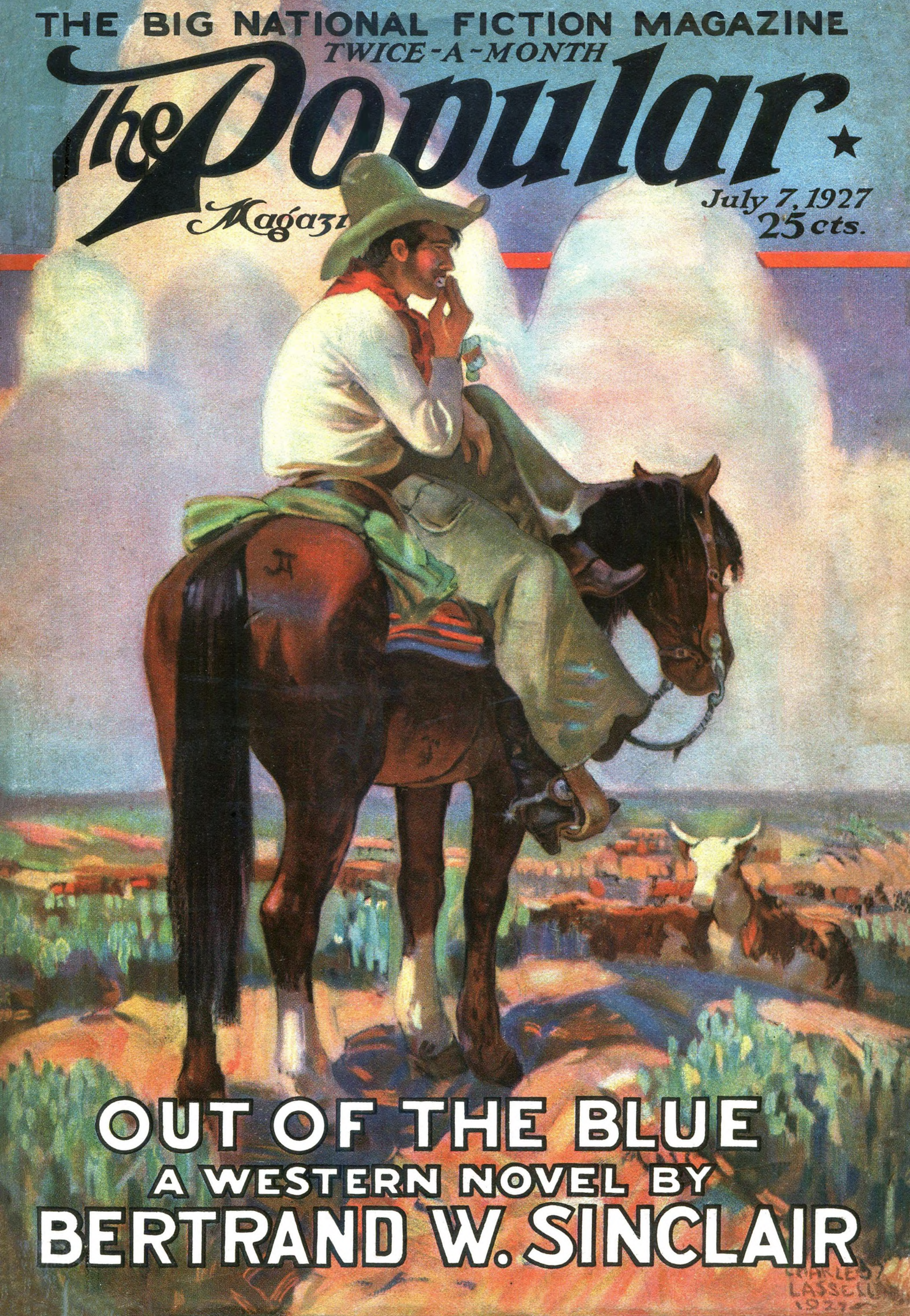
THE BIG NATIONAL FICTION MAGAZINE
TWICE-A-MONTH
The Popular Magazine
July 7, 1927
25 cts.
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BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR
CHARLES LASSELL

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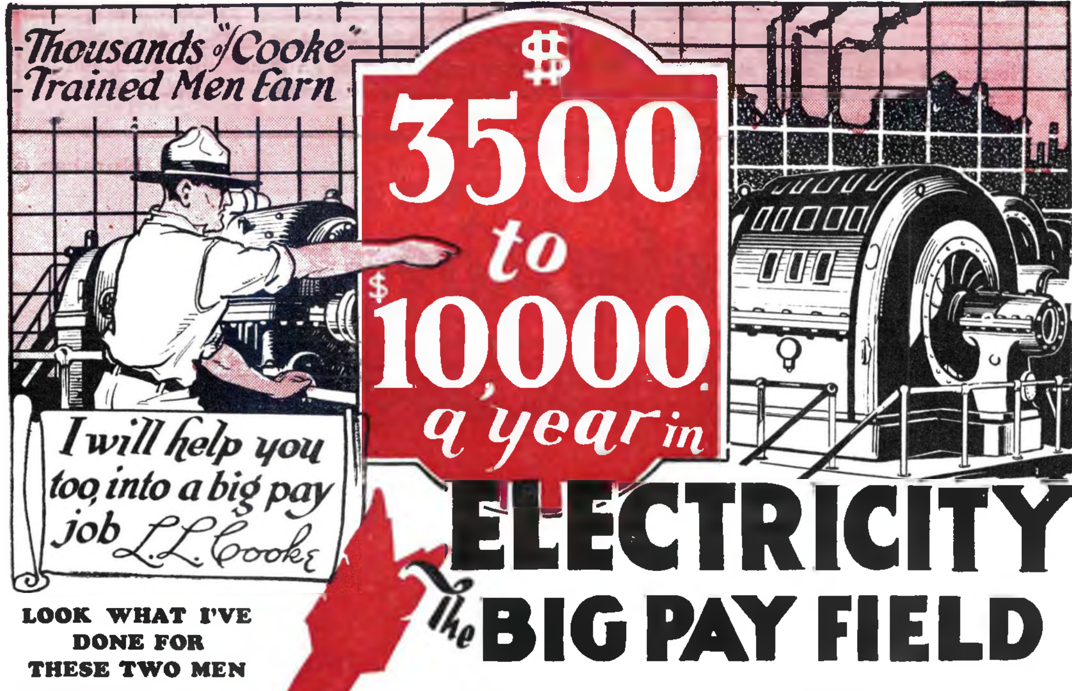

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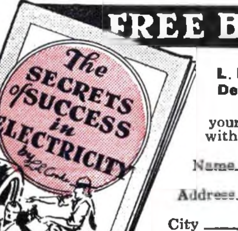

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Volume LXXXIV Number 6

TWICE-A-MONTH

The Popular Magazine

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Twice-a-month publication issued by Street & Smith Corporation, 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York. Ormond G. Smith, President; George C. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; George C. Smith, Jr., Vice President; Ormond V. Gould, Secretary.
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They Thought I Was Trying to be Funny —

Until I Started to Play — Then I Gave Them the Surprise of Their Lives

THE crowd sat spellbound. Harry had just played the violin—beautifully. With mock dignity I arose.

"With your kind permission," I announced, "I shall now charm you with a piano recital."

Everyone snickered. They were sure I couldn't play a note. "Does he really play?" one girl asked. "Yes," Phil laughed, "he plays the Victrola—beautifully!"

With studied clumsiness, I fell over the piano stool. Then I proceeded to pick out "Chop Sticks" with one finger! The crowd laughed. This was the dramatic moment for my surprise. Dropping the mask of the clown, I struck the first sweet chords of Wagner's lovely "The Evening Star" from "Tannhauser."

The laughter died on their lips. The magic of my music cast a spell over everyone. As I played on with complete confidence, I forgot the room—the people—everything. I was alone—lost in the sheer beauty of the immortal master's tender melodies.

The Thrill of My Life

When the last notes had faded away, there was a roar of applause. Then came questions and congratulations from my dumbfounded friends—"How long have you been playing?"—"Who was your teacher?"—"Where did you learn?"

"I know it is hard to believe," I replied, "but I learned at home—*and without a teacher!*"

Then I told them the whole story.

"I have always wanted to play the piano. But I never had a chance to take lessons. Then one day I saw an interesting ad. It told about a new, easy way of learning music—right at home—without a teacher. I sent for the Free Demonstration Lesson and Booklet.

"When they arrived, I was amazed to see how easy playing the piano really was. I decided that I would send for the course and practice secretly. Then I could surprise you all."

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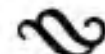
GOOD READING

BY

CHARLES HOUSTON

HERE in brief form are reviews of some of the latest Chelsea House offerings. Bear in mind as you read them that these are not the ordinary reprints of old novels, but are stories that have never previously appeared between book covers.

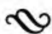


THE AVENGING TWINS, a Detective Story, by Johnston McCulley. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

When the two Selbon twins started out to avenge the ruin of their foster father, they did the job thoroughly. They went after a group of six business swindlers in a manner that was not particularly affable, but at the same time was well within the law, and the story of their subsequent adventures is one that you will not soon forget.

HAWKS OF HAZARD, by Joseph Montague. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

Lovers of Stevenson, and that romantic group who describe so graphically the lives of the natives of the South Seas, will rejoice over the appearance of this fascinating story. From the moment that Vance Loudon stepped aboard the trading schooner *Manawa*, there was adventure aplenty. Ask your dealer tonight for this entrancing story of life beneath the tropic sun.



THE EDGED TOOL, an Adventure Story, by William Morton. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

John Fraser went to work for his cousin, Alan Hooker, and found himself entangled in one of the strangest webs of mendacity that mortal man has ever fallen into. There was mystery in every corner of the house and treachery to boot. Mr. Morton has put on paper a story of gripping significance that you cannot put down until you have come to its breathless finish.

ARIZONA GOLD, a Western Story, by E. Whitman Chambers. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

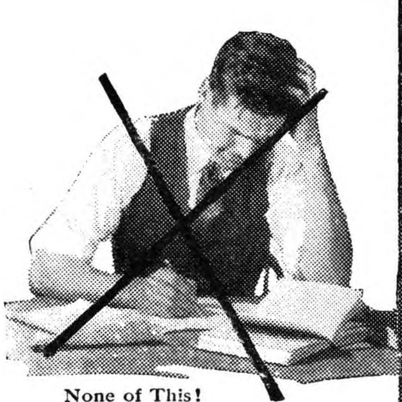
There came to the little desert town of Aztec, Arizona, a man who did not know when to quit. He was Jerry Harding, and side by side with old John Sanderson, he fought off as bad a group of bandits and desperadoes as ever stole a water right. How he fought and won, not only over the bandits, but also the right to the hand of a glorious girl, is here told in thrilling fashion.

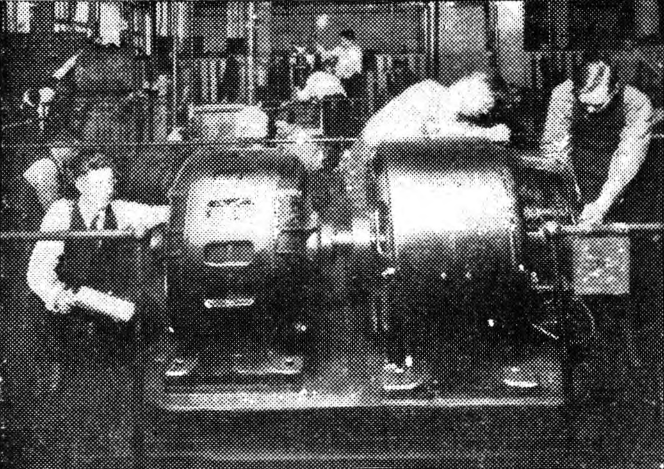
THE CARVED TRAIL, a Western Story, by Emart Kinsburn. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price 75 cents.

It was a cheap, cloth-covered suit case that attracted the attention of the gentleman of fortune, Christopher Horn. When he bought it at an auction, he was astonished to discover that it contained a clew, which led him into a series of adventures that took him from San Francisco to El Paso. Mr. Kinsburn has provided a story with a setting of hobo life that is rich and colorful. When you have read "The Carved Trail," you have had an unforgetable experience, and my advice to you is to go and get that experience to-day.

THE TRAIL TO SAN TRISTE, by George Owen Baxter. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price $2.00.

When George Owen Baxter begins to write a Western story, things begin to happen. If you read "The Whispering Outlaw" you will realize that anything from Mr. Baxter's typewriter is worth going a long way for. In "The Trail to San Triste," he tells the story of a search for a man of whom no clews existed save a portrait. In a full-length novel you follow that man down into old Mexico until at length you come to the astonishing last chapter. "The Trail to San Triste" is not the sort of book to start reading if you have an important business or social engagement. But it is a book to put on your list and have on your library table.


None of This!



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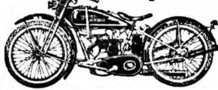

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THE PHANTOM ALIBI	Henry Leverage
MARK TURNS WEST	Mary Imlay Taylor
ON THE TRAIL OF FOUR	David Manning
STRAIGHT CROOKS	Howard Fielding
POISONOUS MIST	Gordon MacCreagh
THE LOOTED BONANZA	E. Whitman Chambers
JUST BUCKAROOS	Robert Ormond Case
THE PURPLE LIMITED	Henry Leverage
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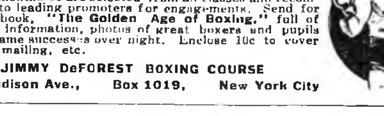

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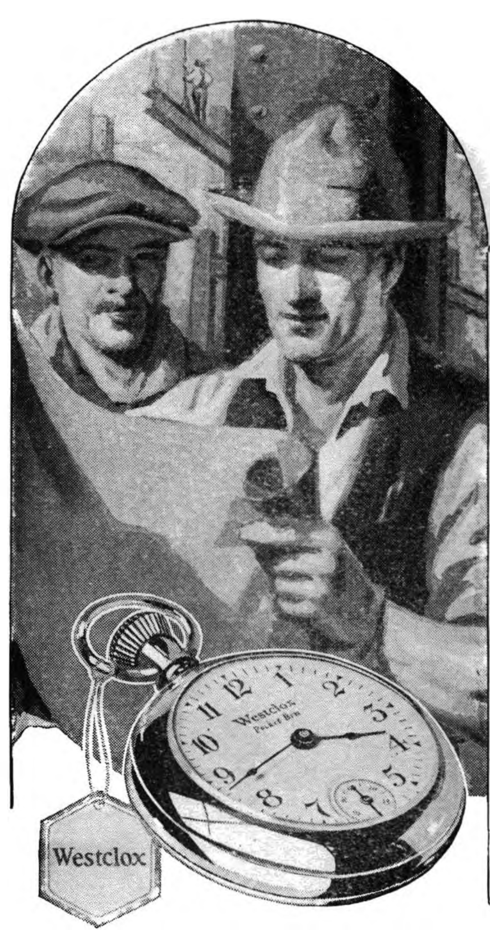

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MARIAN pays 75c a cake for her toilet soap—an imported kind with a perfectly fascinating French name.

Katherine doesn't care so much about names and gorgeous wrappers, but somehow (we can't imagine how) she has become acquainted with beauty-soaps that claim to "feed" the skin with oils and transform it with medicaments.

Then there is Marjorie. She could quite easily afford 75c a cake for toilet soap—more easily than Marian, if truth were known! She has always had the best that money can buy. But she has learned that the best is not necessarily the most expensive. So, unimpressed by foreign accents and suspicious of rosy promises, Marjorie buys Guest Ivory and pays for it the extravagant price of five cents!

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THE POPULAR

VOL. LXXXIV JULY 7, 1927 No. 6

Out of the Blue

By Bertrand W. Sinclair

Author of "North of Fifty-three," "The Land of Frozen Suns," Etc.

Headed north, a carefree young ranger rides on a risky mission—rides in the open, spacious days of a West with worlds of elbowroom, when the winds came winging, when hoof beats came ringing, when bullets came singing, "out of the blue."

CHAPTER I.

A RETAINING FEE.

ONCE upon a time, as the old tales used to begin, a young man came riding down the main street of Fort Worth in the sovereign State of Texas. He was mounted on a bright-sorrel horse, which stepped daintily in the dust of the thoroughfare, for Fort Worth had not yet come to the high estate of asphalt paving and such civic ornamentation as followed in the wake of petroleum and cotton. The longhorn was still king of the plains, a source of wealth in his unnumbered thousands. The cattle kings and their followers were like the ancient Romans; they made their own roads—made them into far places, in a spirit of high emprise. They did not mind a little dust here and there.

This rider, who looked out from under a gray Stetson hat, holding his reins in a buckskin-gloved hand, while he scanned the windows of the various establishments that fronted on the street, was plainly of the range. He was young and deeply tanned. He was armed, as men commonly were in those times. His saddle, bridle, and spurs were beautifully made, and the silver-inlaid steel clinked faintly, as his horse moved. The coiled-rawhide reata at his saddle fork was limber with much use. He might have

been considered picturesque. That idea would never have occurred to him or his fellows. The seed of romance indubitably lay in the stout hearts of Rock Holloway and his like, living and moving and having their being on the fringes of an encroaching civilization, but they were practical in their activities, which had to do with a major industry, wherein there was doubtless romance, but also a considerable portion of hard work and long chances which the range man accepted as incidental to his calling. This long-limbed youth, with the keen eyes and pleasant face, could probably have told why he preferred the range to a university campus; but he was merely the occasional exception. And he may have had glimpses of the future, apart from cattle and trail herds and the wide pastures that were in process of reclamation from the bison and the Indian. But he would never have embodied such dreams in words. And he was not steeping his soul in the color and aspect of a little cow town when he rode along that street. He was looking for a certain place. Presently, and without very much trouble, he found it.

He pulled up before a one-story adobe building. On the paneled door, across the plate-glass windows, ran a legend in gilt lettering:

"The Trinity Bank."

ROCK dismounted and left his sorrel standing on dropped bridle reins, as securely anchored in the utilitarian fashion of the plains as if he had been tied to a post. He paused a moment at the door to grin. On this piece of plain oak some wag had lately scrawled in red chalk the word "Holy" between "The" and "Trinity." It was not inappropriate, Rock knew. The Trinity Bank of Fort Worth was owned and operated by three men who were old and wise and upright, as near to a state of holiness as bankers in the cow country ever got. That is to say, "Uncle Bill" Sayre, who was president, manager, and chief stockholder, and Marcus Proud, and Abel Stewart were square men, whose word was as good and, indeed, sometimes went farther than an explicit bond.

Rock thrust his face at the first wicket in a low grille along a counter.

"Is Mr. Sayre in?"

"Did you want to see him?" The teller looked up from his work.

"If he isn't too busy. Tell him it's Rock Holloway."

The man walked back a few steps and put his head inside a doorway. He beckoned Rock and indicated an opening in the counter through which Rock could enter.

When Rock reached the inner office, a tall, thin-faced man of sixty rose to greet him, shook hands, shoved forward a chair, and closed the door. Then he seated himself, smiling benignantly.

"Well, well," said he. "Yo' young fellows change fast. Le's see. It's nigh two years since I saw yo', Rock. Yo' favor yo' ol' dad mo' and mo' all the time. How's yo' mammy and Cecilia?"

"Fine," Rock replied. "Mother says Austin suits her right down to the ground to live in. Cissy's going to be married this fall."

"Yo' don't say! Why, she ain't but seventeen. Who to?"

"Nobody I know personally," Rock answered. "But I know of his family. He's a Brett. Son of the Brett that runs the B X over toward El Paso. Mother says he's a nice boy."

"I know the Bretts. Pretty good people, take 'em all around. Still, pretty young, pretty young, for marryin'. Kinda sudden after yo'-all fixin' it so she could get whatever advantages lie in an education."

"Pshaw, Uncle Bill," Rock said. "As a matter of fact, I didn't give up anything. There was only so much money to go around, and I'm certainly able to rustle for myself. I had all the show I needed, when I needed it. I don't know as I would have stayed back East long enough to take a degree, anyhow, only to please the old man. It's lots of fun to make a hand on the range, and I don't figure to be a cow hand forever, nohow. But, say, how did you know I was passing this way? Of course I would have come in to say hello, anyhow, but you beat me to it, sending out word you wanted to see me."

"Oh, I keep tab on lots of things, son." Old Sayre's eyes twinkled. "There's a lot of cowmen an' cow business passes through this bank. Su'prise yo', how well they keep me posted on who's who, and what's what. Now, I didn't send fo' yo', Rock, just to ask after yo' health, this time. Yo' goin' No'th with a Seventy Seven trail herd?"

"Right through to Montana," Rock nodded.

"What do yo'-all aim to do after yo' get there?" Sayre inquired. "Stay on with the Seventy Seven?"

