my bus'ness!"

He reloaded his gun, throwing down on the Cantonese as the ketch hit the water. The deck heaved violently in a cloud of spray. Erle's shot creased a plank and ricocheted harmlessly through the rigging; he lost his footing and skidded into the bow.

Cal scrambled over the rail and fell upon Dingo, wresting the gun away in the moment of surprise. For all of his hatred of the woman-killer, with the impending fate of Gwen before his eyes, Cal could not bring himself to shoot an unarmed man. He threw the Colt overside and instantly knew his error.

In rough and tumble, Cal was no match for his enemy. Dingo fought with feet, fists, and teeth, clawing, gouging, kneeing. He had Cal pressed against the rail with one arm useless under him; Erle's hand gripped the engineer's throat. Mandon's vision failed, his chest caved. Suddenly the killing pressure was released, Dingo struggled to his feet in frantic haste, dodging the sweeps of Mock San's gleaming blade.

"Goddam you'self, Dingo!" cried Mock. "Me fix!"

Erle fled up the deck, found no refuge, mounted the rail and clambered into the rigging. Up he went with the Cantonese, machete gripped between his teeth, at his heels. Dingo turned at bay, kicking savagely at Mock San's head. The Chinese descended a step, grasped the knife and slashed at Erle's legs. Dingo dove over the side. His body was still arching outward to clear the deck when Mock followed, blade in hand. They struck the water simultaneously in twin splashes, raising a foaming fountain.

Under the foam the gray-green Pacific tide writhed with the struggle in its depths. Then there was quiet and Mandon had given Mock up for lost, when a head broke the surface—a head of coarse black hair, trailing a waterlogged queue. Below, a shadow drifted seaward, wrapped in a bloody cloud. Mock struck out for the ketch in a thrashing Oriental dogpaddle, getting nowhere fast. Cal threw the Cantonese a rope and towed him alongside. Mock came up hand over hand, his moon face grimly triumphant.

"Lose knife," Mock announced, straddling the rail. "No matteh, no mo' Dingo. Me fix!" He shook himself like a wet dog.

Gwen had seated herself on the coaming of the cargo hatch, a detached spectator of the violence about her. Her expression was withdrawn, neither friendly nor hostile. Cal regarded the girl with trepidation. She had every right to hate him. He was tempted to flee, but he must learn his sentence.

On leaden feet, like a schoolboy approaching a birching, Cal came to Gwen. Her eyes were cast down, absorbed in the grain of the decking. Greatly daring, he took her unresisting hands in his and drew her to her feet.

"Gwen," Cal began miserably, "I don't know how to show you how ashamed I am—"

"Men always want to talk," marveled Gwen, "at the most important times—" She showed him, warmly and firmly, a better use for lips.

Another man approached, wanting to talk. "Mis' Cal," beamed Mock San, "you have big wedding bleakfas'? Me fix!"

THE END

Free-for-All

ZANE GREY'S "Wild Horse Mesa," abridged in this issue of ZGWM, calls to mind the great herds of *mesteños* (mustangs) which once roamed our Western ranges. By and large, these wild, unbranded horses were a nuisance; they bothered the domesticated stock and, in times of drought, they became a positive menace by further depleting the scanty graze. In his fine book, *Californios*, Jo Mora tells how, at such times, the Alta California government would organize great roundups, in which thousands of the *mesteños* were captured and then lanced. Sometimes whole herds were driven over cliffs to their destruction, in desperate efforts to save the grass for the tame, useful stock.

The Plains Indians usually captured mustangs by cornering as many as they could against a bluff or in a canyon and then roping them. Expert shots among the white frontiersmen used a method called "creasing"—the bullet grazing the tendon in the mustang's neck and stunning the animal until he could be tied; it was risky, for a high shot would set him running and a low one would kill him. Some mustangers liked to capture colts; others set snares along trails to make an occasional catch. Roping from concealment in a tree by a favorite water-place was still another method; "Mustang" Gray, of ballad fame, won his nickname by such a trick, using a buffalo-hide lariat he made after being set afoot many miles from the settlements.

● Mining engineer-author John E. Kelly comes through with another fast-moving novelette. "The Octopus Had a Daughter" is every bit as fascinating as its title, which is going some! Another fine Kellyarn coming soon—"He Took to the Tules."

● William J. Glynn's terse little tale, "The Peelers," is this writer's first ZGWM appearance. Minnesota-born, he was raised on a North Dakota ranch, where his father, after several years of sheriffing, was the foreman. After that came California, where William Glynn worked at various jobs. He took up architecture, but soon found he was more interested in building yarns than

houses. Uncle Sam was his boss for three wartime Navy years; now he is connected with the Pasadena police force and does his writing in his spare time.

● In "Just Another (Black)Smith," author Two-Gun Tompkins introduces a new playmate for our favorite artist feller of liteerchoor, the Paintin' Pistoleer. She's Anvil Aggie—three hundred pounds of beef, brawn, and bellow. Apt to stick around Apache awhile too, grabbing herself off a husbind like she done. A hint: Aggie plays a prominunt part in the next Smith & Co. exculpade, "A Sense of Yuma"(!)

● "Murder at Three Orphans" brings Ranger Ware back after an absence of several months. Author 'Gene Cunningham takes considerable pride in the fact that the Ware yarns were among the most popular ever published in the old *Frontier Stories* magazine.

● Less well-known than the story of the ill-fated Donner party, though nearly as tragic, is that of the Bennett-Arcane gold-rush pilgrims. W. H. Hutchinson tells it dramatically in "A Name to Live By."

● Pressed for good reading? Here's a quintet of recent Western books by five great writers: *Shadow on the Range*, by Norman A. Fox, and *The Stirrup Boss*, by Peter Dawson (both published by Dodd, Mead); *The Doctor at Coffin Gap*, by Les Savage, Jr., and *Broken Valley*, by Thomas Thompson, both frequent ZGWM contributors and both of whose books are Doubleday publications; and *Smugglers' Trail*, by Evan Evans, a Harper & Brothers book. Fast-moving action in all of 'em, as well as smooth writing!

Coming next month: a magazine abridgment of Zane Grey's novel, "Fighting Caravans," plus a rousing L. L. Foreman novelette, a grim short by Thomas Thompson, and other great stories and features.

—THE EDITORS.

REMINGTON ARMY REVOLVER

THE REMINGTON single-action Army Model was patented in September, 1858. This model, as well as all subsequent Remington revolvers, were based on Beal's patents, and as a group they are sometimes referred to as "Beal's Patent Revolvers." Made at Ilion and Utica, New York, by Remington, they were manufactured in large quantities in both .44 and .36 calibers for the Union forces during the Civil War.

Next to the Colt, the Remington .44-caliber Army Model was the best known of the many Civil War revolvers. Upward of 125,000 of them were purchased by the War Department between 1861 and 1865. Although there were several different models produced during this period of conflict, they differed in only slight details. The heavier Army .44 had an eight-inch barrel, while the .36-caliber Navy Model was equipped with a seven-and-a-half-inch barrel.

When metallic cartridges were introduced during the 1870's, many of the percussion paper-cartridge Remingtons were altered to use the new type of ammunition, in time to play a distinctive role in the conquest of the West.

RANDY STEFFEN

FORDING THE SNAKE Painted by Dan Muller