"Don't think so." Rock frowned slightly. "I'd as soon work right along, but I don't know as I like this outfit well enough to tie to."

"Yo' mean yo' don't cotton much to yo' boss?" the old man supplied.

"Well, perhaps. Know him?"

"A Duffy, ain't he?"

Rock nodded.

"I know the tribe. They's four boys —all big—all inclined to be high-handed. Le's see. There's Joe, Elmer, Ed, an' Mark. Elmer's handlin' this herd yo'-all are with?"

Again Rock nodded.

"Elmer ain't bad. Joe's noisy, but harmless. Ed is real tough. Mark's both noisy and mean. He always aimed to be bad, unless he's changed a heap lately. He's big as a house. Overbearin' accordin' to his size."

"Mark's trail hand with this Seventy Seven herd," Rock said.

"Huh? If Elmer's startin' No'th with *that* handicap, he'll have trouble on the trail, I reckon. Oughto have more sense than have that disturber in his outfit. I don't expect yo' and Mark love each other, eh? No, I shouldn't imagine yo'd want to stay with the Seventy Seven after the drive's over, not if yo' got to rub elbows with Mark. He sure is the wrong kind."

"Maybe not even all the way," Rock said casually. "Mark's inclined to ride me. No particular reason. Just don't like me, I expect."

"Better quit the Seventy Seven, son," Sayre counseled after a moment's silence. "There's other herds drivin' No'th that need good men."

Rock shook his head. A little smile flitted across his face.

"Would you?" he challenged. "Just to get away from a man that don't like the shape of your head, or something? Would you, Uncle Bill, after you'd promised a trail boss you'd go?"

"Well, no, I reckon I wouldn't, come to think it over," the old man answered dryly. "At least, when I was twenty-five I sho' wouldn't. At my age, now, I c'n see the wisdom of side-steppin' trouble. Still, yo' better quit the Seventy Seven soon as yo' get to yo' destination, providin' yo' and Mark both do get there all right."

"I certainly aim to do both." Rock smiled. "Mark's welcome to flourish, so long as he don't step on my corns too frequent. I want to get into this North country. I hear there's chances there for a fellow with a little money. Time I've worked another year I'll have a couple of thousand dollars. I might find a place where I could start in with a hundred cows or so, and grow up with the country."

"When yo' get around to that, let me know," the banker said. "I hear good reports of that Montana country. I might put in some money if yo' locate a range. Texas is full up. She'll spill a heap of stock and men into the Northwest in the next five years. Cattle grow into money tol'able fast."

That was an indubitable fact. Sayre, as Rock knew, was a cattle owner as well as a banker. And Texas *was* getting crowded. That was why the longhorns were swarming North and West to free grass and plentiful water, like droves of horned locusts. They were grazing year by year farther afield into regions dotted by the bones of the buffalo, bleaching where they but lately fell before the rifles of the hide hunters. Rock promised that he would remember the suggestion. They talked a while longer desultorily. Then a clerk asked if Mr. Sayre was busy. A man wanted to see him. Rock rose to his feet.

"Sit still," Sayre told him. To the clerk he said: "Tell him to come back in half an hour, and I'll see him."

And when the door closed again he put

both feet up on his desk, looked Rock over with an appraising eye, and said:

"Fact is, young man, I sent fo' yo' because I want yo'-all to do something fo' me when yo' hit Montana. The question is, will yo'? Yo' the man I want fo' the job. Yo'-all will be well paid, and yo' sho' will be doing yo' Uncle Bill Sayre a favor."

"Name your poison," Rock said lightly. "What is it you'd have me do? I'm open to any kind of engagement, Uncle Bill. So long as you don't aim to have me bushwhack some enemy for you and mail you his scalp."

Sayre grinned. Then he grew sober.

"This is strictly confidential, son," said he. "First off, do yo' know the Maltese Cross? Dave Snell's outfit. Used to range on the west fork of the Trinity."

FROM where he sat, Rock could see the silver of the Trinity River looping by the town. He knew the upper Trinity only by hearsay. Texas is an empire, and its cattle kings were many, not all with honor and fame beyond their own little kingdoms. He shook his head.

"Don't matter. Dave Snell was a friend of mine. Yo' dad knew him, too. He owned a lot of range. Ran about thirty thousand cattle. More'n a year ago he started to move all his stock to Montana. Took two herds up that season. There's three more on trail now. Meantime Dave ups and dies. He leaves all he has to two children. A girl just come twenty-one, a boy sixteen. Said estate to be carried on as a going concern until the boy's twenty-five. The income from this is to be paid to each annually, as he or she comes of age, and finally equally divided in the end. I'm an executor of this document. The other executor is a man named Walters—'Buck' Walters. Know him by name?"

"No."

"Thought yo' might. Don't matter. He was once in that Pecos country yo've frequented lately. I'll get down to cases pretty soon. This Buck Walters was range boss for old Dave for quite a spell before he died. Dave thought a heap of him. I don't."

Uncle Bill stopped to roll a cigarette.

"No, suh, I sho' don't think a heap of my fellow executor," he resumed. "Dave Snell was pretty specific in his will. He had a couple of months to think up all the details. I have a free hand with the business end, and all money is checked in and out of this bank. Buck Walters has a free hand with the cattle. The outfit's pretty well moved into Montana. It was Buck's notion in the first place. He says there's no room to range the Maltese Cross on the Trinity no mo'. He says no sense havin' ten thousand cattle in Montana and another ten thousand in Texas."

"May be right, at that," Rock commented.

"Maybe so, maybe so," Sayre agreed. "But I'd a heap rather the Maltese Cross stock wasn't on a range two thousand miles from Fort Worth, even if it is a mite better range. To cut it short, Rock, I don't know what's goin' on up there, an' I got ideas that make me uneasy. I want to know how he handles this outfit, and how he handles himself. I sent for yo' specifically to ask if yo'-all would consider going up there and keep cases on the Maltese Cross fo' me, Bill Sayre, personally. Will you?"

"I'd do most anything you wanted me to do, Uncle Bill," Rock said promptly. "But I'm no detective."

"Yo' a practical cowman," Sayre countered. "Yo' know all the tricks of the trade. I don't want no detective. What I want up there is a man that can size up what's going on on a cattle range—a man that can't be bought and is not easy fooled. I picked on yo'-all, for that reason."

"Thanks. Just what would you aim for me to do?" Rock asked.

"Well, it's easy to keep tab on what a man does with thirty thousand cattle if yo' circulate in his vicinity," Sayre observed. *You* ain't no fool, Rock. I don't care how yo' manage it—whether yo' work for another outfit or get a job with the Maltese Cross. Don't care whether yo' work at all; yo'll be paid direct by me. What I want is fo' yo' to linger around in that territory and use yo' eyes and ears. Yo'll know in one season whether the outfit is going up

or down, and whether Buck is shootin' straight."

"You think maybe he isn't?"

"Buck Walters is young, ambitious high-handed with men, and powerful fond of women," Sayre said frowningly. "He dresses flash. He's mighty fond of stiff poker. He's a smart cowman, I'll admit. But he's been drawin' big wages fo' ten years and never held onto a dollar. Yo' put a man like that in complete control of three hundred thousand dollars' worth of live stock, with nobody to check up on him——"

Sayre threw out his hands in an eloquent gesture.

"He had old Dave hypnotized," he went on. "I think Dave was a damn fool to give him such a swing. I may be wrong about Walters. If I am, so much the better fo' him. But I aim to play my hunch. I mean to see that the Snell estate don't get the worst of it, no way. I feel more than ordinary responsibility in this. Dave was my friend. I can't leave my business here to go up into Montana every few weeks to keep tab on Buck Walters. Next best thing is to send a man I can trust."

"I'm young and ambitious," Rock mused. "I don't shy none from poker games; in fact, I horn into 'em deliberate because I frequently beat 'em. I've held down good jobs, too, in the last three years, without savin' much of my wages. Gosh, Uncle Bill, are you sure I'm to be trusted?"

The old man gazed at him affectionately.

"I know yo'," he said, "and I know yo'r breed. Will yo' do this for me, Rock?"

"Why, sure," Rock agreed. "I don't suppose it would be very difficult for me to get a pretty good idea of how this Buck Walters is handling the Maltese Cross."

"That'll be good enough," Sayre nodded. "If yo're on the ground takin' notice, I'll be satisfied. Le's see," he stopped to reflect, "yo'll be into Montana about September. I don't issue no orders, son. Use your own judgment. Barrin' a hard season, nothing much ever happens on a cow range in the winter."

"Don't you fool yourself," Rock said seriously. Then he stopped. Old Uncle Bill was grinning at him understandingly.

"I ain't going to prime yo' with no false ideas, Rock," he declared. "Yo' just circulate around in that vicinity as it suits yo' and let me know how she stacks up."

"Whereabouts in Montana is the Maltese Cross located?" Rock inquired.

"Marias River. Their post office is Fort Benton—no'thern part of the territory. You're bound for the Marias with the Seventy Seven. Course, she's a long stream. The Maltese Cross is on the lower end, near where the Marias joins the upper Missouri."

"I understood the Seventy Seven was headed for the Musselshell," Rock observed.

"Maybe yo'-all understood that, son, but that herd'll be turned loose on the Marias," Sayre said positively. "I get that info'mation from the men that's backin' the Duffys. Joe Duffy is on trail with a herd in the same brand, too, from the Panhandle."

"I didn't know. Don't matter to me, nohow," Rock said, "so long as I get to Montana. I'm bound North, like the bear that went over the mountain, to see what I can see. And I won't be on the Seventy Seven pay roll after I get there. I sort of feel that in my bones."

SAYRE opened a drawer. His hand came out with a small canvas bag which clinked gently, as he laid it on the oak desk and slid it across to Rock.

"There's five hundred dollars' advance in gold," he said abruptly. "I'll allow yo' sixty dollars a month from date, until I notify yo' this arrangement is canceled. Now"—he lifted a hand to silence Rock's protest—"I don't want yo' to hesitate about nothing that's calculated to protect the Snell interests. When yo' protect them yo' protect me. You're a smart boy. Yo' been raised in a cow country and had considerable Eastern education rammed down yo' gullet. I don't need to tell yo' what a range boss can do to a cow outfit, if he sets out to do some good for himself at the outfit's expense. It'll be yo' job to let me know if Buck

Walters shows any such symptoms. If, to make sure of anything in connection with him, yo' find it necessary to spend money, draw on this bank in yo' own name. There is a railroad and a telegraph line through the southern part of Montana now. Yo' can wire me direct anything important. If yo'-all get into trouble, I'll back yo' play."

"You certainly sound pessimistic, Uncle Bill," Rock declared.

"I don't trust that fellow executor of mine no farther than I could throw him," Sayre stated bluntly. "He's a mighty powerful man, so yo' can reckon how far that is. I feel a powerful sight of responsibility. I aim to see that Dave Snell's children inherit this estate unimpaired by other persons with ambitions to enrich theirselves by methods that ain't strictly accordin' to Hoyle."

"All right, Uncle Bill," Rock promised. "I'll wander around the Maltese Cross and keep you posted on how she stacks up to my innocent eye. It won't be soon. I'll be six months on the drive. It may take me some time to learn anything. I can't saunter onto the Maltese Cross range and say right off who's who, and what's what. So I'd just as soon not take your money until I start earning it. If you hear from me inside a year, you'll be lucky."

"I'm not expectin' Buck to try and put thirty thousand cattle in his hip pocket right off," Sayre grinned. "He couldn't. And he's too all-fired smart to let his work—if any—be coarse. I'm merely insurin' against contingencies. I could have picked thirty men to send into Montana, with a big cow outfit apiece, and never have an uneasy moment over any one of 'em. As I size up this situation——"

Again that eloquent spread of his hands.

"So," he went on, "yo' keep that money, because yo'-all might need it. That's like a lawyer's retaining fee, my son—an earnest of an' undertakin' entered into for a duly acknowledged consideration. Yo' the man for the job, Rock. Yo'-all are entitled to pay. So don't get highfalutin' about a few measly dollars."

"Never found 'em measly yet," Rock said lightly. "Though I've known lots of measly things done in behalf of 'em."

He slid the bag of gold into his trousers pocket, where it sagged uncomfortably when he arose.

"Well, Uncle Bill," said he, "now you've got that off your chest, suppose we go out and have a farewell drink together? The Seventy Seven is moving. I've got quite a ways to ride to catch that herd to take my regular turn on guard to-night."

A mile from the last scattered houses of Fort Worth, Rock paused on the north side of the Trinity. The river flowed beneath him, a lovely, sparkling stream. Its banks were green with spring growth. Texas wore an April smile for her sons that were departing into far lands with many a herd. Rock looked down at the river and back at the town.

"Well, Sangre," he addressed the twitching ears of his sorrel horse, "if Uncle Bill Sayre's hunch about this fellow executor of his happens to be right, we ought to be able to keep time from hanging heavy on our hands after we hit Montana, provided we get that far in peace and quietness."

Rock frowned slightly, as he muttered this. He had his doubts; not of the mission he had promised to undertake, however. He was thinking of something else when he repeated the last sentence. It wasn't just an idle phrase.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE ODEON.

EAST and west across the flat face of Nebraska runs a river, which needs no naming, looping, like a great watery rope, the Rocky Mountains and its ultimate confluence with the Big Muddy. It was once said of this stream that it resembled the speeches of a well-known politician, inasmuch as it was a thousand miles long, a mile wide, and about four inches deep.

In one particular year of our Lord, when herds of longhorn cattle were spilling out of Texas like milk seeping over a polished table top, from an overflowing bowl, the curses of many a trail boss

and cattle owner were heaped upon this wide, shallow, sandy-bottomed river. Northbound herds must cross it. Under its ankle depths of flow lurked miles of quicksand. The first drives to the North suffered. Later, hard bottom crossings were located.

In the height of the great bovine exodus, such crossings were like the junction of two great thoroughfares. They were heavily traffic laden. From May to September the march of the herds never slackened. Every herd had its quota of riders. Wherever there are men there is money, and money is made to be spent. So, at each of these river crossings, enterprising merchants set up with stocks of goods. Equally enterprising individuals set up establishments where a cowpuncher could find something for his throat besides dust and alkali water, where he could take a fling at faro bank and poker. In other words, the saloon and gambling hall arose, side by side, with the general store, to the profit of their owners and the glory of the trail.

Clark's Ford was such a place. When Ben Clark bogged his first herd in the quicksands, he lay on the bank, and his riders scouted for hard bottom, found it, passed over and passed on, leaving his name to the place and bequeathing future herds on that route the only safe crossing in a hundred miles.

A year later a cluster of frame buildings on the north bank greeted the lead of each herd, as it emerged from the stream. Here outfits could replenish their grub supply, get or send mail by a stage route, before they vanished into the empty land that spread north to the Canada line, a land that was empty even unto the arctic circle.

And into Clark's Ford one July evening Rock Holloway rode alone, on the same sorrel horse, one of his own private mounts, that had stepped light-footedly in the dust of a Fort Worth street that spring. For weeks he had faced the dip and roll and flatness of plains as bare as the seas Columbus faced when he crossed the Western ocean. Ride, eat, sleep, and ride again, in the dust of eight thousand hoofs, on that pilgrimage from the Rio Grande to the forty-ninth parallel, across silent leagues of grass, from which the bison had but lately vanished, and where the Indian had not yet forgotten how to take a white man's scalp.

SO Rock, who had nothing much on his mind but a Stetson hat, rode into Clark's Ford. Little sinks of iniquity like this were not new in his experience. He was too sensible to take a moral attitude. They were not, with their gaudy activities, much to his taste, but they supplied a want. He didn't drink much at any time, preferring poker for pastime, and he had been known to wander about for hours in the midst of cowtown hilarity doing nothing but watch his fellows make merry.

Clark's Ford numbered scarcely a dozen buildings. One general store, one blacksmith shop, one combined saloon and dance hall. A gaunt boarding house purveyed food and sleeping quarters to clerks, gamblers, bartenders, and transients. Clark's Ford was little more than a camp, a mushroom growth with neither a past nor a future.

It was not a place that Ben Clark would have been proud to bear his name. If it catered in some measure to the legitimate necessities of these Argonauts of the plains, it likewise battened on their weaknesses. Cattlemen and their riders had few illusions about such places, except in moments of alcoholic exaltation. They were tolerant of them, that was all, because they were centers of human contact, in the midst of an unpeopled wilderness.

It was a dreary place in the glare of day. Sagebrush flowed to the very doors—gray—monotonously gray. A river, with a dozen channels plowed by the spring floods in its yellow sands, slunk at the feet of Clark's Ford. For a mile about no green thing flourished. Only the tough sagebrush defied obliteration under the trampling hoofs that passed in myriads. That valley had yet to become verdant under irrigation canals. Even the red brother shunned it in bygone days except when the buffalo herds passed that way. The cattleman would have shunned it if he could. But the herds focused at this point, but, once

across, they radiated like the spokes of a wheel to pleasanter ranges farther north, where grass waved like fields of ripe wheat; where clear streams flowed in gravelly beds, and now and then a man's eye would be gladdened by a tree.

But at night Clark's Ford shook off its daytime somnolence, shrouded itself in the dusky mantle of night and decked itself with yellow jewels. Night and lamps! There is magic in those two. A pianist and a fiddler strummed in the dance hall. The women glowed in silk and satin and smiled their mechanical smiles. Within, the light softened hard faces, struck glints from glass, and spread over green-topped tables, the racked silver and gold behind the games, and the multicolored poker chips. A man could get action there. Seldom any one paused outside those doors, behind which the piano tinkled, and the fiddle wailed, and the voices of men and women were pitched a little above the normal key.

Rock paused now, after he had swung down from his horse. He stared up at the sky, the inverted bowl of the Persian poet, studded with stars. He looked absently upward, the fingers of one hand tangled in Sangre's mane. Perhaps he studied the stars in their courses. Perhaps he saw something invisible save to the imaginative eye, off in that calm, obscuring night. And then he shrugged his shoulders, gave his gun belt a hitch, and walked into the Odeon. Why the exploiter of Clark's Ford bestowed on a tin-pot dance hall a name that derived from ancient Greek through modern French, Heaven only knows. Perhaps that was what made Rock smile, as he noted the name painted in white on a door illuminated by a hung lantern. He had a way of noting such things.

A bar ranged along one side of the Odeon. A low platform lifted against the opposite wall, where the two musicians played, and now and then a woman sang the sentimental ballads of the period. A clear space in the middle was left for dancing. One side was set with pine tables and chairs. The other wall made a backstop for gambling paraphernalia, operated by bored men with impassive faces, who dealt for the house and watched winning or losing with equal indifference.

ALL this Rock took in rapidly. He had heard about Clark's Ford and the Odeon a thousand miles south. He reflected that there were other places of the same stripe, which he had seen here, and they were more impressive, if less widely known. Yet it was a fairly big night at the Odeon. Four herds had made the crossing that day. Three more lay within ten miles. There were riders from all in Clark's Ford this night, seeking diversion. The gabble of voices and laughter filled the big room. The click of chips greeted Rock's ears, a faint, penetrating sound. A woman was singing, "Drink to me only with thine eyes." It sounded at once incongruous and highly appropriate in that atmosphere. She had a fairly good voice, too. He stood within the door until the last note sounded, then walked across the room to a poker game, where he recognized a cattleman he knew from Waco.

"Well, well!" Al Kerr reached up to shake hands. "Seems like everybody's headed North these days. How's tricks?"

"So, so," Rock answered. "Laying up much wealth in this noble pastime?"

"Not so you could notice," Kerr grinned. "Just amusin' myself. This here table sort of attracted me. First green thing I've seen for six weeks. Here, cash these."

He shoved half a stack of reds to the dealer, got five silver dollars in exchange, and pushed back his chair.

"Let's inhale a drink," he suggested. "Maybe you and me could horn into an easier game later on."

"I'm due on guard at one thirty, and it's eleven now," Rock said, "so I won't play poker to-night. But I will have a glass of beer."

"Beer's no good except off ice in hot weather," Kerr told him. "And ice is as scarce as square men among the regular population of Clark's Ford. Better drink rye."

As the choice lay between lukewarm beer and the stronger drink, Rock chose whisky. It didn't matter what he drank.

He didn't intend to tarry long in the Odeon.

Nor did he. If he could have foreseen the manner and necessity of his departure, he might not have entered the place. And again he might have braved fate, even with certain knowledge, since he was not by nature inclined to dodge issues either present or potential. A man on the frontier seldom got anywhere if he were always counting costs. If Rock had not got anywhere, he was at least on his way.

They walked over to the bar and stood near the farther end from the main entrance. Rock was not a tall man, perhaps a little over medium height. Even so he towered over his companion. Kerr barely reached his shoulder. He was a little wisp of a man, with a gnomelike face. Small bodied, but big-hearted, full of humorous quips and kindly impulses, Al Kerr was the type of Texas cowman who never figures in song and story. He had never killed any one. He had never found it necessary. Probably he had not exchanged a dozen harsh sentences with another man in his life. Yet he was a successful man. He had cattle scattered over the length of three States. He had fifty riders on his pay roll. And for every rider he had a score of friends. Rock happened to be one of them. And Rock looked down on the little, middle-aged man, whose hair was thin, but whose blue eyes were merry, and he wondered what it was that made some men succeed in whatever they undertook. It wasn't size, it wasn't blatant force, and it wasn't always the power of possessions. What was it, Rock wondered?

A dance had just ended. Several lusty, perspiring young trail hands had led their ladies to the bar to liquidate the Terpsichorean debt, after the custom of such places. They were lined up twenty in a row. As they stood there, glass in hand, some in the act of pouring their drink, the door of the Odeon flew open, and a man swaggered in.

HE stood a moment staring with eyes a trifle reddened. He was a mountain of a man, well over six feet, and thick in proportion. He wore a rider's usual costume. Like most of those who trafficked across the plains, he was armed. He took two quick strides from the door to the bar end and, picking up the nearest glass of whisky, drank it at a gulp. Then he stood, towering above the man whose drink he had taken, grinning, as if at a capital joke.

"Well, well," Kerr murmured. "The village cut-up is with us again. He was around here this afternoon raisin' Cain. He aims to be bad, it looks like. Wonder where he escaped from?"

Rock smiled. He knew the man. He watched with a detached sort of interest to see what would happen. For a second nothing happened. A quick-witted bartender hastily set up another glass, thus stifling the protest that was evidently on tap by the man whose drink had been taken. That, to Rock, was an indication of how far Mark Duffy's size and disposition had carried him in Clark's Ford. But he was hardly prepared for the big man's next action. Considering the time and place, it seemed suicidal.

Duffy walked right down the bar, shouldering all and sundry out of his way. His big red face was wreathed in a sardonic grin, and his bellowing voice uttered a warning to all in his path:

"Make room for a man. I'm goin' to drink, an' when I drink I need lots of room."

He seemed in a fair way to get all the room he desired without opposition. Probably any other man would have been smelling powder before he got halfway, Rock reflected. But Duffy looked neither to right nor left nor hesitated in his ponderous stride, nor heeded the curses that were hurled at him. He was asserting himself, he wanted room, and he got it—a clear path, until he came to Al Kerr and Rock Holloway.

Neither moved. Their second drink was before them. Rock had one elbow on the bar, and he kept it there. Kerr stood between him and Duffy.

The big man loomed over Kerr. He looked down.

"Say, runt!" he bellowed. "Did you hear me say I wanted room?"

"Seems to me you got plenty," Kerr answered. "Nobody's crowdin' you."

For answer Duffy seized him by both shoulders, picked him off his feet, as if he had been a child, and set him on the bar. Kerr stood probably five foot four. He never carried a six-shooter. He was handy with a rifle, but that was not a weapon he carried in town.

Duffy kept that iron grip on his shoulders. The little man was helpless. Faint snickers arose in the room. Kerr's face flushed. He felt the indignity. But he said nothing, only looked Duffy coldly in the eye. And Duffy began to shake him until his head snapped back and forth, yanking him at last roughly off the bar, so that his boot heels struck the floor with a crack.

"Buy a drink for the crowd, runt," he commanded.

"You go to hell," Kerr defied him. "Buy your own drinks. You're too big for me to fight with my hands. But you lay off'n me long enough for me to get a gun, and I'll shoot with you for the drinks, you side of raw beef on the hoof!"

Duffy's face wreathed in a grin. He reached his gorrillalike arms and took a step forward. Kerr dodged sidewise. And for the first time Duffy seemed to see and recognize Rock. He stared briefly. Rock looked back at him, expressionless. Duffy turned on Kerr again. His hand crept toward the gun in his belt.

"You'll buy a drink, or you'll dance," he said meaningly. "Look spry, little feller! Buy drinks or dance."

He punctuated the last sentence with a shot into the floor at Kerr's feet. Whereat Rock stepped between the little man and his tormentor. His Colt was in his hand. Like Duffy's, it pointed at the floor. There was a swift surge of men away from the bar.

"You've gone far enough with this, Duffy," Rock said quietly. "Don't be a damn fool."

FOR five tense seconds Duffy glared at Rock; then his gun jerked. At the movement, Rock fired. He was pitching himself sidewise, as he pulled trigger. He knew when he interfered that there would only be one end to such interference, and he had discounted that. Duffy's bullet sped somewhere past his face. And Rock held his second shot, for the big man was sagging slowly forward, until suddenly he collapsed on the floor.

Rock slid the fallen six-shooter with his toe toward Kerr, his eyes on the crowd.

"Take that till we get out of here," he said. "Maybe he's got friends."

But other friends were at hand. Half a dozen of Kerr's men came shouldering their way toward him.

"That was neat," one grinned at Rock. "We couldn't very well bust our way through that crowd, but if anybody wants to go farther with it, we're here to take 'em on."

Evidently no one did. They walked, Kerr and Rock and five trail hands, the length of the room to the entrance door, while the hush that sudden death always brings held the crowd in the Odeon.

Once in the street beside their mounts, Kerr said:

"Well, I think I better amble off to camp before some other ambitious drunk picks on me. You fellers comin' along?"

"I expect we better," they agreed. "That joint is no great shakes for amusement, nohow."

"Where's your outfit camped?" Rock asked.

"About nine miles north," Kerr answered. "Where's your camp, Rock?"

"Same direction. Not quite so far," Rock answered. "I'll ride with you a ways."

They went jingling away from Clark's Ford, Kerr's riders laughing and joking, Rock and the little cowman silent. The Dipper wheeling on its ancient circle of the pole star gave them bearings. The night hush enfolded them, as the lights and sounds were swallowed in the dark hollow by the river. Three miles out Rock pulled up his horse.

"Here's where I turn aside," he said. "So long, boys."

"Look, Rock," Kerr said slowly. "You done me a good turn back there. If you're ever in a jack pot, you let me know. I'm locatin' in Montana for good this season. You'll find me in the Judith

Basin, on Arrow Creek. Capital K they call my outfit up there. Post office is Lewistown. My house is yours any time you show up."

"Maybe, I'll call your bluff some time, Al," Rock laughed. "You never can tell. I'm bound for Montana, myself, so I may see you-all again this summer. So long. Be good, and if you can't be good be careful."

Rock sat his horse, listening to the patter of departing hoofs. So Kerr was bound for the Judith Basin. Rock had said that the outfit he was with was also bound for Montana. But he had omitted to mention that he would not be with it when it arrived.

In fact, Rock was not wholly certain that he would ever arrive. He had another private horse beside Sangre with the Seventy Seven. His bed was in the wagon. He had two months' wages due. Before he could get anywhere, he had to collect his belongings and his pay.

And that might very well lead to a continuation of the unpleasantness this night had already spanned. The man whom he had killed in the Odeon was the brother of the trail boss of the Seventy Seven, and the Duffys were a clannish lot, with more nerve than good judgment.

He mighn't be lucky twice in one night. The pitcher that goes often enough to the, well—— Rock shrugged his shoulders and shook his horse into a lope. In twenty minutes he drew up to where the Seventy Seven herd lay bedded, a huge dark blot on the bleached grass, with the chuck tent looming a ghost-white outline, half a mile past the sleeping herd.

CHAPTER III.

THE STEERING WHEEL.

WHEN the sun flung its Midas touch across the Nebraska plains the morning after what was but an episode in Clark's Ford, it struck a ruddy sheen on the sorrel horse Rock Holloway bestrode and made the sleek coat of the black pony that carried his bed, shine like a piece of widow's silk.

Rock hummed a little tune as he rode. He had lived through that unavoidable encounter with Mark Duffy. He had avoided open clash with Duffy's brother by quitting the Seventy Seven. A blood feud is no light thing to be involved in. Rock had no regrets over Mark. The man's bulldozing disposition had brought them to the verge once or twice on the trail. But Rock had no desire to burn powder against a man who would be actuated chiefly by some vague notion that it was proper to avenge a dead kinsman.

Duffy, the trail boss, had been a little stunned by the death of his domineering brother. He had tentatively agreed that Rock was not to blame. He had paid him his wages and let him go unmolested. But later on, Rock knew, the surviving Duffy would ponder and brood, be urged to reprisal, as in the cloak-and-sword period gallants brooded upon a slight to their honor, whether real or fancied, until they had no course but to draw blade.

So Rock was well satisfied to be a lone horseman in a waste of grass and sage in the cool of a summer morning. On the flat area running unbroken by mountain or forest, from horizon to horizon, he marked northbound herds in the offing, as a lookout might descry distant sails at sea. Over yonder was a Matador herd, yonder marched the horned regiment of the Turkey Track. At a guess, Rock could have named the brand of the five herds visible within the radius of his sight. Northbound, headed for free grass and abundant water, as the Israelites of old went forth seeking the land of milk and honey. Texas was full of cattle, full to overflowing, and the overflow in that season swept in full volume over twenty-three degrees of latitude to end in Montana, with sundry minor spillings into the Canadian northwest.

Rock, like the cattleman with his herds, had set his face North. Like many another young Texan, he had lent eager ear to tales of this *terra incognita*, out of which scouting cattlemen sent reports that it was a paradise for herds, now that the bison were exterminated, and the Indians herded on reservations. Nine hundred miles still lay between Rock and his destination. But that was nothing. He had two good horses, a rifle and a .45 Colt, ammunition, food, bed-

ding and a sanguine soul. Many a pioneer had set forth with less. It was not precisely hostile country he had to traverse alone. True, a lone rider was a temptation to scouting braves who might have jumped the reservation. But that was a detail. In thirty days, more or less, he could reach Fort Benton. Once there—well, even if he had not the mission bestowed on him in Forth Worth, an able range rider could always find useful employment in his calling.

So Rock rode with a little tune on his lips and wondered how far it was between water holes.

THREE days out from Clark's Ford he sighted the mass of a trail herd and caught up with it at sundown. Four riders were bunching the cattle on the bed ground. Rock exchanged greetings with one, noted the brand, a Maltese Cross, and went on to the chuck wagon, camped by a nameless creek, meandering out of an endless sweep of plains to the westward into an equally limitless void on the east. The Maltese Cross made him welcome. It was a rare thing for a lone man to come out of those empty spaces. But the range properly held that a man's business was his own until he chose to divulge it. The Cross herd was bound for northern Montana, they told him. Rock knew that already. The trail boss casually remarked that he was welcome to keep them company if he liked.

Since they had a full crew, Rock didn't care to be a guest and crawl North at the mad speed of ten miles a day, when he could make thirty or forty a day on his own. So he accepted a hunk of beef from the cook next morning and rode on.

Two weeks brought him into Wyoming, into a different type of country. The flat, undulating surface of the great plains became sharply rolling ridges. He crossed creeks lined with willows and clumps of quaking aspen. He rode through open forests of pine. He made lonely camps in spots of rare beauty. Once or twice he stopped overnight at ranches well established.

Off to the northwest, mountains began to loom. He bore on until these white and purple peaks were behind him on the left, and so came to a watershed dipping in a long slant to the north. By which he guessed that he was well within the Territory of Montana, following a stream that flowed to the Yellowstone.

When he came to that turbulent river, in a valley traversed by the first transcontinental railway to cross the Northwest, he found eight men with a mixed herd at a fording place. They were a weary lot. Eight men to twelve hundred cattle was a short trail crew. They had left Kansas early that spring, they told Rock. They had made fast time, and their horses bore the trace, being gaunt and leg weary, although the cattle were in fair flesh. And the men were even more tired than their stock. Of the scores of trailed herds Rock had passed, this was the first that was short-handed. A trail outfit left the South with a full crew. Barring accident or death, the riders stayed with the herd to the journey's end. It was equivalent to desertion in the face of the enemy for a trail hand to quit for a whim. In all that bovine pilgrimage, there was no place where riders could be secured, no more than a ship can replace its crew a thousand miles offshore.

"I can use you plenty," the trail boss said, as soon as he sized Rock up, "if you hanker to be usefully employed."

"Where you bound for?" Rock asked.

"Canada. Old Man River in the Fort MacLeod country," the man said.

"In the home of the mounted police, eh?" Rock drawled. "We go through the Blackfeet country. That's about as far North as cattle range, isn't it?"

"Just about; although, if this Northern drive keeps extendin' itself, there'll be longhorns winterin' at the north pole, it looks like," the wagon boss replied. "If you want to see some new country, here's a chance."

"From Mexico to Canada, personally conducted!" Rock laughed. "All right, I'm with you."

THUS did he come into the foothills of the Rockies, north of 49°, in the month of September. They crossed the Missouri where Chief Joseph had

forded it with his braves ten years earlier, with U. S. cavalry in hot pursuit. They plodded west and north to their destination, leaving the Bear Paws to the right. Sweet Grass Hills on their left, sweeping across a country where grass grew to their stirrups, driving before them twelve hundred cattle of divers age and sex, marked with a brand on the left ribs, called a steering wheel.

Rock looked once or twice to the westward before they reached the boundary line. Somewhere in that great empty area the Marias River split the plains. Somewhere on the Marias was the headquarters of the Maltese Cross. The Cross would keep. He had given his word to go through with the Steering Wheel. In the winter or in the spring he would drift into Fort Benton, and he would contrive to make himself familiar with the ways and works of Buck Walters. For the present——

The Old Man revealed itself as a pleasant country, well grassed, well wooded with small pine, and with a small, swift-flowing stream in which trout lurked in eddying pools. Axes and saws they had in the chuck wagon. By some mysterious agency of freighting across the plains, they found themselves in possession of a mower and a dump rake. For once, faced as it were by an emergency, these knights of the saddle, who had all the man-on-horseback's traditional contempt for labor on foot, fell to as carpenters, corral builders, reapers and stackers of hay.

So that, when the first November snows hit them, they were housed in a comfortable log dwelling. Each man had a saddle horse tied in a warm stable, and hay stacked to feed his mount till spring. The Steering Wheel cattle had sun-cured grass to graze upon and brushy creek bottoms to shelter them against the blizzard.

"It might be worse," Rock said to a fellow rider a few days before Christmas. "I had an idea this Canada country was like the arctic regions. But it shapes up like a real cattle country. It's colder than Texas, but there's more grass and better shelter. These mounted police, with their funny red coats and striped pants, are about like the Texan rangers, only they don't shoot so frequent nor play as tight a game of poker."

"She's a lonesome country," the other rider said.

It was indeed a lonely land. When spring opened, with streams in flood and blue windflowers thrusting ahead of the first grass blades, Rock missed the gathering of the clans, the scope of great round-ups, and the hundreds of riders with gossip from a thousand miles of range. It was like being a chip in an eddy, he thought to himself, being given to similes and metaphors. The Steering Wheel seemed to have the entire Northwest to itself. They heard that another big outfit lay somewhere north of them. The STV had headquarters two hundred miles east. But from September to April Rock saw no four-footed beast on the range outside of the Steering Wheel brand. Nor did any rider ever come up from the horizon to pass the time of day. Fort MacLeod was a police barracks chiefly. It boasted a trading store, where trappers from the mountains sold their furs and bought supplies. Community life there was none at all.

The nine men of the Steering Wheel had a sinecure over the winter. Rock took to speculating on what brought that particular one-horse cow outfit all the way to Canada, when there were magnificent ranges to be had for the taking south of the line. None of the men knew who owned the Steering Wheel. A typical Texan, tall, thin-faced, with a drawly voice, and a good-natured soul, who knew cattle, ran the outfit. When a man needed money to buy goods at the fort, Dave Wells produced cash. His reticence discouraged curiosity. Rock, who knew the cow business both in practice and in theory, wondered at this dead silence—this absence of outlined plan. Twelve hundred cattle didn't need nine riders in comparative idleness.

THIS gave him a good excuse in April for leaving. When he told Wells, that individual looked thoughtful.

"I sho' don't need eight riders right along," he said. "I kept yo' boys over the winter, mostly because I didn't want

to turn yo' loose in a country where they's no chance for a job. I'm aimin' to let four of yo' go. But not for a spell. I'd like for yo' to stay on three-fo' weeks yet. I got to take a pasear after some stock. If yo' drift back across the line in May, yo'll still be able to get on as hands with some round-up."

Rock agreed. May would do as well as April. He had written once to Uncle Bill Sayre, and had received a reply. If he got around to the Maltese Cross range that summer, it would be good enough.

Immediately thereafter, Dave Wells flung his men out on a horse-gathering expedition. The Steering Wheel ponies were brought in by tens and dozens. They ranged uniformly within ten miles of the ranch. Most of the cattle grazed in the same area. And, as soon as forty horses were in the pasture, Wells organized a pack outfit, took four men with him, and vanished.

He left a red-headed youth in nominal charge. The duties of the riders left at home were to build an extension of the pole pasture and to gather the rest of the Steering Wheel saddle stock. Thereafter they were to scout around the outer fringes of the range and throw all cattle close home.

"The old he-coon gone South for another trail herd?" Billy Gore asked the deputy foreman, once he was in Rock's hearing.

"Naw," the red-headed one divulged the first information. "Said he was goin' somewhere after a bunch of doggies."

"Doggy" in range parlance meant farm cattle, scrubs, nondescript stock generally, sometimes cheaply bought to help stock a range.

Rock recalled that remark three weeks later, when Wells and his four riders rode into the ranch. They had left with forty saddle horses. These mounts were ridden to a standstill. The five men were heavy-eyed and obviously weary. Wells kept his own counsel, as did the four who had ridden with him. They appeared at noon, turned loose their horses, ate, and then slept still sunrise of the next day. After breakfast Dave Wells called the four riders who had stayed on the ranch, told them courteously that he would have to let them go, and paid them off in gold.

The discharged quartet rode south, leading pack horses, within two hours. They discovered, once clear of the ranch and free to air their personal views, that they were mutually eager to be away to a real cow country. They had had enough of comparative isolation. They were all Texans. Three of them were for home, via Butte and south over the Oregon Short Line to the Union Pacific. They had had enough of the North for the present. Only Rock proposed to linger, and he would keep them company until they were well into Montana.

Five miles south of the ranch they jumped a bunch of cattle out of a draw, mature cattle, with a freshly burned Steering Wheel black on their ribs. On the slope which they breasted were others; by a cluster of sloughs were still more.

Doggies! The cow-punchers, free of any loyalty or responsibility to any outfit, glanced and kept on talking of home. Rock looked and kept his thoughts to himself. They were *not* doggies. They were simon-pure longhorns, with a touch of Hereford blood, here and there—the type of cattle that poured annually by the hundred thousand out of Texas. If they were purchased range stock, other brands, vented or barred out, should have shown. All the mark that Rock saw on any beast was a fresh-burned Steering Wheel. But he kept his speculations to himself. After all, it was no business of his. The Steering Wheel might have cattle all over the Northwest, for all he knew or cared. If his fellow riders thought it queer, they were not concerned enough to mention the fact.

Five days later he parted from his companions under the shoulder of the Sweet Grass Hills. They were bearing off for Silver Bow Junction, homeward bound. Rock's course lay a trifle east of south, toward Fort Benton. Ahead of him, in that spring-green void, big round-ups were mustering from the upper Teton to the Larb Hills. The Bear Paws loomed faintly on the horizon. Milk River, Sun Prairie, the Bad Lands—place names to conjure with. There was nothing petty

in all that sweep of plain and mountain. It gave Rock a curious sense of thrilling possibilities. He rode alone without being lonely, fired by some subtle anticipation.

He often asked himself afterward what it is that gives a man a definite urge along a definite line that may lead him to both triumph and disaster. But he was never able to answer that question, any more than he was able to answer it that June day when, parting company with his fellows, he pointed the red horse's head toward Fort Benton murmuring whimsically:

"Here we comes, and there we goes,
And where we'll stop nobody knows."

CHAPTER IV.

A DEAD DOUBLE.

ROCK knew where he was going and why. But it was not on the cards that his course was to be direct. Halfway between Milk River and the Marias he rode down a coulee in search of water for a noon camp. He found water eventually and beside it a troop of United States cavalry, in the throes of getting under way. "Throes" is correct. They had a considerable amount of equipment to be packed upon mules. They were cantankerous mules. A dozen men were fighting them with pack lashings and profanity.

Rock drew rein to watch the circus. A man, a civilian, approached him, mopping the sweat from his brow.

"Stranger," said he, "you look like a cow-puncher."

"Looks don't deceive you this time," Rock admitted.

"Can you pack a mule?"

"I have lashed packs on a variety of animals," Rock said. "But I have no ambition to be a government muleteer."

"Be a good sport an' help me out," the man appealed. "It won't be but for four or five days, till we get to the post. I'm short-handed, and these mules is bad medicine. I shore need a man that's handy with a rope. I'll give you five dollars a day."

Rock grinned and accepted. The mules were certainly bad medicine, and he *was* handy with a rope, and a few days more or less didn't matter.

Fort Assiniboine lay eighty miles eastward. Fort Benton hugged the north bank of the Missouri, some sixty miles southwest. But here was a job just begging to be taken in hand. So for five days thereafter he was a mule packer, learning something of the way of men and mules in Uncle Sam's service. He even had an officer suggest that he would make a likely cavalryman. But Rock had different ideas. He took his twenty-five dollars in the shadow of this military post and set his face westward again.

He left in the gray of dawn. The second evening he dropped from the level of the plains, full three hundred feet into the valley of the Marias, where a little stream sang and whispered over a pebbly bed, through flats of rich, loamy soil. Sagebrush grew here, and natural meadows spread there. Willows lined the banks. Groves of poplar studded the flats, thickets of service berry. Great cottonwoods, solitary giants and family groups, cast a pleasant shade from gnarly boughs in full leaf.

"Gosh, places like this," Rock murmured, "fairly shout out loud for a fellow to settle down and make himself a home. No wonder Texas is flocking North."

In the first bottom Rock crossed, he stirred up a few cattle, then a band of horses, several of which bore trimmed manes and tails and marks of the saddle—fine-looking beasts, bigger than the Texas mustang. He couldn't see the brand.

"I wonder if we're anywhere near the Maltese Cross, Sangre, old boy?" he asked the sorrel horse. "Funny, if we'd stumble in there for the night."

HE rounded a point masked by thickets of young, green poplar and saw a house with smoke curling blue from the chimney. There was a stable beyond, corrals, a stack of last year's hay, and the lines of a pole fence running away along the river. It was a typical cow outfit's headquarters. The house was roomy, of pine logs, L-shaped, with a low porch in front. Rock stopped at the front

of the house. He saw no one anywhere. The only sign of life about the place was that wisp of blue, a wavering pennant in the still air.

He hesitated, sitting in his saddle. There was life here. Why didn't it show itself? Range hospitality was more than a courtesy to friends and neighbors. Even outlaws in a hidden camp would share food and blankets with a passing stranger. The logical accepted thing for any man faring across the plains was to make himself free wherever nightfall or mealtime overtook him. He was expected to put his horses in the stable and make himself at home. It wasn't altogether good form to wait for an invitation. The open-handed hospitality of the old West did have its forms, and Rock knew them.

He was a little surprised at himself, at his hesitation, this unaccountable feeling of delicacy, as if he were intruding. Why should he expect some one to rush out of that house to bid him welcome? Why did he hesitate? He asked himself that question in so many words, as he rode on to the stable.

It was a large stable, well kept, with room in it for twenty horses. Harness hung on pegs against the wall. The mangers were full of hay. The doorway was wide and high, so that Rock rode in before he dismounted. And from his seat he looked down at two horses, standing on bridle reins in their stalls, saddled, still rough with sweat. He stared at them.

The saddle of the nearest, the mane and foreshoulder, was stained with blood, not yet dried to the blackening point. It stood like the brand of Cain on the gray beast—on the yellow leather.

Was *that* why he had hesitated at the house? Could a man sense the unknown? Could fear or awe or the presence of tragedy impregnate the atmosphere like a sinister mist? These were uncommon questions for a cow-puncher to stand asking himself, but Rock Holloway had an uncommon sort of mind.

Still he was not merely mind. He had a body and appetites and all the natural passions man is heir to. If he had the mentality to analyze a situation, he had also a capacity for instantaneous, purposeful action. He had proved that long before he waited by the Odeon bar to halt Mark Duffy's high-handed career. He proved it once more. He left his two horses standing where he dismounted and walked quickly toward the house. He was conscious that he merely obeyed instinct—a hunch, if you will, except that Rock distrusted hunches which had no basis in reason—because he had felt an intuition of something wrong before he laid eyes on that bloodstained saddle. He strode toward that house with the certainty that he was needed there, yet in one portion of his mind he wondered how he came by that conclusion.

A door opened out of the north wall, which was guiltless of porch. One stepped from the threshold to the earth. The door stood wide. Rock looked in. He had seen many ranch rooms like this—a stove against one wall, a set of shelves for dishes and utensils, a long table in the middle of the room.

Beside this table, her back to him, a woman sat with her face buried in her hands. A few feet beyond a little girl in green calico, no more than three or four years of age, sat looking at Rock, out of blue baby eyes, her little, round, red mouth opened in a friendly smile.

" 'Lo 'Doc,' " she piped.

The woman lifted her head, looked, sprang to her feet, and shrank back. For one instant, unbelieving terror stood in her wide gray eyes, in the part of her lips, as plain as Rock had ever seen it on any human face.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said quickly. "I'm merely a passing stranger."

"Ah!" Her pent breath came with an explosive release. She put her hands to her breast for a second. Her features relaxed into a somber intentness.

Wordless, she stared at Rock, her eyes sweeping him from head to foot, coming back to rest searchingly, with a look of incredulity, on his face. And Rock stared back, wondering, yet alive to the strange compelling quality that seemed to radiate from this woman like an aura, to command interest and admiration and profound respect.

She hadn't been afraid of him. No; timidity was no attribute of that dark, imperious face. She had been shocked, startled, by something about him. Rock wondered what it could be.

TWO spots of color crept slowly into her cheeks. A very striking-looking creature, Rock thought. Not beautiful; not even pretty. Proud, passionate, dominant—yes. Slender as a willow, with a cloud of dark hair. Deep-gray eyes, like pools; scarlet lips.

" 'Lo, Doc," the little girl repeated, in a childish treble. She clambered to her feet and toddled forward a step or two, waving a rag doll by one arm. "W'y don't oo tum in?"

"Hello, baby!" Rock answered and doffed his hat. "You don't seem to find me a fearsome object, anyway."

"Nor do I." The woman suddenly had found her voice—a deep, throaty sound, like water rippling gently over pebbles. "But I thought I was seeing a ghost."

"A ghost?" Rock grinned. His interest quickened at the tone, the clean-clipped words. No semiliterate range beauty this. Education had done one thing for Rock Holloway. It had made his ear sensitive to enunciation. "I'm a pretty substantial spook, I wish to remark. Rock Holloway is my name. I hail from Texas, via the Canadian Northwest and way points. I'm poor, but honest, and my intentions are reasonably honorable, even if my performances aren't always up to par. No, lady, I'm no ghost. I'm a stock hand in search of occupation. I stopped in here because this was the first ranch I've seen to-day, and it's near sundown. But, if I make you uncomfortable, I'll ride on."

"No, no!" she said quickly. "I didn't mean that. Come in. I'll show you what I mean. I think you'll understand. It may startle you, too."

Rock stepped into the room. The baby generously offered her doll in token of amity.

"I's hung'y," she announced, with juvenile directness. "I wan' my suppah. Nona just sits an' cwies. Make her 'top, Doc."

The girl—Rock decided she could be no more than twenty-one or two—gathered the child up and set her on a chair.

"Sit right there till I come back, honey," she murmured. "Then you shall have your supper."

The fair-haired, blue-eyed mite obeyed without question. The girl beckoned Rock. She walked to the other end of the room, through a doorway. Rock followed her. He found himself in a narrow hallway that bisected the house. She opened a door off that and motioned him to enter.

He found himself in a woman's room. No man ever surrounded himself with such dainty knickknacks. It was an amazing contrast to the bare utility of the kitchen.

A man lay stretched at full length on the white counterpane that covered the bed—a dead man. One glance told Rock that. Crimson marked the pillow that held his head, and crimson speckled the yellow and blue of a hooked rug on the floor. A hand basin, with crimson-stained cloths in it, stood on a chair.

"Look at him!" the girl whispered. "Look closely at his face!"

But Rock was already looking. He needed no prompting. He stared. The amazed certainty came to him that, except for very minor differences, he might well have been looking at his own corpse.

YET he was alive, never more so. And he had no brothers, nor indeed any kin that so resembled him. Coincidence, he reflected. Such things were. No great mystery that, of the millions of men cast in the image of their Maker, the mold for two should be strangely alike. He did not now wonder at the shock he must have given this girl, when he stood in the doorway, the image of the man dead in her room.

But Rock passed at once to a more practical consideration. The man had been shot. His bared chest showed a blue-rimmed puncture.

"Do you wonder?" the girl's voice said in his ear. "You see the resemblance. It is uncanny. You could pass for him anywhere. My heart stood still when I saw you in the doorway."

Rock nodded. He put his hand on the

body. The flesh was still soft, not yet cold.

"He hasn't been dead long," he remarked.

The girl looked down at the dead man and reached one slim-fingered hand to smooth the brown hair back from his forehead with a caressing gesture. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"About half an hour," she whispered. "It was like lightning out of the blue. We were up the river a couple of miles. He had separated from me to look at some cattle around the bend. I heard a shot—just one. I didn't think anything of that until he came back to me, holding himself on his horse by main strength, dying in his saddle. He couldn't talk. He never did speak again. I got him home. He died in a little while."

"Where are the other men?" Rock asked.

"There are no other men."

"Any neighbors?"

"Not near. There is the Maltese Cross on the river, seven miles below, and the Seventy Seven about the same distance above."

"The Seventy Seven? Texas outfit? Pull in here last fall? Fellow name of Duffy run it?"

She nodded.

A curious conviction, based on less than nothing, arose in Rock's mind. It couldn't be—and still—— Absurd—of course.

"And you don't know who shot him nor why? Well, I suppose it isn't my business. Only he might be my twin. He isn't, but——" Rock stopped. He had very nearly spoken what was in his mind.

"I don't know," she sighed. "I only suspect."

Rock did not press for particulars.

"It hurts you," he said kindly. "I expect you thought a lot of him. But it's done. Now, is there anything I can do?"

"What can you do?" she cried, the first despairing note that had entered her voice. "Can you give back life? Can you——"

She checked herself in the middle of the sentence.

"Oh, I mustn't be silly," she said, after a moment. "It's so useless. Only, it seems—— Ah, well."

She turned away. Rock closed the door behind them. The baby sat on the chair by the table, waiting patiently.

"If you'll put up your horse," she said, "I'll get some supper."

"Look here," Rock said bluntly, "I'm foot-loose for the time being. Is there anything you want done? Anybody you want notified about this? My horses are fairly fresh."

She stood a second. "Oh, I've got to think," she said. "No, not to-night. And there is no one, anyway. In the morning we may——"

She turned to the kitchen stove and lifted a lid. It had gone down to a few charred sticks. Rock took that matter off her hands. He rebuilt the fire and noted empty water pails on a bench.

"Get your water out of the river?" he asked.

"No. There's a spring by those willows to the right."

Rock found the spring, a small pool bubbling out of white sand, clear as crystal and cold as ice. He filled the pails and brought them back. The girl was peeling potatoes when he came in. Sliced bacon sizzled in a pan.

Rock went to the stable by the river bank, unsaddled the three horses, took off his pack, fed and watered all four. When he reached the house again supper was on the table. They ate in silence. The sun filled the valley with the fire of its last beams. Bright shafts shot dazzling through the windows, a yellow blaze that grew red and then rose pink and faded into a pearly gray. Yellow-haired Betty laid down her spoon, slid off her chair, climbed on Rock's knee, and snuggled her round face against his shirt. In two minutes she was fast asleep.

THE girl, who had been sitting with her eyes absently on her plate, smiled briefly—a phantom smile that strangely transformed her face.

She was young to have a kid like that, Rock thought. And it was tough losing a man by the gun route. Was it going to be his lot to step into the breach? If—if—— Well, he had to get to the bot-

tom of this, somehow. Here was a fellow who looked exactly like him, same build, same age, same features, shot down in a river bottom. It smelled of ambush. The Seventy Seven was less than an hour's ride to the west. And Elmer Duffy was running the Seventy Seven. For the moment the Maltese Cross and Buck Walters and the mission he had undertaken for Uncle Bill Sayre had no place in Rock's mind.

The girl took the baby out of his arms and carried her off into a bedroom. Rock put away these reflections and gathered the dishes off the table and began to wash them.

"I might as well earn my night's lodging," he murmured whimsically, probably to hide the fact that he was moved by a desire to make his sympathy take some practical form.

The girl reappeared, put the food away in a pantry, took a cloth, and wiped the dishes as Rock washed. She made no comment. She moved quickly, and efficiently. Her hands were deft. But her mind was elsewhere. She was scarcely conscious of him, Rock perceived. And when the supper things were finished, he went outside and sat down on a chopping block to smoke a cigarette in the twilight.

Dusk gathered. The pearl-gray mist of the evening sky merged into the lucent shroud of a plains night. Crickets chirped in the grass. The Marias whispered its sibilant song in a stony bed. A lamp glowed through a window in the house. Rock saw the girl sitting by the table again, as when he first saw her, elbows on the wood, face buried in her palms.

"She aches inside," he thought. "Poor devil! She needs folks or friends or something, right now."

But he couldn't be one or the other, he knew. He was too sensible to blunder with well-meant, useless words. She had forgotten he was there. So he walked softly down to the stable, drew his blankets in the canvas tarpaulin off to one side, under the stars, and turned in.

So the Seventy Seven did locate on the Marias instead of the Judith? Uncle Bill was right. This might be no healthier a neighborhood for him than it had proved for his double.

"Well, you got to be in this neighborhood for a spell, whether it's dangerous or not, you darned fool," Rock apostrophized himself. "This is the Maltese range, and you've promised to look over the Cross."

Thus Rock, with the blankets drawn up to his chin and his gaze meditatively on the three stars that make Orion's belt.

His last drowsily conscious act was to smile at the obliquity of his thought. In the morning he would do whatever that dark-haired, gray-eyed young woman requested. He had ridden slap into this thing. Whatever it was, he would see it through. Yet he couldn't imagine her requiring anything of him except that he would perhaps ride into Fort Benton and notify whatever authorities functioned there that a man had been shot on the Marias. And that didn't call for any great resolution on his part.

Just the same, he desired greatly to know who this man was who looked so much like him, who shot him, and why?

CHAPTER V.

WRAPPED IN CANVAS.

BIRDS twittering in the poplars and willows by the river wakened Rock when the rose-pink dawn was turning to gold. He lay watching, listening. He could hear the ripple of running water. He could see the bleached hills rising abrupt from the gray-green valley floor. The cool air was like balm on his face. Beyond all doubt this was a pleasant country. If a man could settle on one of these river bottoms, with a couple of hundred cows, in ten years—— But Rock was a long way from peering anxious-eyed into the future.

He sat up and rolled a cigarette. The sun thrust searching yellow fingers into the valley of the Marias. The winter-bleached log walls of the house drew his gaze and set his mind to work in fruitless speculation. This must be quite an outfit, he reflected. The house was big, built to accommodate a score of men. He had marked a bunk room across that hall from the roomy kitchen. The sta-

ble argued plenty of riding stock in winter. There were machinery and wagons, even a spring buggy, under a lean-to shed. Yet apparently the place was held down by a young woman, a baby, and one man. Hadn't the girl said there were no other men? Still, she had been more or less fussed at the time. The riders might be afar on round-up. But Rock had that sense of abandonment, just the same. It was rather puzzling. Whereupon he reached for his boots, dressed, fed and watered the horses, and sat down on the river bank to watch the clear water sparkle in the sun, while he waited some sign of life from the house.

He didn't wait long. A voice at his elbow roused him to attention. The girl had come unseen and unheard. Her dark hair was coiled in a neat rope about her head. She had on a short gray skirt and a white blouse. Her skin, in the clear morning light, was like a piece of satin, dusky and transparent. Rock had seen enough of slatternly women on ranches to make him appreciate freshness. There was a peculiar interest-compelling quality about this girl, over and above her youth and charm. Rock had felt it last night. He felt it now, even when she said no more than a low-toned: "Good-morning, Mr. Holloway.

"I thought you had gone," she continued, "until I saw you moving around here. I must have seemed rather inhospitable last night, not even thinking where you were to sleep."

"A cow-puncher," Rock drawled, "generally carries his bed with him when he's on the move. And there's all outdoors to spread it in."

"Of course. But when you come to a ranch—— Well, breakfast's ready."

He walked with her to the house.

"I got up early," she said when they had finished. "Betty generally sleeps till seven or eight o'clock. I thought——"

She stopped a moment, then continued with quiet decision:

"I want to bury him."

"Here?" Rock didn't mistake her meaning.

"Yes. I'm sure he'd as soon be buried here as anywhere. There is nothing else we can do for him. You know what this country is like. We're practically out of the world."

"Isn't this part of the country organized at all?" Rock asked. "No local authorities?"

"Are you a complete stranger here?" she countered. "I didn't think so by the way you spoke of the Seventy Seven last night."

"I passed through this country last fall with a trail herd bound from Texas to Canada."

"Oh, I see," she said. "Well, this Territory of Montana is a good deal of a no man's land, outside of the western part, where there is a lot of mining. Fort Benton is the nearest thing to a town. It's quite a place, but it isn't a regularly organized community. There's a United States marshal there, I think, and a judge comes down from the western part of the State, once a year, to hold court. There aren't enough people to form a proper county organization yet, although it's talked of. When my father came in here four years ago, we were the first outfit on the Marias. Betty is the first white child born north of the Missouri River in the Territory, I believe. So, you see," she motioned abruptly with her hands, "there's not much use running around in circles telling that Doc Martin has been shot. Last night I was in a terrible state. But I can think straight now. Doc is dead. We can't do anything but bury him. I'd like to get it over with before Betty wakes up. She doesn't know. She was awfully fond of Doc, and he of her."

"All right," Rock agreed. If there were no formalities to be complied with, no coroner to sit in inquiry, no sheriff to seek trace of the killers, the sooner the dead man was buried the better. Trail outfits buried their dead and went on. And, perhaps, the last rites men performed for their dead under such circumstances lost nothing of sincerity because they were informal.

SO Rock, shovel in hand, followed her to a spot a hundred yards east of the house, near the river bank. Under a giant cottonwood stood a small picket inclosure. Within that inclosure lifted two grassy mounds, long and narrow, a

painted board at the end of each. For a second Rock thought the girl would break down again.

"It's ghastly," she whispered. "It's almost as if there were a curse on this place, if I believed in such a thing. Mamma died when Betty was born. A horse fell on dad. They're both there. Now Doc."

The soft mold dug easily. When Rock had a hole deep enough, they returned to the house. Some time between dark and dawn the girl had changed the man's clothing and wiped clean every trace of blood. She had put on him a clean, soft shirt, with a coat and trousers of blue serge. He looked calm and contented, as if he slept. And Rock, gazing at the still face, marveled again at the resemblance to himself. He would have liked to meet this man alive, he thought.

They wrapped the body in heavy canvas, swathed like a mummy. A coffin was out of the question. Sawed lumber there was none. Except furniture, freighted in from afar, everything about that place was hewn from raw timber with axes. And canvas, Rock thought, was as good as a steel casket. The dead are careless of their housing. Only the living fret over such things.

He piled on the last shovelful of earth and stood aside. The girl looked down at the raw soil. Her lips quivered. She dropped to her knees. She seemed to whisper something like a prayer. Rock stood with bared head in the morning sun that sent bright shafts of light through the crooked boughs above. Then he left her, still on her knees, her head bowed, her fingers locked tight together.

CHAPTER VI.

VERY ADROIT ROCK.

SOME minutes later he heard her stirring in the house. The sun grows hot early on the plains in midsummer. Rock had planted himself on the porch steps, in the shade, debating his next move. Should he ride on about his business? Logically, yes. He had a definite task to perform. It was time he set about it. He was on the ground. This was only an incident, a happening by the way. Yet his mind was full of this woman and child, alone on a ranch in the wilderness. The girl had said there were no other men. But this ranch and equipment spelled men and stock. It was more than the cabin of a settler striving for a foothold and security in a virgin land. A woman with a three-year-old baby had no business alone on a ranch in this waste, without a man in the background.

That problem—which was more a state of feeling than a problem, Rock knew—was solved for him in unexpected fashion. He rose at last and entered the house, specifically to ask her if there was anything else he could do before he departed.

The girl had the child in a high chair and was giving the youngster her breakfast. Silently she poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Rock. When he drank it she said:

"Come outside. I want to talk to you."

Rock followed her to the porch.

"You told me last night you were a stock hand in search of occupation. Do you want to go to work for me?"

Rock liked her directnesss. His mind was quick to grasp possibilities. Work to Rock meant activity on the range He was next door to the Maltese Cross. Two birds had been killed before with one stone. Still, he wasn't fond of mysteries that involved sudden death. He liked to know where he was going when he took a new trail.

"I'd as soon ride range here as anywhere," he said. "It's immaterial to me who I work for, so long as it's my kind of work."

"Are you one of these stock hands that considers it beneath his dignity to work for any outfit with less than ten thousand head of cattle?" she asked, with a comical note of asperity.

"Well, no," he laughed. "Hardly so finicky as that. If you've got a rider's job for me, consider me on the pay roll. Only, I'd like to know, if I'm going to work for you, whether I'm likely to find myself being buried some morning at sunrise—and why?"

"Wait a minute," she said. She turned

back into the house. In a second she was back with a hat on and two shiny tin pails.

"Come down to the stable with me, and we'll talk this over while I milk. I was in such a state last night that I forgot the cows. Will you saddle up and bring them in out of the pasture?"

Rock drove two amiable-looking red cows from the far end of a small pasture to the corral. The girl tied both to the fence and sat down beside one on a low stool.

"Can you milk?" she asked, with the faintest shadow of a smile.

"Never did," he answered truthfully.

"It's considered woman's work, I suppose," she replied. "But even the wild and woolly cowboy, I notice, likes real milk and cream and butter. I don't want you to milk cows, though. I'm not running a dairy. I have about eight hundred cattle scattered around here."

"Your ranch outfit looks like about eight thousand," Rock remarked.

"We had more than eight thousand when we came here," she said. "That is why the house is big and the stable. My father drove three trail herds in here from the Pecos. But we lost most of them."

"Oh, I see," Rock commented.

"So, as I said, I have about eight hundred cattle on the range. I have a rider with the Maltese Cross round-up. I need another rider on the ranch."

"But if you keep a rep with the Cross," Rock interpolated, "does it matter if your stock does scatter considerable? The outfit would brand the calves and ship your beef as long as you supply a man and a string of horses."

"Yes and no," she said. "I see you know range work. I suppose what you say is true. Only I have reasons for handling cattle in my own way. But that's all beside the point. What you want to know is whether you'll be expected to step into a dead man's boots and take the risk of getting shot for some reason or other, isn't it?"

"Yes," Rock admitted. "I have no hankering to inherit a private war along with a forty-dollar job."

"It'll be fifty if you work for me," she said. "There may be a risk. Not if you can be around here and work for me, without getting sentimental and jealous. That was what got Doc killed, I believe. I'm sure it was."

Perhaps Rock looked his curiosity and surprise. The girl stood up. She had worked, as she talked, and finished milking the first cow.

"I had better explain a little," she said calmly. "As I said, four years ago we came in here with nearly nine thousand cattle and a dozen riders in our outfit. I was eighteen then. I had just finished school. Our first winter here was a bad one—a terrible winter of hard frost and deep snow and storms. In the spring a round-up out two months gathered less than five hundred cattle in our brand. Betty was born that winter, and mamma died. The next summer a horse fell on my father, injured his back, so that he was a helpless cripple for nearly a year. Then he died. He left all there was to me and Betty. I have full control of everything until she comes of age. So I have managed here ever since. Mostly with one man, sometimes with two."

SO that was that. The dead man was a range rider, not a husband, and the baby was a sister. She was a level-headed, plucky girl to run a shoe-string outfit by herself. Yet he suspected that in this man's country, men would make it easy for this capable and determined young person. Rock's interest quickened.

"Wonder you didn't sell out and go back to your folk," he suggested.

"I have none—at least none that I care much about," she replied. "And how much would I get for five or six hundred cattle? A few thousand dollars. The ranch isn't salable. Who would pay money for a ranch, when land and water can be had anywhere for taking? Why should I sell out? I know cattle. This is a new country, a good range. We may not have another hard winter in a lifetime. It just happened. The old trappers and the Indians never saw a winter like that. Every four years my cattle will double. After a while it will make Betty and me independent. Why should

I sell out? What would I do? Go to some town and be a clerk in a store?"

The vehemence in her voice made Rock smile.

"Oh, you got the right idea," he admitted. "You're working on the same principle that has built up every big outfit in the country. Only, it's sort of unexpected in a woman no bigger than a minute."

"Please understand me clearly," she said, with a peremptory note in her curiously musical voice. "I don't need any sympathy from anybody. I know what I'm doing, and I'm doing very well here. I want any one who works for me to work on exactly the same basis as he would work for any cow outfit. I don't want any of this 'That's all right, little girl, we'll see you through,' business. That's mostly what got Doc Martin killed, I suspect. Every man who works for me gets the idea that he's in love with me."

"Why blame 'em for that?" Rock interrupted.

"It embarrasses me. I've fired two or three for getting mushy. I don't want that sort of thing. Do you think you can ride for me without getting sentimental—without presently getting the attitude that it's your duty and privilege to protect me from every man in the country except yourself?"

Rock's amused smile faded.

"Miss—— I don't think I got your name." He stopped.

"Nona Parke. The baby's name is Betty," she supplied promptly.

"Well, then. Miss Parke," Rock said a little stiffly, "I can assure you that if I do draw wages from you I'll try to earn them without making a bid either for your gratitude or your affection."

Nona Parke's gray eyes rested on his for a second with cool appraisement.

"You talk like a man with some sense. If you can handle horses and cattle the way you handle the English language, you ought to be useful."

"You're getting too personal," Rock said rudely. "Tell me about this shooting. That's what I want to know before I decide whether I want to make myself the same kind of a target. I have ambitions to live and do well in the world, myself."

"Now you're getting offended," she reproached. "And I'm only trying to be frank and have things understood. You can't imagine what a nuisance men can be sometimes. Doc worked for me ever since dad died. He was a good man. But he persisted in wanting to love me. I let him go once and then took him on again. He promised to behave himself. But he wouldn't. He was jealous. He couldn't bear other men coming here to see me. He stirred up trouble for himself with Elmer Duffy, the boss of the Seventy Seven outfit. I am fairly sure that Elmer shot Doc yesterday afternoon."

She said this reluctantly, but with an earnestness that convinced Rock she really believed it. To him it seemed rather simple. He had seen men quarrel over women before.

"Elmer, I suppose, is a victim, too," Rock commented. "Was he inclined to be jealous of a good-looking fellow like Doc Martin being in your company all the time?"

"Yes; that's about it." She sighed. "It sounds horrid, but it's true. I'm quite sure Duffy was a little afraid of Doc. Doc had a quick temper, and he was supposed to be rather deadly. I don't know how he got that reputation, because I never knew of him having trouble with anybody in this country."

"And you think they met and shot it out around the bend?" Rock queried.

"No." She replied soberly. "I think Doc was ambushed. There was only one shot. He had been mean and arbitrary with Elmer Duffy the last time they met. In fact, he threatened him and told him never to set foot on this ranch when I was here alone."

"Listen, Miss Parke," Rock said positively. "I know something about Elmer Duffy, myself. I'll confess that I don't like his style with men very much. I don't know what it would be like with women. Elmer belongs to a family that walks roughshod over people when they feel like it. But I don't think he would lay for your man and bushwhack him."

"I tell you simply what I believe," she

said gravely. "I don't know. There is no proof. I wouldn't breathe this to any one. I only say it to you because I'm asking you to work for me. I don't know that I would even tell you, if you didn't look so much like Doc that you could easily be taken for him. If you ride for me, you *may* fall heir to whatever bad blood did exist between him and Elmer Duffy. If Doc hadn't made an issue of me with this man he would still be alive. I don't want to be a bone of contention. I won't be. I like men well enough until they get too friendly. If a man works for me, he's working for me, and that's all there is to it. So now you know all about it. And I do need a rider to take Doc's place."

"It was very inconsiderate of him to get himself killed off when you needed him." Rock couldn't forbear the ironic note. "Riders can't always be picked up in this country just when you want 'em."

"You're brutal." Nona drew herself up, and her eyes filled. "I liked Doc. He *was* nice. He was loyal. It made me sick to see him die like that. It made me feel guilty, because I was partly the cause. But I can't help it that I'm a woman. Can't you understand? I'm not a callous beast."

And Rock knew she was not. He knew he had hurt her with that thrust.

"Well, I'll guarantee not to afflict you with my admiration if I feel any," he smiled. "And it's a cow-puncher's nature to be loyal to the people he works for. If I ever lock horns with Elmer Duffy, it won't be for the reason you say your man, Doc, did. No. And I like the looks of this country. I'd sort of like to linger on this range for a while. So there doesn't seem to be any reason why I shouldn't work for you."

"All right," she answered composedly. "If you'll bunch those horses that are in the pasture, I'll show you what ones to saddle. I want you to go down the river with me after I've milked this other cow."

WHILE Rock gathered a few horses out of the pasture, he saw a rider cross the flat. The milch cows were in a small corral. Rock bunched the horses in a larger one and walked through the stable to where Nona finished her dairymaid's task. From the door he saw that the man was Elmer Duffy. Rock's mind worked fast. He was bound to encounter Duffy some time, and it might as well be now. Duffy's business was with Nona Parke, not with him. But Rock cared nothing for that. He remembered that he had killed this man's brother. He was going to live for a time in Duffy's immediate neighborhood. If Duffy had taken Mark's death to heart and brooded over it, Rock wanted to know and be ready for what might follow.

But he was hardly prepared for what did happen. He walked straight toward Duffy. The man's back was toward him. He was talking to Nona. She was just rising from her stool. Duffy was in no way excited. His tone was the habitual slow drawl of the native Texan.

Then Rock spoke.

"Hello, Duffy," said he.

Duffy wheeled. His arms hung by his sides. There wasn't the faintest twitch of the fingers hanging a little below his gun belt, nor any quick lighting of his slaty eyes, nor the frowning recognition Rock half expected. True, recognition impended in the man's attitude. And he was wary—wary without being hostile.

"Hellow, Doc," he answered evenly.

"Doc!" A ripple of sardonic amusement stirred in Rock. Duffy thought he faced Nona Parke's dead rider. Rock stood perfectly still for a second or two. The man's eyes never left his.

"You didn't expect to see me, did you?" Rock asked.

Surely his voice would establish his identity. Duffy had been in daily contact with Rock Holloway for two months on trail and had known him casually the season earlier. But he didn't know him now. His words proved that.

"Why, I reckoned I might," he answered, "seein' I rode in here. You didn't expect me to take what you said serious, did you?"

Rock had a retentive memory.

"About you keeping off this ranch?"

Duffy nodded. Rock could understand his watchfulness.

"Shucks! I've changed my mind about caring a whoop whether you come here, there, or the other place," Rock said slowly, "so long as you act white. But there's something I do want to tell you, Duffy. Up the river yesterday somebody took a pot shot at me. Nona heard it."

HE looked at her. For a second her face was a study. Would she play up to his lead? Rock didn't know himself precisely why he did this, except that instinctively he took the opening Duffy gave him.

But her words came with sharp emphasis. Her wits were nimble.

"I heard the shot. I didn't see who fired."

"I don't like to be shot at from ambush," Rock said pointedly.

"You say I'd do that? Did do that?"

A rising inflection put an edge in Duffy's tone. The tan of his long, homely face went a brick red.

"I didn't say so. I said I don't like to be shot at from ambush."

Duffy stared at him for a second or two.

"Lissen, Doc Martin." His tone was flat—squeezed dry of all feeling. "You don't like me. You've been kinda high-handed with me more'n once. I don't suffer with admiration for you, myself. But I'll tell you this: if I want you, I'll take you with an even break. I'm no bushwhacker. If somebody shot at you, an' you think it was me, you got another think comin'. When I shoot at *you*, I'll be lookin' you in the eye."

"I'm inclined to take your word for that, Duffy," Rock said coolly. "If you say you didn't, we'll let it go at that."

"The way you've acted with me the last few months," said Duffy, growing querulous, "I'd as soon shoot it out with you as not. I'm tellin' you straight, Martin, but it's up to you to make the break. I don't *hunt* trouble."

"Nor do I," Rock assured him truthfully.

"You musta changed your ways mighty sudden, then," Duffy retorted.

Rock grinned amiably.

"I have," said he. "I've sort of convinced myself I've been barking up the wrong tree. Elmer. I aim to change my ways. Don't know whether for better or worse. But if you don't go gunnin' for me, I certainly don't hanker to pick a fuss with you."

Duffy eyed him doubtfully. He turned to the girl.

"Do you reckon he means what he says?"

"He always does, so far as I know," she told him shortly.

"Well, we might as well let it go at that," Duffy finally said. "Sounds reasonable."

"All right. Let her go as she lays." Rock closed the conversation abruptly by turning on his heel. He walked back through the stable, into the larger corral, where he perched himself on the top rail. He looked down on the sleek backs of Nona Parke's saddle stock, but his mind was wholly on the amazing fact that he had practically committed himself to a dead man's identity.

He watched Duffy walk up to the house with Nona, carrying the two pails of milk, saw him stand at the door and talk for a minute. Then he came back, swung into his saddle, and rode around the stable end. Rock tightened up a little. The girl had been a restraining influence. Now, perhaps Duffy would have more to say or do. Long ago Rock had privately estimated Elmer Duffy as the most dangerous of the Duffy quartet, chiefly because he was tenacious of an idea or a grievance and inclined to be moody. But he only looked up at Rock and said:

"You kinda got me goin'. Martin. You've changed your tune a heap. You recollect what you told me last time we talked?"

Rock nodded, with only a hazy idea of what he was supposed to have said.

"Let's get down to cases," Duffy persisted. "Do I understand that you've changed your idea that you got a license to close-herd this girl of Parke's, any time another man acts like he wanted to speak to her?"

Rock sifted tobacco into a paper.

"I don't know as I like your way of putting it," he said, with a pretense at being sullen. "But she's convinced me

she aims to be a free agent. It's nothing to me who she talks to, from now on. I don't claim no special privileges no more. She's made it clear that she's able to look out for herself, as far as men are concerned."

Duffy ironed out the smile that started to overspread his face.

"It don't look to me," he said thoughtfully, "like any man's got the inside track with that girl. She sure don't favor nobody that I know of. So you were just naturally buildin' up trouble for yourself, takin' the stand you did."

"I guess so," Rock admitted indifferently. "Anyway, I got something else besides her on my mind, now. I'd sure like to find out who tried to pot me yesterday, Duffy. I'd make him hard to catch."

"Don't know as I blame you," Duffy remarked. "But don't you never think it was me, Doc. I've done told you where I stand. So long."

YES; Duffy had made it clear enough where he stood. Still, somebody had shot Doc Martin. Rock was still pondering on that problem when Nona came back from the house. She had changed into a pair of overalls and leather chaps. She wore a beautifully made pair of tan riding boots. She looked like a slim, capable boy, with her dark hair tucked out of sight under a felt hat.

"What on earth did you do that for?" she demanded irritably.

"Do what for?" Rock affected ignorance.

"Let him think you were Doc Martin?"

"Well, he was so darned sure of it, for one thing," Rock answered thoughtfully. "It struck me as a good chance to feel around and find out if he did take that crack at Doc. I don't believe he did. Also, I think I've convinced him that I'm going—as Doc Martin—to mind my own business so far as you're concerned."

"I noticed how you managed to create that impression," Nona admitted. "You were very—very——"

"Adroit," Rock suggested dryly.

"That's the word." She smiled. "You certainly have——"

"I meant to be," Rock interrupted, frowning. "I value my scalp, and I never like to scrap over nothing."

He looked intently at her.

"See here: If people around here persist in taking me for Doc Martin, why not let it go at that?" he suggested.

"Why do you want to pass for him?" she demanded. "Are you on the dodge for something?"

Rock shook his head. He didn't want to explain to her the possibility of Elmer Duffy starting a blood feud with him over Mark's death. He had disarmed Duffy, he thought, in his rôle of Doc Martin, no longer jealously hostile toward any ambitious male who came wooing Nona Parke. And Rock was quite willing to chance some unknown enemy of the dead rider. Pity and wonder had stirred in his breast when he looked at his double stretched on the bed, and when he helped to bury him. He had a sense of outrage in a man being murdered from ambush. He was puzzled about that shooting—curious about the how and why.

"No," he said. "I have told you my name, and where I came from. I have nothing to hide. Just the same, I have a notion to play Doc Martin for a while. I might find out who killed him. Duffy didn't."

"Perhaps not. I'd hate to believe it. And, still, I don't know. It's just a feeling. If Elmer Duffy didn't shoot Doc, I can't imagine who would. Doc never quarreled with any one else around here that I know about, and I think that I would know if he had."

"Sometimes," Rock said, and he was thinking of himself when he spoke, "things that are a long way behind a man crop up. Queer things happen in the cow country. Well, what about it? Do you want to keep it dark about Doc being shot and let me play his hand for a while? Or shall I announce myself to Elmer Duffy and everybody else who takes me for Doc Martin?"

"Suit yourself," she said. "You will be taking your own chances."

"On what?"

"On whatever happens."

"Oh, well, I don't mind taking a sporting chance now and then." Rock swung

lightly off the fence. "What's the program now, Miss Parke?"

"Rope that sorrel for me and that chunky bay for yourself," she said crisply. "And catch me that black pony."

NONA saddled her horse as soon as Rock, and she had him saddle the small black horse with an extra rig in the stable. They rode to the house. The girl swung down, darted in, and came out with a cushion, which she fastened across the fork of her saddle. Then she called Betty, and that chubby person toddled forth.

Nona put her on the cushion and swung up to her seat. The child, all smiles for Rock, rode easily within the protection of her sister's arm. The extra horse trotted at the end of Rock's lead rope, as they set off down the valley.

"Didn't she see him?" Rock muttered. "How come she takes me for him?"

Nona shook her head. "I left her shut in the house when we made that ride yesterday. You can see she takes you for granted."

Betty undoubtedly did. She prattled away, calling him "Dot."

"I don't like to leave her alone much," Nona explained. "That's why we've got this extra cayuse. There's a half-breed family lives down river a few miles. One of the girls has been nurse for Betty most all the last year. She's been away for a while, and I've got to get her back. I've carried this child hundreds of miles like this, but it's too hard on her and on me. I've got to be free to ride when I need to."

Rock nodded comprehension. He had been wondering how she managed with the baby.

They traversed long river flats, gray with sage, heavily grassed here and there, spotted with natural meadows of bluejoint hay. Meadow larks caroled. In the still pools, where foaming riffles ended, wild ducks mothered flapping broods. Gray and brown buffalo birds haunted the berry thickets and fluttered out at their approach. Except for this wild life, the bottoms were deserted. Few cattle grazed in those valleys, so hotly scrutinized by a brassy sun. They kept to high ground and cooler airs. And, just as Rock was beginning to wonder if his day's ride should consist of acting solely as Nona's escort, she pulled up and pointed to a wide-mouthed draw, opening into the Marias from the north.

"Ride up that about six or eight miles, then swing west, and circle back to the ranch," she said. "My brand is a TL, same as on your horse. Left rib on cattle. Make a sort of rough estimate of how many you see. You ought to get in about two or three o'clock. I'll have some dinner cooked."

CHAPTER VII.

MARINERS.

ROCK'S horse splashed knee-deep through the sparkling Marias, where it raced down a long, pebbled stretch to foam into a black pool. The draw indicated by Nona opened a yawning mouth, coming in from the illimitable spread of Lonesome Prairie, although Rock had yet to learn the name and its aptness. A small creek trickled through this depression. The draw narrowed and lifted, as he rode. He climbed at last to the upper levels, where the eye could span fifty miles. Here cattle lay in the midday heat, along the tiny stream that meandered in a shallow trough, or they fed in bunches on the tops of low rises, where vagrant airs stirred.

Rock counted and estimated, as he jogged from bunch to bunch, noting brands and earmarks, admiring the glint of sun on slender curving horns, the chubby roundness of fat calves and sleek yearlings, and the massive bulk of challenging bulls.

Most of these cattle were branded TL. A few bore the Maltese Cross. Rock smiled to himself. Here he was where Uncle Bill Sayre wanted him to be. The odd part of it was that, if he had never ridden into Fort Worth, he would still be here. It was as if some obscure force had been heading him toward this spot for more than a year. He noted, too, as he glanced over these cattle, an odd 77. He might still be a Seventy Seven rider he reflected, if Mark Duffy had not been

a wanton bully in a region where there was no law save that enforced by Colonel Colt.

"Yes, I seemed bound to land here, anywhere," Rock thought, "whether I came with the Seventy Seven or on my own. I suppose that's just chance."

Blind, blundering chance. Very likely. Yet chance might be a maker of secret patterns, Rock reflected, when he had put ten miles between himself and the Marias. The far-rolling land seemed to carry only cattle with the Maltese Cross and few of those. For here he dropped into a low hollow, and on top of the next small lift in the plains he rode into three riders, one of whom was a woman.

Rock had keen eyes. Moreover, since that meeting with Elmer Duffy he was acutely conscious of his newly acquired identity. Thus he marked instantly the brands of the horses. Two were Maltese Cross stock, the other, bestridden by a youth of twenty or less, carried Nona Parke's brand on his left shoulder. His rider was a blue-eyed slender boy, with a smile that showed fine white teeth when he laid his eyes on Rock.

"Hello, Doc, old boy," he said. "How's the ranch an' the family and everythin'?"

"Same as usual," Rock answered genially. "What you expect?"

They had reined up, facing each other. The second man nodded and grunted a brief, "Howdy." The girl stared at Rock with frank interest, as he lifted his hat. Her expression wasn't lost on him. He wondered if he were expected to know her well, in his assumed identity. In the same breath he wondered if a more complete contrast to Nona Parke could have materialized out of those silent plains. She was a very beautiful creature, indeed. It was hot, and she had taken off her hat to fan her face. Her hair was a tawny yellow. A perfect mouth with a dimple at one corner fitted in a face that would have been uncommon anywhere. Curiously, with that yellow hair she had black eyebrows and eyelashes. And her eyes were the deep blue, almost purple, of mountains far on the horizon. To complete the picture more effectually her split riding skirt was of green corduroy, and she sat atop of a saddle that was a masterpiece of hand-carved leather, with hammered-silver trimmings. It was not the first time Rock had seen the daughters of cattle kings heralding their rank by the elaborate beauty of their gear. He made a lightning guess at her identity and wondered why she was there, riding on round-up. She seemed to know him, too. There was a curious sort of expectancy about her that Rock wondered at.

However, he took all this in at a glance, in a breath. He said to the boy on the Parke horse:

"Where's the outfit?"

"Back on White Springs, a coupla miles. You might as well come along to camp with us, Doc. It's time to eat, an' you're a long way from home."

"Guess I will." Rock was indeed ready to approach any chuck wagon thankfully. It was eleven, and he had breakfasted at five.

They swung their horses away in a lope, four abreast. What the deuce was this Parke rider's name, Rock wondered? He should have been primed for this. Nona might have told him he would possibly come across the Maltese Cross round-up. This must be her "rep."

And he was likewise unprepared for the girl's direct attack. Rock rode on the outside, the girl next. She looked at him sidewise and said without a smile, with even a trace of resentment:

"You must be awful busy these days. You haven't wandered around our way for over two weeks."

"I'm working for a boss that don't believe in holidays," he parried.

"I'd pick an easier boss," she said. "Nona never lets the grass grow under anybody's feet, that I've noticed. Sometimes I wish I had some of her energetic style."

"If you're suffering from lack of ambish," Rock said, merely to make conversation, "how'd you get so far from home on a hot day?"

"Oh, Buck was in at the home ranch yesterday, and I rode back with him. Took a notion to see the round-up. I think I'll go home this afternoon."

"Say, where'd you get that ridin' rig, Doc?" the young man asked. He craned

his neck, staring with real admiration, and again Rock felt himself involved in a mesh of pretense which almost tempted him to proclaim himself. But that, too, he evaded slightly. He *did* have a good riding rig. It hadn't occurred to him that it might occasion comment. But this youth, of course, knew Doc Martin's accustomed gear probably as well as he knew his own. Naturally he would be curious.

"Made a trade with a fellow the other day."

ROCK registered a mental note to cache Martin's saddle, bridle, and spurs as soon as he got home.

"I bet you gave him plenty to boot," the boy said anxiously. "You always were lucky. He musta been broke an' needed the mazuma."

"I expect he was," Rock agreed.

Again the girl's lips parted to speak, and again the boy interrupted. Rock out of one corner of his eye detected a shade of annoyance cross her alluring face. He wondered.

"How's Nona an' the kid?"

"Fine." Rock informed him. "I left her riding down to Vieux's after that dark-complected nurse girl."

"Are you going back home to-night?" the girl asked abruptly.

"I'd tell a man," Rock said. "As soon as I do business with the chuck pile, I'm riding. I'm supposed to be back by three, and I'll certainly have to burn the earth to make it."

"You won't lose your job if you don't."

"Well, if I do, I know where I can get another one," Rock said lightly. "But I aim to be on time."

"Him lose his job!" the TL rider scoffed. "You couldn't pry him lose from that job with a crowbar. Now don't shoot," he begged in mock fear. "You know you got a snap, compared to ridin' round-up with the Maltese Cross—or any other gosh-danged cow outfit. I'm goin' to put up a powerful strong talk to Nona to send you on beef round-up this fall an' let me be ranch boss for a rest."

"You got my permission," Rock said a little tartly. These personalities irked him. "I'll be tickled to death if you do."

He didn't know what there was in his words, or tone, perhaps, to make the boy stare at him doubtfully, and the yellow-haired girl to smile with a knowing twinkle in her eyes, as if she shared some secret understanding with him.

By then they were loping swiftly into a saucerlike depression in the plains, in the midst of which a large day herd grazed under the eye of four riders, and the saddle bunch was a compact mass by the round-up tents.

Rock left his horse standing on the reins. The others turned their mounts loose. The Cross riders were squatted about the chuck wagon in tailor-fashion attitudes, loaded plates in their laps. Rock followed the other three to the pile of dishes beside the row of Dutch ovens in the cook's domain. Some of the men looked up, nodded and called him by name. And, as Rock turned the end of the wagon, he came face to face with a man holding a cup of coffee in one hand—a man who stared at him with a queer, bright glint in a pair of agate-gray eyes, a look on his face which Rock interpreted as sheer incredulity.

He was a tall man, a well-built, good-looking individual, somewhat past thirty, Rock guessed. His clothing was rather better than the average range man wore. Neither his size nor his looks nor his dress escaped Rock's scrutiny, but he was chiefly struck by that momentary expression.

And the fellow knew Rock. He grunted: "Hello, Martin."

"Hello," Rock said indifferently. Then, as much on impulse as with a definite purpose, he continued with a slight grin: "You seem kinda surprised to see me."

Again that bright glint in the eyes, and a flash of color surged up under the tan, as if the words stirred him. Rock didn't stop to pry into that peculiar manifestation of a disturbed ego. He was hungry. Also, he was sensible and reasonably cautious. He felt some undercurrent of feeling that had to do with Doc Martin. Between the vivacious blonde and this brow-wrinkling stockman, Rock surmised

that posing as Doc could easily involve him in far more than he had bargained for.

SO he filled his plate and busied himself with his food. No one tarried to converse. As each rider finished eating, he arose, roped a fresh horse out of the *remuda,* and saddled. The girl and the other two riders ate in silence. From the corner of one eye Rock could see the girl occasionally glance at him, as if she were curious or tentatively expectant. He couldn't tell what was in her mind. He was going it blind. He didn't know a soul whom he was supposed to know. That amused him a little—troubled him a little. The quicker he got on his way the better. He had got a little information out of this visit, though. He heard one of the riders address the big, well-dressed man as "Buck." He heard him issue crisp orders about relieving the day herders. Old Uncle Bill Sayre's words floated through his mind: "Buck Walters is young, ambitious and high-handed with men an' fond of women. He dresses flash. A smart cowman."

That was Buck Walters, the range-functioning executor of the Maltese Cross estate. And there was some distaste in Buck Walters for Doc Martin. More wheels within wheels. Rock wondered if this tawny-haired girl could be the daughter of the deceased Snell. Probably. That didn't matter. But it might matter a good deal to him if there was any occasion for bad blood between Walters and the dead man into whose boots he, Rock, had stepped.

He finished and rose.

"Well, people," said Rock, "I'll be like the beggar, eat and run. I have a long way to go."

"Tell Nona to ride over to see me," the girl said politely, but with no particular warmth. "I'll be at the ranch most of the summer."

"Sure," Rock said laconically. "So long."

He was a trifle relieved when he got clear of that camp. He had plenty of food for thought, as he covered the miles between White Springs and the Marias. Stepping out of his own boots into those of a dead man seemed to have potential complications. When Rock pulled up on the brink of the valley, he had just about made up his mind that he would be himself. Or, he reflected, he could turn his back on Nona Parke and the TL, and the curious atmosphere of mystery that seemed to envelope that ranch on the Marias. He was a capable stock hand. He could probably work for the Maltese Cross and learn all he wanted to know under his own name. Why burden himself with a dead man's feud, even if the dead man might have been his brother?

As far as Nona Parke went, one rider was as good as another to her. And Rock had no intention of remaining always merely a good stock hand. Other men had started at the bottom and gained independence. No reason why he should not do the same. Land and cattle were substantial possessions. Cattle could be bought. From a small nucleus they grew and multiplied. Land could be had here in the Northwest for the taking. Why should he commit himself to a dead man's feuds and a haughty young woman's personal interests? For a monthly wage? He could get that anywhere. He could probably go to work for the Maltese Cross, without question and in his own identity.

Rock, looking from the high rim down on the silver band of the Marias, on the weather-bleached log buildings, asked himself why he should not ride this range and fulfill his promise to an uneasy man in Texas in his own fashion? Why shouldn't he work for some outfit where there were neither women to complicate life, nor enemies save such as he might make for himself?

The answer to that, he decided at last, must be that one job was as good as another, and that somehow, for all her passionate independence, Nona Parke needed him. There was a peculiar persuasiveness about that imperious young woman. Rock could easily understand why men fell in love with her, desired her greatly, and were moved to serve her if they could. She seemed to generate that sort of impulse in a man's breast. Rock felt it; knew he felt it, without any trace of sentimentalism involved. He

could smile at the idea of being in love with her. Yet some time he might be. He was no different from other men. She had made a profound impression on him. He knew that and did not attempt to shut his eyes to the truth. All these things, sinister and puzzling, of which her dead rider seemed the focus, might be of little consequence, after all. As far as he was concerned, every one simply insisted on taking him for a man who was dead. That had a comical aspect to Rock.

HE stared with a speculative interest at the Parke ranch lying in the sunlight beside that shining river. Nona Parke had the right idea. She had the pick of a beautiful valley, eight hundred cattle, and the brains and equipment to handle them. That outfit would make a fortune for her and Betty. Yet it was a man's job.

"She's an up-and-coming little devil," Rock said to himself. "Mind like a steel trap. Hard as nails. A man would never be anything more than an incident to her."

Thus Rock unconsciously safeguarded his emotions against disaster. He was neither a fool nor a fish. He liked Nona Parke. He had liked her the moment he looked into the gray pools of her troubled eyes. But he wouldn't like her too well. No; that would be unwise. She had warned him. But he could work for her. Her wages were as good as any—better, indeed, by ten dollars a month. And if there should be trouble in the offing—— Rock shrugged his shoulders. Bridge crossing in due time.

A moon-faced, dark-haired girl of sixteen was puttering around in the kitchen when Rock walked up to the house. Betty came flying to meet him, and Rock swung her to the ceiling two or three times, while she shrieked exultantly.

"Where's Miss Parke?" he asked the half-breed girl.

"Workin' in the garden."

"Where the dickens is the garden?" Rock thought, but he didn't ask. He went forth to see.

Ultimately he found it, by skirting the brushy bank of the river to the westward beyond the spring. Its overflow watered a plot of half an acre, fenced and cultivated. Rich black loam bore patches of vegetables, all the staple varieties, a few watermelon vines, and cornstalks as tall as a man. In the middle of this, Nona was on her knees, stripping green peas off a tangle of vines.

"Did Mary give you your dinner?" she asked.

"I struck the Maltese Cross round-up about eleven and ate with them," he told her.

"Oh! Did you see Charlie Shaw?" she asked. "Did he say whether they picked up much of my stuff on Milk River?"

"Charlie Shaw is the name of that kid riding for you, eh? Well, I saw him, but he didn't say much about cattle. And I didn't ask. I had to step soft around that outfit. I don't know any of these fellows, you see, and they all persist in taking me for Doc Martin. I suppose I'd have a deuce of a time persuading anybody around here that I wasn't."

"It's funny. I keep thinking of you as Doc, myself. You're really quite different, I think," she replied thoughtfully. "Somehow, I can't think of Doc as being dead. Yet he is."

"Very much so," Rock answered dryly. "And I'm myself, alive, and I wish to stay so. I've been wondering if posing as your man, Doc, is, after all, a wise thing for me to do. What do you think?"

"You don't have to," she said quickly. "I'm sure Elmer Duffy would be relieved to know you aren't Doc Martin."

"I don't know about that," Rock mused. "Elmer might have just as much to brood over if he knew who I really am."

"Why so?" she asked point-blank.

Rock didn't question the impulse to tell her. His instinct to be himself was strong. The pose he had taken with Duffy that morning had arisen from mixed motives. He wasn't sure he wanted to carry on along those lines. And he most assuredly didn't want Nona Parke to think him actuated by any quixotic idea of functioning as her protector, after her declarations on that subject.

SO he told her concisely why Elmer Duffy might think a feud with Rock Holloway a sacred duty to a dead brother. Nona looked at him with wondering eyes and an expression on her face that troubled Rock, and finally moved him to protest.

"Hang it," he said irritably. "You needn't look as if I'd confessed to some diabolical murder. Mark Duffy was as hard as they make 'em. He was running it rough on an inoffensive little man who happens to be my friend. I *had* to interfere. And Mark knew I'd interfere. He brought it on himself. If I hadn't killed him he would have killed me. That's what he was looking for."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking that at all," she said earnestly. "Of course, you were quite justified. I was just thinking that this explains why Elmer always hated Doc. Doc told me so. He felt it. I suppose it was the resemblance. I don't see, now, so far as trouble with Elmer is concerned, that it matters much whether you pass as yourself or Doc Martin. You'd have to watch out for Elmer Duffy in either case. I couldn't trust that man as far as I could throw a bull by the tail."

"Nice estimate of a man that's in love with you," Rock chuckled. "You're a little bit afraid of Elmer, aren't you?"

"No," she declared. "But he's brutal at heart. He's the kind that broods on little things till they get big in his own mind. He would do anything he wanted if he was sure he could get away with it. And he would like to run both me and my ranch."

"Powerful description," Rock commented. "Still it sort of fits Elmer—all the Duffys, more or less. They're inclined to be more aggressive than they ought. Well, I guess it doesn't make much difference if I do pass as Doc. I'm not trying to put anything over on anybody doing that. Now——"

He went on to tell her about meeting the girl at the Maltese Cross. He described the man who had glared at him and puzzled him by his attitude, but he didn't tell Nona this latter detail. He merely wanted to know who was who.

"That was Buck Walters, range foreman of the Maltese Cross," she confirmed Rock's guess.

"Did Doc Martin ever have any sort of run-in with him?" he asked.

"Heavens, no! I would certainly have heard of it if he had. Why?"

"Oh, he seemed rather stand-offish, that's all," Rock answered indifferently.

"Buck thinks rather highly of himself," Nona told him. "He's in charge of a big outfit. The Maltese Cross is an estate, and he is one of the administrators. He's pretty high-handed. There are men in this country who don't like him much. But I don't think Doc cared two whoops, one way or the other. Probably Buck was thinking about something."

"Very likely. And who is the yellow-haired *dulce?*"

"Alice Snell. She and a brother inherit the whole Maltese Cross outfit when the boy comes of age."

"She told me to tell you to ride down to see her—that she'd be at the ranch all summer." Thus Rock delivered the message. "I didn't hardly know what she was talking about."

"Alice never does talk about anything much, although she talks a lot," Nona said coolly. "Her long suit is getting lots of attention."

"Well, I expect she gets it," Rock ventured. "She's good looking. Heiress to a fortune in cows. She ought to be popular."

"She is," Nona said—"especially with Buck Walters."

"Oh! And is Buck popular with her?" Rock asked with more than mere curiosity. This was an item that might be useful in the task of sizing up Buck Walters and his way with the Maltese Cross.

"She detests him, so she says," Nona murmured.

"Then why does she stick around up here in this forsaken country, when she doesn't have to?"

"You might ask her," Nona replied.

Rock had squatted on his heels, picking pods off the vines and chucking them by handfuls into the pan.

"I might, at that," he agreed, "when I have a chance."

"Alice is very ornamental," Nona Parke continued thoughtfully. "But quite useless, except to look at. She gives me a pain sometimes, although I like her well enough."

"You're not very hard to look at yourself, it happens," Rock told her deliberately. "And I don't suppose you object to being ornamental as well as very useful and practical."

Nona looked at him critically.

"Don't be silly," she warned.

"Don't intend to be." Rock grinned. "I never did take life very seriously. I sure don't aspire to begin the minute I find myself working for you. I'm a poor but honest youth, with my way to make in the world. Is it silly for a man to admire a woman—any woman?"

"I wish you'd pull those weeds out of that lettuce patch," she said, changing the subject abruptly. "They grow so quickly. I'm always at these infernal weeds. After you get that done, roll up your bed and bring it to the house. There's lots of room."

ROCK performed the weeding in half an hour. If another had asked him to do that, he would probably have told him to go hire a gardener, he reflected.

"She'll have me baking bread and working the churn next," he chuckled to himself. "Trust Miss Nona Parke to get her money's worth out of the hired man."

That was an exaggeration. Nona wasn't a driver. Within a week Rock found himself doing various jobs about the ranch because he saw that they needed doing, not because she told him to do them. He rode more or less every day, and most of the time Nona rode with him. It was easier, if less exciting and glamorous, than round-up. He had a comfortable bed in a big room, with a huge stone fireplace, which had been the bunk room when the TL had a dozen riders and cattle by the thousand. Between Nona and the half-breed girl, the vegetable garden and the two milch cows, Rock ate better food than had fallen to his lot since he was at school on the Atlantic seaboard.

It was pleasant to live there, pleasant to ride range with this dark-haired, competent young person, who could be brusque and curt when she chose, and self-sufficient at all times. They went clattering away from the ranch in the cool of morning. They combed far coulee heads, hidden springs, river bottoms above and below the ranch. Rock was never quite sure what the girl looked for in these long rides. The only actual stock work they did was to throw back straggling bunches that grazed beyond certain limits. That, as Rock understood the range business, was not important. He concluded that Nona simply had a passion for looking over her possessions. He had seen men like that—men who owned longhorns by the tens of thousands.

But she seemed to be looking for something. Rock merely surmised that. For a week after he happened on the Maltese Cross, they covered the surrounding country, day by day. Nona talked very little. She rode like a man, easily, carelessly, a component part of her mount. She could handle a rope with fair skill There was strength in her slender arms, an amazing endurance in her slim body. She knew her stock, bunch by bunch—leader cows and oddly marked bulls. She knew where to find certain little herds. It was as if she watched over them jealously, as a miser gloats over his hoard. There was something in that Rock couldn't fathom. Branded cattle on a recognized range were safer than bonds in a steel safe, as a rule. Sometimes there were exceptions to that rule. If there was such an exception here, Nona never breathed it, and the riders of a cow outfit were usually the first to be warned if there was any suspicion of rustling in the air. And Rock would not ask. But he wondered. He began to grow a little uneasy, too. He had accepted pay from Uncle Bill Sayre to secure certain information. He was on the ground, but he was not learning much about the Maltese Cross and Buck Walters. He had grown personally curious about Buck Walters, too, since meeting him. He didn't like the man. Rock wasn't given to sudden likes and dislikes. Nevertheless, on that one eye-to-eye clash he disliked Buck

Walters—a much more active feeling than he could muster up either for or against Elmer Duffy, for instance.

Rock had plenty of time for these mental conjectures. They were like mariners stranded on an island in mid-ocean—himself, Nona Parke, the half-breed girl, and Baby Betty. No riders passed. Elmer Duffy did not come again. The sun rose, swung in a hot arc across a sapphire sky, and sank behind the far-off Rockies. They rode, rested, and slept, while the stars twinkled in a cool canopy, and the frogs along the Marias croaked antiphony to the soprano of a myriad of unseen crickets in the grass.

Then one day Rock rode alone on the benches to the North. When he splashed through the shallows and came to the corrals late in the afternoon, there was a bay horse in the stable, and Charlie Shaw sat talking to Nona in the shade of the porch.

CHAPTER VIII.

GETTING DOWN TO CASES.

UNDER his ready laugh and effervescent smile, Charlie Shaw gave the impression of entire competence. The downright self-reliance demanded by the range of all who would pass muster in its service, was quite apparent to Rock. In a cow camp a man was judged by the way he carried himself, and what he could do, rather than his years. Charlie had been giving Nona an account of things on round-up. Apparently he had just ridden in. He nodded to Rock and went on with his talk. Rock sat down beside them to roll a cigarette.

"I know within a dozen head how many unbranded calves are scattered around here," Nona said finally. "We had an open winter. We should have at least seventy or eighty more calves than last year. Yet the tally is less."

"The range is covered to the last fringe," Charlie stated. "They'll make a few more rides, but they won't show much. I don't savvy it either, Nona, but that's the count."

"How did the Cross come out on their calf crop?" she inquired.

"Nobody knows but Buck. I wouldn't ask *him.*"

The girl stared at the porch floor for a second, frowning.

"I don't understand it," she said. "There ought to be more calves than that."

Charlie didn't comment. After a minute she got up and went inside. Shaw looked at Rock smoking in silence.

"Say, old-timer," he remarked abruptly, but in a discreet undertone, "there's some whisperin' about you in the Maltese Cross outfit."

"Yes?" Rock became alert. "What do they whisper? And who's whispering?"

"I don't know who started it," Charlie said. "I heard it the first day you rode in with me and Alice Snell and Joe Bishop. I don't like to repeat gabble, but seems to me you'd oughto know."

"Shoot!" Rock smiled.

"It's just a whisper," Charlie mumbled seriously. "Nobody said a word to me direct. I just overheard here and there. They say you're rustlin'."

"*Me*—rustling?" Rock perked up in astonishment. For the moment he forgot his assumed identity. The idea was so utterly ludicrous. He laughed. Recollection sobered him. This must be more Martin history.

"Yeah. Got you hooked up with them Burris boys over behind the Goosebill," Charlie murmured. "Talkin' about rawhide neckties. Some of them Texicans in Buck's crew are bad hombres, Doc."

Rock knitted his brows. He hadn't heard before of the Burris boys. The Goosebill he had seen only as an odd-shaped hill standing blue on the south-western sky line, halfway between the Marias and Fort Benton.

"Well, you reckon I've been draggin' the long rope in my spare time and should be a candidate for their kind attentions?" he asked.

Shaw snorted.

"I might 'a' known you'd make a joke of it," he complained.

"I wonder who wants to get me so bad as that?" Rock said under his breath.

"Buck Walters, of course," Charlie returned promptly. "Who else? Just like his damn left-hand ways. Didn't you never figure he'd shoot at you over some-

body else's shoulder? As a matter of fact, I'm satisfied Buck aims to get you."

"Why?"

"Say, you know why well enough," Charlie blurted irritably. "You been flirtin' with the undertaker all spring. You ain't a fool."

"You mean Alice Snell?" Rock hazarded a guess.

"Sure." Charlie looked at him out of narrowed eyes, the bright blue of which held a peculiar gleam, whether of friendship or disapproval Rock could not tell from the boy's otherwise impassive face. No; not disapproval; merely the recollection of something unpleasant, either in the past or threatening in the future. This capable youngster was by no means an open book. "I wouldn't yeep, only to give you a hint to step soft. Buck's mean. He'll make trouble. Nona's had a hard enough row to hoe. Long as we draw wages from her, we got to do the best we can for her. The TL ain't so popular as it used to be with the Maltese Cross."

"Account of me?" Rock inquired.

"I don't know," Charlie said frankly. "I've told you all I know. That talk about rustlin' an' hangin' parties was *meant* for me to hear. Savvy?"

ROCK didn't, but he nodded. His brows wrinkled deeply. The solution finally came to him. To make a decision with him was to act.

"Do you recollect asking me where I got that riding rig?" he asked.

"Sure. Why?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. Meantime I want to show you something." He rose. "Come on in!"

Charlie followed him into the kitchen.

"Will you open up that room?" Rock asked Nona. "The one where that stuff is we put away?"

"Why——" She stopped short. Something on the faces of the two men checked the question on her lips. Silently she took a key out of a drawer and walked into the hall, the narrow passage that divided the house. She opened a door—the only locked door in all those log-walled rooms.

"You better come in," Rock said. "Charlie's got to know. You better tell him."

A window from the south let sunlight into the room. A bed long unslept in stood against one wall. On the floor lay a saddle, bridle, a pair of black, Angora-faced chaps, and a pair of silver-inlaid spurs. Beside them a pair of worn riding boots, a brown calfskin belt full of .45 cartridges, and in the holster a plain, black-handled Colt. On a nail above hung a man's felt hat. A canvas war bag lay across a chair, stuffed with the dead man's belongings.

Rock pointed to the saddle. On the yellow leather a stain lay black like dried paint.

"Do you know that rig?" he asked. "Do you see that smear? That's blood."

"Well?" The boy looked at the dead man's outfit in puzzled wonder. He looked at Nona Parke and back again at Rock. "Well?" he repeated. "I see it. What's it all about?"

"Am I Doc Martin or not?" Rock asked softly.

"Are you crazy?" Charlie demanded. "What are you getting at? Who do you think you are? Have you gone loco?"

"Tell him," Rock commanded the girl.

"Doc is dead," she whispered. "He was shot from ambush a week ago yesterday."

Nona Parke's cow-puncher looked at her unbelievingly. She gave him details, chapter and verse, describing that tragic afternoon, Rock's coming, and the burial at sunrise.

"That's all," she said wearily. "You can see his grave beside dad and mamma."

"Poor old Doc," Shaw muttered. He looked at Rock with new interest. "I wouldn't 'a' believed it if *she* hadn't told me. You're the dead spit of him. You talk like him. Only, you seemed a little different, some way, from what Doc used to be."

"Come on into the bunk room," Rock invited. "Let's try to get down to cases."

"Has anything happened?" Nona asked sharply.

"Gosh, no," Rock equivocated. "Nothing at all. I wanted this kid to know

how things stand, though. I couldn't go on and not tip my hand, for fear he'd think there was something queer about me."

"Probably it's best," Nona agreed. "Supper will be ready in a few minutes. Charlie has to ride back to the round-up. I'll call you."

"All right."

THEY turned out of the hall into the huge room where Rock slept. Side by side, they sat on a bed that seemed lost in that empty space, where forgotten riders had clanked their spurs and joked and told stories through long winter nights, while the fireplace roared.

"Now you see where I stand," Rock said. "I'm having a dead man's troubles wished on me. Tell me just how Doc Martin stood with Alice Snell, and why Buck Walters had his knife out for Doc."

"That's simple," the boy answered. "This blond *dulce* was soft on Doc—crazy about him. I don't blame you. Darn it, I keep thinkin' of you as Doc Martin. I can't get it that he's cashed in."

"You can see how hard it is for me to make any one believe I'm *not* Doc," Rock observed.

"Hell, yes. They'd have to have it *proved*. They'd laugh and think you were trying to put it over 'em."

"Were you and Doc friends?" Rock asked. He wanted to know where this boy stood.

"I liked Doc," the boy said simply. "He showed me lots of things. He was kinda high-handed with anybody he didn't like. But he was darned good to me. Doc was a white man."

"No chance of him being mixed up in anything underhanded?"

Charlie Shaw snorted disdainfully, which was explicit enough answer for Rock.

"Go on, tell me about Alice Snell and Doc—and Buck Walters," he prompted.

"Buck's the fly in the ointment." Charlie frowned. "As I said, I don't blame Doc for playin' up to Alice. She's a mighty sweet-lookin' girl. Only——"

"I gathered somehow," Rock filled in the pause, "that the late Doc was pretty sweet on Nona Parke. So much so, that he was jealous of any man that paid her much attention, and that he got himself in wrong with Elmer Duffy over that."

"Yeah, that's true. But Nona don't want nothin' of a man except that he be a good stock hand around her outfit. Sure, Doc thought a heap of her. So do I. But not the way he did. Even if he got to consolin' hisself with Alice, I expect he still felt like protectin' Nona from fellers like Duffy. Elmer ain't such a much. I'd be inclined to horn off fellers like Duffy, myself. An' *I'm* not stuck on Nona. Me 'n' Doc worked for her two years, off 'n' on. She's been like a sister to me. She's game as they make 'em. Darned few girls would have the nerve to run this one-horse show the way she's done. I'd rather have her for a boss than anybody I know."

There was a sincerity in this stumbling, embarrassed declaration that Rock admired. But he was still on the trail of the unknown, and he quizzed Shaw further.

"This Snell girl's of age. She's rich. I guess she's been spoiled. Always had her own way about anythin'. She come up here last summer, first time. Come back again this spring. Took a dickens of a shine to Doc and didn't hide it much. Everybody in the country knows it, except Nona. She ain't got eyes nor ears for anything but her ranch and her cattle. An' Buck Walters is crazy about this Snell girl, himself, though she has no use for him. She told Doc once that she'd can Buck off the Maltese Cross if her dad hadn't made him an administrator of his will. I don't know if there was anythin' definite between Doc an' Alice. I do know Buck has turned to hatin' you—Doc I mean—like poison, lately. His eyes burn whenever your name comes up. That's why I said he aims to get you—get Doc. Darn it, I keep gettin' you all mixed up."

"Better go on thinkin' of me as Doc Martin," Rock suggested, "until something breaks. I'm interested in this. Listen, now, Charlie: Do you remember where the Maltese Cross was a week ago yesterday—the day Doc was shot? Were they in easy reach of the Marias? Do

you recollect if Buck Walters was missing that afternoon?"

"I know where we were," Charlie said. "Couldn't say for sure whether Buck was early or late off circle that afternoon. Anyhow, I'm here to tell you that he wouldn't be likely to do his own bushwhackin'. Too foxy for that. He's got at least half a dozen riders in his outfit that'd kill a man for two bits—especially if Buck told 'em to."

"Got something on 'em, I suppose," Rock suggested.

"Maybe; I don't know. I know he's got some hard citizens in his crew. None of 'em has made a crooked move since they come to Montana, but they got 'Killer' written all over 'em. There's two fellers that never ride with the round-up. They hang around the home ranch all the time, foolin' with horses. They got a name down South. A rider in Benton told me their history last fall."

"I see. Buck Walters has a lot of hard pills on his pay roll." Rock nodded. "Not because they're such good range hands, eh? Most cow-punchers aren't killers—not by choice or for money. Now, why do you reckon he keeps men like that around, Charlie?"

But all Shaw could answer was a shake of his head and a muttered, "Search *me*."

"It would sort of seem as if Buck kept a crowd around that would burn powder free and easy, if the play came up," Rock mused. "Consequently, he must expect something to break. What would it likely be? A cow outfit don't have to fight for nothin' in this country."

And again Charlie Shaw shook his blond, youthful head.

"He wouldn't surround himself with bad men from Bitter Creek, waiting for their night to howl, just to deal with Doc Martin for shining up to a girl he has his mind on."

"No; because he brought most of his crowd up from the South with him," Charlie answered. "But he'll put your light out, just the same, if he gets a good chance."

"Doc Martin has already had his light put out," Rock said.

"I keep forgettin'," the boy muttered. "If I was you I'd advertise that fact pronto. It ain't healthy to be in Doc Martin's shoes around here."

"I have a notion to fill 'em for a while, just to see what comes of it," Rock said slowly. "You're sure Buck Walters had it in for Doc over this girl—and nothing else?"

"Nothing else that *I* know of," Shaw said.

Something in the boy's tone made that denial unconvincing and warned Rock that there was more in Charlie Shaw's mind than he would utter.

"Do you suppose there was something that Doc Martin knew or had found out or suspected, that would make Buck want him out of the way?"

Shaw stared at Rock for a minute, as if trying to fathom his purpose—as if he were suspicious of subtleties beyond his understanding.

"I can't answer for what Doc might have known. All I know is that I'm a Parke rider, and I don't aim to horn into nothin' that don't concern me nor the outfit I ride for—nor my friends."

"I'm a TL rider, too," Rock said pointedly. "I aim to be as good a hand, if not better, to the outfit I work for as any rider that ever forked a cayuse. Even if you don't know anything positive, Charlie, you could tell me what you *think* about Buck Walters."

"I might tell you when I know you better," the boy said bluntly. "A man that wags his tongue too free is a fool. I've told you what I know. It ain't important what I *think*."

Rock gave him credit for a wisdom beyond his years and did not press the matter. He had taken a liking to this slender, smiling youth. Charlie was good stuff—that curious mixture of which all good range men were made—loyalty, courage and a rude dignity. And he was damnably efficient. The boy had an eye like an eagle and a discerning, practical mind. He knew or suspected far more than he would ever admit to any one he didn't know inside out and could trust implicitly. He would have told things to Doc Martin that he would only reveal to Rock Holloway when Rock had demonstrated that he was all wool and a yard wide.

Nona called them presently to supper. They ate, then smoked a cigarette on the porch. Charlie Shaw strolled off to the stable, mounted and rode away to rejoin the Maltese Cross. While Rock sat on the edge of the porch, pondering on what he had learned, Nona joined him. She leaned against a log pillar, looking absently out across the river flats. Rock watched her. She was so young, so utterly free from self-consciousness, so intent upon her own purposes. Something about her warmed his heart. It wasn't beauty, as Alice Snell was beautiful. It was an air, an atmosphere, something indefinable, subtle, but very powerful, like the invisible force in a bit of bent steel that draws other bits of steel to itself.

"I want you to take a wagon and go to Fort Benton to-morrow," she said abruptly, "and see if you can hire a couple of men for haying. We've got to get up a couple of hundred tons of hay for next winter."

Rock smiled. He had been brooding over life and death, treachery and broken faith, loyalty in unexpected phases, the mystery of passion that bred hatred and bloody clashes. Nona had been thinking of hay for her stock.

Each to his own thoughts. He envied her a little and admired her for that simplicity, the directness of her faith and works. His own mental groping and convolutions would have distressed her, no doubt.

CHAPTER IX.

ORDERED SOUTH.

BY midforenoon Rock had the striking contour of the Goosebill breaking the sky line far on his right. As the team jogged with rattling wagon wheels on a trail that was no more than two shallow ruts in the grassy plateau, his mind dwelt on the Burris boys—two unsavory brothers, with a ranch in a tangle of ravines behind that strange hump on the flat face of Montana. Charlie had sketched them for his benefit. They were suspected and had been for some time. They had a few cattle, and their herd seemed to increase more rapidly than cows naturally breed. No mavericks—unbranded yearlings; hence the property of whosoever first got his irons on them—were ever found on their range. They were supposed to ride with a long rope, lifting the odd calf here and there. It was only a matter of time, Charlie declared, before some big outfit would deal with them, as the feudal barons dealt with miscreants within their demesnes.

And Doc Martin's name was being coupled with these two in the Maltese Cross camp. Rock's lip curled. When a man with power in his hands wanted another man out of the way, he would go to great lengths. Rock had observed the workings of such sinister intent in his native State. He kept thinking about Uncle Bill Sayre's estimate of Buck Walters.

He was still more or less revolving this in his mind, when he came to the brow of the steep bank that slanted sharply down to Fort Benton. This one-time seat of the Northwest Fur Company was the oldest settlement in the Territory, a compact unit of adobe and log and frame dwellings, when the first gold was found at Bannack and Virginia City, and when the eager miners looted the treasure of Last Chance Gulch. Still the head of navigation on the Missouri River, it had become the pivotal point of the cow business in northern Montana, which had supplanted gold, as gold had supplanted furs, as a road to fortune.

A conglomeration of buildings stood by the bank of the wide, swift river. Away southward loomed a mountain range. The Bear Paws stood blue, fifty miles east. A ferry plied from shore to shore, for the convenience of horsemen, teams and three-wagon freight outfits hauling supplies to the Judith Basin. The Grand Union Hotel loomed big in the town, a great square building in a patch of green grass, set off from Main Street, the single street which formed the business heart of the town. A singularly attractive spot, it had had its historic day. Buffalo had swarmed in its dooryard not so long before. The Blackfeet and the Crows had fought each other there and joined forces to fight the white man. In the spring at high water the stern-wheel steamers from St. Louis laid their flat bows against the clay bank and unloaded enormous cargoes of goods. Otherwise, since furs and

gold no longer dominated the Northwest, Fort Benton lived a placid, uneventful day-to-day existence, except when round-ups came that way, and the cowboys took the town.

Yet there was life in it. The exciting scenes of a decade earlier arose on a small scale. And between these high lights business flourished. The fort was the hub of a great area, in which herds and settlers were taking root. It supported a permanent population of two hundred or more, stores, saloons and the Grand Union, which had housed miners, gamblers, military men, river pilots, rich and enterprising fur dealers, and was now headquarters for the cattle kings and their henchmen.

Rock put his team in a livery stable and registered at the Grand Union. He sought the bar, his parched throat craving St. Louis beer fresh off the ice.

In the doorway, between lobby and barroom, he halted to look. Anywhere between the Rockies and the Mississippi, between the Rio Grande and the Canada line, a range rider might meet a man whom he knew. They were rolling stones, gathering moss in transit, contrary to the proverb. And Rock was not disappointed, although it would be wrong to say that he was pleased.

For he saw two men whom he recognized. They leaned on the bar at one end, deep in talk, glasses before them. They did not see him. Their backs were toward the doorway in which he stood. Their eyes were on each other, not on the broad mirror over the back bar, which showed Rock their faces.

One was Buck Walters; the other was Dave Wells, the Texan boss of the Wagon Wheel on Old Man River, north of the Canada line.

Rock drew back, unseen, sought a chair in the lobby, and sat down, with some food for thought. Here were two men, each of whom knew him quite well —one as Doc Martin, a Parke cow-puncher; while the other had employed him for nine months in his real identity. Fort Benton was small. He could not remain in that town over the night without meeting both, face to face. Which identity should he choose?

IT did not take Rock long to decide. He rose and made for the bar. This time he put his foot on the rail and made an inclusive sign to the bartender, after the custom of the country.

There were other men in the bar now. Walters and Wells looked up to see who was buying. A shadow, very faint, flitted across Buck Walters' face. He nodded, with a grunt. Wells grinned recognition and stuck out his hand.

"You got the best of me," Rock drawled. "But shake, anyway."

"I'd know your hide on a fence in hell," Wells declared. He was jovial, and his eyes were bright. He had been hoisting quite a few, Rock decided. Walters seemed coldly sober.

"Gosh, who do you think I am?" Rock asked. "Your long-lost brother or something?"

"Why, you're Rock Holloway, darn you!" Wells said bluntly. "I'd oughto know you. I paid you off less'n a month ago. Course, if you're layin' low for somethin'——" He paused significantly. Over his shoulder Rock marked the surprised attention of Buck Walters.

"If that is so, I sure must have a double," Rock said. "I been drawin' wages from the TL on the Marias River for goin' on two years, without a break. Does this Holloway fellow you speak of look so much like me, stranger?"

Wells looked him up and down in silence.

"If you ain't Rock Holloway, I'll eat my hat," he said deliberately.

"Let's see a man eat a Stetson for once," Rock said to the manager of the Maltese Cross. "Tell him who I am."

"Eat the hat, Dave," Walters said. "This feller never rode for you—not in this country. His name is Doc Martin. He rides for a lady rancher on my range. I know him as well as I know you."

Wells scratched his head.

"I need my sky piece to shed the rain," he said mildly. "Maybe the drinks are on me. If you ain't the feller I think you are, you certainly got a twin."

"I never had no brothers," Rock declared lightly and reached for his glass. "Never heard of anybody that looked like me. Well, here's luck."

That was that. He got away from the barroom in a few minutes.

Wells kept eying him. So did Walters. He felt that they were discussing him in discreet undertones. They did not include him in their conversation after that drink. Once out of there, Rock set about his business. He had no desire to paint the town. He went seeking casual labor. Luck rode with him. Within an hour he had located and hired two men—the only two souls in Fort Benton, he discovered, who needed jobs. He went back to the Grand Union for supper. In the dining room he saw Wells and Walters still together, seated at a table by themselves. He observed them later in the lobby, deep in cushioned chairs, cigars jutting rakishly from their lips.

Early in the evening Rock went up to his room. He had left the Marias at sunrise, and had jolted forty miles in a dead-axle wagon. He would hit the trail early in the morning, with the hay diggers, before they changed their mind and hired themselves to some one else. He needed sleep.

But he couldn't sleep. The imps of unrest propped his eyelids open. An hour of wakefulness made him fretful. His mind questioned ceaselessly. Could a man like Buck Walters deliberately set out to destroy another man merely because he was a rival for a girl's capricious affection? It didn't seem incentive enough. A man with as much on his hands as Walters, could scarcely afford petty feuds like that. Still——

Rock dressed again, drew on his boots, and tucked his gun inside the waistband of his trousers. He would stroll around Fort Benton for an hour or so. By that time he would be able to sleep.

A BATTERY of lighted windows faced the Missouri. Saloons with quaint names, "Last Chance," "The Eldorado," "Cowboy's Retreat," the "Bucket of Blood." They never closed. They were the day-and-night clubs of frontier citizens. Business did not thrive in all at once. It ebbed and flowed, as the tides of convivial fancy dictated. In one or two the bartender polished glasses industriously, while house dealers sat patiently playing solitaire on their idle gambling layouts. But in others there were happy gatherings, with faro and poker and crap games in full swing. Rock visited them all and chanced a dollar or two here and there. Eventually he retraced his steps toward the hotel.

In the glow of lamplight from the last saloon on the western end of the row, just where he had to cross the street to the Grand Union, sitting in its patch of grass and flanked by a few gnarly cottonwoods, Rock met Buck Walters and Dave Wells.

He nodded and passed them. A little prickly sensation troubled the back of his neck. It startled Rock, that involuntary sensation. Nervous about showing his back to a potential enemy? Nothing less. The realization almost amused Rock. Absurd! Nobody would shoot him down on a lighted street. Yet it was a curious feeling. Expectancy, a sense of danger, a conscious irritation at these psychological absurdities. He was not surprised when a voice behind him peremptorily called:

"Hey, Martin!"

He turned to see Buck Walters stalking toward him. Wells' long, thin figure showed plain in the glimmer of light. He stood on the edge of the plank walk, staring at the river.

"Got somethin' to say to you," Walters announced curtly.

"Shoot," Rock answered in the same tone.

Walters faced him, six feet away. His face, so far as Rock could see, told nothing. It was cold and impassive, like the face of a gambler who has learned how to make his feature a serviceable mask to hide what is in his mind. Buck's face was unreadable, but his words were plain.

"This country ain't healthy for you no more, Martin."

"Why?"

"Because I tell you it ain't."

"You're telling me doesn't make it so, does it?"

"I know. Talk's cheap. But this talk will be made good. You need a change of scenery. I'd go South if I was you—quick. You've been on the Marias too long."

"Why should I go South, if I don't happen to want to?" Rock asked.

"Because I tell you to."

Rock laughed. For the moment he was himself, Doc Martin forgotten, and he had never stepped aside an inch for any man in his life.

"You go plumb to hell," he said. "I'll be on the Marias when you are going down the road talking to yourself."

"All right," Buck told him very slowly. "This is the second time I've warned you. You know what I mean. You're huntin' trouble. You'll get it."

"I don't know what you mean," Rock retorted. "Say it in plain English. What's eating you?"

"I've said all I aimed to say," Walters declared. "You know what I mean, well enough."

"If I had never laid eyes on you before," Rock answered quietly, "you have said enough right now to justify me in going after you. Is that what you want? Do you want to lock horns with me? The light's good. Pop your whip, you skunk!"

Rock spat the epithet at him in a cold, collected fury. He meant precisely what he said. There was such an arrogant note in that cool intimidation. It filled him with a contemptuous anger for Buck Walters and all his ways and works and his veiled threats.

"You are just a little faster with a gun than I am," Walters replied, unruffled, the tempo of his voice unchanged. "I take no chances with you. I am not afraid of you, but I have too much at stake to risk it on gun play—by myself. If you do not leave this country, I will have you put away. You can gamble on that."

Rock took a single step toward him. Walters held both hands away from his sides. He smiled.

"If you so much as make a motion for that gun in your pants," he said in an undertone, "my friend Dave Wells will kill you before you get it out."

NOW Rock had made that step with the deliberate intention of slapping Walters' face. No Texan would take a blow and not retaliate. He couldn't live with himself if he did. But, "my friend, Dave Wells," made him hesitate. Rock's glance marked Wells, twenty feet away, a silent watchful figure. And it was more than a mere personal matter. Down in Fort Worth, Uncle Bill Sayre had joint responsibility with this man for the safeguarding of a fortune, and a medley of queer conclusions were leaping into Rock's agile brain. Reason, logic, evidence—all are excellent tools. Sometimes instinct or intuition, something more subtle than conscious intellectual processes, short-circuits and illuminates the truth with a mysterious flash of light. This man before him was afraid of Doc Martin. He was afraid of Doc, over and above any desire for possession of a woman—any passion of jealousy. There was too much at stake, he had said. Rock would have given much to know just what Buck Walters meant by the phrase. Doc Martin would have known. Rock didn't regret the surge of his own temper—the insult and challenge he had flung in this man's teeth. But he fell back on craft.

"Yes," he said. "I'd expect you to take no chance on an even break, with anybody or about anything. You'll play safe. You'll pass the word that I'm to be put away. You tried it already."

"Next time there will be no slip-up," Walters answered with cold determination. "You have said things you shouldn't have said. You have shot off your mouth at me. You have made a play at a fool of a girl that I aim to have for myself. I have a cinch, Martin, and I am goin' to play it for all it is worth."

"A cinch on me—or on the Maltese Cross?" Rock taunted.

"Both," Walters muttered, in a whisper like a hiss, the first emotion that had crept into his cold, malevolent voice.

"That's a damaging admission to make," Rock sneered.

"Not to you," Walters said flatly. "You'll never have a chance to use it. You are goin' to be snuffed out, if you don't pull out. I don't like you, for one thing; you are interferin' with my plans. for another."

"Those are pretty strong words, Buck," Rock told him soberly. "I'm not an easy man to get away with." He tried a new

tack. "If you are so dead anxious to get rid of me, why don't you try making it worth my while to remove myself?"

Walters stared at him.

"I ain't buyin' you," he said at last. "There's a cheaper way."

"All right, turn your wolf loose on me." Rock laughed. "See what'll happen. Now you run along, Mister Buck Walters, before I shoot an eye out of you for luck, you dirty scoundrel!"

Rock's anger burned anew, but he did not on that account lose his head. He abused Walters in a penetrating undertone, with malice, with intent, with venom that was partly real, partly simulated. But he might as well have offered abuse and insult to a stone. He could not stir Walters to any declaration, any admission that would have been a key to what Rock sought.

"Talk is cheap. I don't care what you say. It don't hurt me," the Maltese Cross boss told him stiffly. "I will shut your mouth for good, inside of forty-eight hours."

And with that he turned his back squarely on Rock and walked to rejoin his friend, Dave Wells, who stood there, ready to shoot in the name of friendship.

Rock stood staring at their twin backs sauntering past lighted saloons. He wouldn't have turned *his* back on Walters, after that. Which was a measure of his appraisal of the man's intent. Buck would make that threat good!

Rock shrugged his shoulders and strolled across the dusty street into the Grand Union. He was little the wiser for that encounter, except that he could look for reprisal, swift and deadly. He wondered calmly what form it would take.

Certainly he had stepped into a hornet's nest when he stepped into the dead cow-puncher's boots. Rock lay down on his bed with his clothes still on and stared up at the dusky ceiling. He was trying to put one and one together, to make a logical sum. It made no difference now, whether he was Doc Martin or Rock Holloway. After to-night Buck Walters was an enemy. And Rock reflected contemptuously that he would rather have him as an enemy than a friend.

He recalled again Uncle Bill Sayre's distrust of his fellow executor. Uncle Bill's instinct was sound, Rock felt sure in his own soul, now.

"I expect I am in for some exciting times," Rock murmured to himself. "Yes, sir, I shouldn't be surprised."

Ten minutes later he was sound asleep.

CHAPTER X.

THIRTY ANGRY MEN.

HE had been given forty-eight hours! When twenty-four of them had elapsed, Rock lay in his bunk at the TL, staring at roof beams dim above his head. The small noises of the night, insect voices, and the river's eternal whisper drifted through an open window. In an opposite corner the two hired men snored. Perhaps to-morrow something would happen. Perhaps not. Yet Rock could not take easy refuge behind the idea that Buck Walters' talk had been a bluff. Fire burned under that smoke. To-morrow would tell the tale.

Sunrise came and breakfast. Rock set the men at work in a meadow. The whir of the mower blades droned in the quiet valley. There were odds and ends of work that kept him busy until ten o'clock. While he attended to these jobs, he debated with himself whether to tell Nona Parke about his encounter with Buck. He concluded to keep it to himself. He wished that he had taken advantage of Dave Wells' presence to establish his own identity. Yet who the devil, he asked himself fretfully, would have expected Buck Walters to declare open war?

At the next opportunity, he decided, he would be himself and be done with a dead man's troubles. It had been altogether too easy to let people go on thinking he was Doc Martin. But there was no use worrying Nona Parke with that just now. She wasn't concerned. If anything happened to him, she could get other riders. And she was quite helpless to prevent anything happening. Rock didn't intend that anything should happen to him. He would be wary, watchful, his weapons always handy.

Something took him to the house.

Nona sat on the porch, darning stockings for Betty. She stopped Rock to mention the need of getting in more work horses, and while they talked, her eyes, looking past Rock, began to twinkle.

"Well," she said, "we are about to have a distinguished visitor. There's Alice Snell, and she's certainly burning the earth."

Rock turned. That range phrase for speed was apt. Alice came across the flat on a high gallop, her skirt flapping, bareheaded, and the gold of her hair like a halo in the sun. Her bay horse, when she jerked him to a stop, was lathered with sweat, his breast spotted with foam flecks. The girl's face struck Rock as being stricken with a terrible fear. She swung down. To Nona Parke she gave no greeting whatever. Her eyes never left Rock, except for one furtive, backward glance. And she cried with a hysterical tremble in her voice:

"Buck Walters and Elmer Duffy, with all the boys, are coming to hang you! For God's sake, Doc, get away from here before they come! I heard them talking it over, and I sneaked away from the ranch. They can't be far behind me."

So that was it. Rock's lip curled. But a vigilance committee from two big outfits didn't function without some excuse.

"What are they going to hang me for?" he asked.

Alice Snell put her hands on his arms, her white face turned up to his in a fever of anxiety.

"They say—they say," she gulped, "you're stealing cattle. They mean to hang you."

Rock laughed.

"They won't hang me," he said lightly. "Thank you, just the same, for coming to tell me of their kind intentions."

"Doc, please! There's a lot of them. Elmer Duffy and his crew as well as the Maltese Cross riders. You can't fight that bunch. Get a horse and ride fast."

Rock smiled and put Alice Snell's trembling, clutching hands off his own. But there was no mirth in that smile, for a squad of horsemen, a long line of them abreast, had swung around the point of brush, a quarter of a mile away. Nona Parke stared at the two of them in blank amazement. Alice didn't seem to know that she was there. She had no thought for anything but this man she took for Doc Martin. But out of one corner of her eye she marked the approaching riders and began to babble incoherently.

"Take her into the kitchen," Rock commanded Nona. "Stay in there. If she's right, there'll be a fuss. I can't run. And neither Buck Walters nor anybody else is going to hang me."

HE darted into the bunk room. His rifle hung above his bed, and he took it down. Out of his war bag he snatched two boxes of cartridges and stuffed them in his trousers pocket. He had on his belt gun. Both six-shooter and carbine were the same caliber. Then he went back to the door. The line of riders drew close, bobbing in unison, a long row. The sun made their silver ornaments gleam—white hats and black, red horses, blacks, bays, dun, and spotted—on they came, a brave sight. Thirty riders to confront a single miscreant. Rock wondered if Charlie Shaw rode with them, and if he would stand by, unprotesting. But he had brief time to speculate. The two girls were still on the porch. Nona had her arms about Alice, steadying her, encouraging her, and Alice was sobbing in a panic of grief and fear.

"For Heaven's sake get her and yourself inside," Rock snapped. "This is not going to be a Sunday-school picnic. Buck Walters warned me in Fort Benton that he'd get me inside of forty-eight hours. He's going to make it good, if he can. This is nothing for you to be mixed up in."

"This is as good a place as any for her and me," Nona declared. "This is my ranch. They won't dare!"

"Dare!" Rock grinned. "The man leading that bunch will dare anything. But I aim to fool him, if I get a chance to declare myself."

"And if you don't, they won't stop to listen to anything," she declared. Her eyes were full of questions.

"From the bunk room," Rock said softly. "I will give them a good run for their money. The walls are thick, and I have plenty of ammunition."

The eyeballs of horses and men were visible now, faces staring from under hat brims. Rock could see Seventy Seven riders he had worked with on trail. Charlie Shaw rode beside Buck Walters and Elmer Duffy. They slowed to a trot, then to a walk and drew up before the house. Rock moved back a little in the doorway, his rifle in the crook of his arm. He stood in plain sight; but if a hand moved toward a weapon he would be under cover before it could be drawn, or fired, at least.

Walters, Duffy and Charlie Shaw dismounted. Buck Walters looked at Alice Snell, her face hidden yet against Nona's shoulder. His own face remained impassive, but his eyes burned. And Rock got in the first word.

"Miss Snell, not liking the idea of cold-blooded murder to satisfy a personal grudge, rode up a little ahead of you-all to tell us you aimed to hang Doc Martin. If——"

"If that is true," Nona Parke's voice cut like a knife across his sentence, "you are a pack of dirty cowards—and you are too late."

She thrust the weeping girl away from her and faced them, with her head up, her gray eyes wide with scorn.

"Is it true?" she demanded. "What do you want here, all of you with rifles, as if you were going to war?"

"We want him," Buck Walters pointed at Rock. "And we will take him, dead or alive. He is a thief."

"That," said Nona without a moment's hesitation, "is a lie."

DUFFY, Walters, and Charlie Shaw had stepped up on the porch. They stood within eight feet of Rock, apparently secure in the belief that under thirty pairs of watchful eyes he could neither escape nor menace them.

"You two girls better go inside," Duffy said. "Leave us men handle this thing. They ain't no room for argument, I guess."

"Guess again, Elmer," Rock said quietly. "There is lots of room for argument. In the first place, I am not Doc Martin. I can prove that by you, Duffy, and by Buck Walters himself."

"What the hell are you givin' us?" Walters growled.

"It is quite true," Nona declared. "Doc Martin is dead. He was shot from ambush ten days ago. This man, no matter how much he may look like Doc, is not Doc."

"I told you that, but you wouldn't listen, you were so hell-bent to hang somebody," declared Charlie Shaw, opening his mouth for the first time and addressing Buck Walters. "Now it can be proved right here, unless you got to hang *somebody* for your own personal satisfaction."

"Listen, all of you!" Rock put in. "I have told you, and Miss Parke has told you, I am not Doc Martin. Do you want to listen to proof, or do you want it proved to you after a bunch of men have gone to hell in a fog of powder smoke? Because, if you don't want to listen to reason, there will be a lot of shooting before there is any hanging. And I will get you, Mr. Buck Walters, first crack, in spite of all your men. Just think that over."

Charlie Shaw winked at Rock, then took two quick steps to the doorway and slid through. Walters' right hand moved ever so little, suggestively and involuntarily, and the muzzle of Rock's carbine pointed straight at his breast.

"Just one move," said Rock, "one more little move like that, Buck, and the Maltese Cross will be shy your services for good. I will give you leave to hang me or shoot me, if you can, but this crowd is going to hear who I am before the ball opens. I am going to keep this gun right on your middle. If I feel anything or hear anything, I pull trigger. If one of your men should pot me, I can still kill you, even if I were dead on my feet. Now, I tell you again I am not Doc Martin. I came to this ranch the day he was killed—murdered, as a matter of fact. I helped to bury him. His riding gear and all his stuff is here in the house."

The riders edged their horses nearer and craned their necks. At best, destroying a thief was an unpleasant task even for honest men who despised stock thieves with the contempt such a thief inspired on the range. Every word uttered on

that porch carried distinctly to their ears. They were not fools. They knew, and Rock banked on that knowledge, that, whether the man in the doorway was Doc Martin or not, he had the drop on Buck Walters, and the chances were a hundred to one he would kill not only Walters but several of them before they got him. Perhaps too late they realized the tactical error of letting Charlie Shaw get inside. He was a TL man. Right or wrong, if there was a fight, Shaw would fight against them. They would have been confirmed in that supposition if they could have looked behind Rock. That young man's heart warmed at the boy's quick wit and unhesitating loyalty. A little behind him Charlie whispered:

"Stand pat. I'll back any play you make. I got two guns on me."

Elmer Duffy stared at Rock. He glanced sidewise at Buck Walters, then back to the man in the door.

"If you ain't Doc Martin," he said at last, "there's only one other man you *could* be."

"Hell and damnation!" Walters burst out. "Who else could he be? Are we goin' to be old women and let him bluff us out with a fairy story?"

"We got plenty of time, Buck," Elmer Duffy reminded him. "He can't get away. We don't want to get off on the wrong foot. Young Shaw did tell us this before we started."

"Rats!" Rock laughed. "You sure don't want to be convinced, do you, Buck? You surely want to see Doc Martin dance on a rope end. Maybe you'd just as soon hang me, even if I'm not Doc. You recollect what Dave Wells named me in Fort Benton, night before last, don't you? Well, you have Elmer Duffy say who *he* thinks I might be if I'm not Doc."

"If Doc Martin is dead an' buried," Duffy said, "there's only one man you can be."

"You are right," Rock said. "I will bet you a new hat, Walters, that Elmer Duffy names me what Dave Wells called me in Benton. I can see half a dozen riders in this crowd I worked on trail with, until we came to Clark's Ford in Nebraska. If you want to be dead sure, Elmer, there is a sorrel horse with two white hind feet and a big star on his forehead, branded JB, and a black, branded a Bleeding Heart, grazing in the pasture back of the barn. And I could tell you more that only one man could know, Elmer. Tell Buck Walters who I am."

"You're Rock Holloway," Duffy muttered.

"Bull's-eye!" Rock said. "I have been in Montana less than three weeks. It seems a plumb exciting place. Are you satisfied, Buck? Are you still eager to hang me under the impression that I'm Doc Martin? Do you want to see his saddle, with bloodstains on it, where somebody—who also wanted to see him dead—shot him, while he rode along the river bottoms? Maybe you'd like to dig up his body, where he's buried over by those poplars?"

"What is the use of carrying this on any longer?" Nona demanded. "I don't believe Doc did what Alice says you claim he did. I don't believe he was a thief. But, whether he was or was not, he is dead. This man is what he says he is. He came here the day Doc was killed. He told me his name was Rock Holloway. I hired him. That is all there is to it."

"Isn't that what Dave Wells called me?" Rock said to Walters. "Are you satisfied?"

"You denied it," Walters said. "When he spoke to you, you used me to prove you *were* Doc Martin."

"A man can have a joke with his friends, if he likes. It isn't against any law that I know of. He probably told you I joined his outfit on the Yellowstone last summer and worked for him all winter."

"I don't recollect him mentionin' it," Walters replied. "Why have you passed yourself off for Doc Martin, anyway?"

"Shucks!" Rock said. "Everybody just naturally insisted on taking me for Doc. Miss Parke knew my name. I explained myself to Charlie Shaw as soon as I had a chance. I didn't care much, one way or the other. I didn't know anybody in this neck of the woods, barring the Seventy Seven. I fooled Elmer

Duffy purposely, the first time I saw him, because I was kinda interested in trying to find out who killed Doc Martin, seeing I looked so much like him and was taking his place as a TL rider. Are you satisfied, or is there still something you'd like to know about?"

"Yes, I can see there's been a mistake," Walters said in a different tone. "You can't blame us. We got it straight that Martin was standing in with some pretty bald-faced stealing. We've cleaned out his partners. I guess this settles it as far as you're concerned. I'll have to take Elmer's word for it. He ought to know you, seein' you killed his brother."

It seemed to Rock that Walters raised his voice a trifle, and that he managed to impart a sneer into those words. Every man could hear. It seemed to Rock like a deliberate taunt, a barb purposely planted to rankle in Duffy's skin. For a second there was silence. Elmer Duffy's Adam's apple slid nervously up and down his lean throat. His face flushed. Rock read the signs for himself. A few spiteful reminders like that, and Duffy would feel that he *had* to go gunning for his brother's slayer. Buck Walters broke that strained hush. He lifted his hat to Nona.

"I'm sorry if this has been disagreeable," he said politely. "But those Burris thieves incriminated your man Martin. He has been in with them on their rustling. We've lost a lot of stock. Maybe they didn't overlook you. It's as well Doc Martin has cashed in. We would certainly have hung him to the nearest cottonwood. We don't reckon there'll be any more trouble. I hope you don't hold grudges," he said, turning to Rock. "In our place you'd do the same. Nobody told us what happened to Martin. You passed for him. We got to protect our range. There's only one way to deal with rustlers."

He turned to his men with a wave of his hand.

"All right, boys," he said. "You've heard the whole show, and we're saved a nasty job. Ride on. We'll catch up with you."

Elmer Duffy muttered something, stepped down off the porch, and swung into his saddle, without a word or a look at Rock. Buck Walters stepped over beside Alice. She had listened, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Now she shrank away from Buck.

"Come on home with us, Al," he said coaxingly.

"Go home with *you!*" Alice Snell shrilled. "I'll never go on that ranch again till you're off it for good, you black-hearted beast! If Doc Martin was murdered, I know who did it and why. I hate you—I *hate* you!"

"You're all worked up," Walters said diffidently. "You'll be sorry for saying such a thing about me when you cool off. I didn't kill Doc Martin, although he had it coming. A man who steals can't flourish on any range I have charge of."

"Doc Martin never stole anything in his life," the girl cried. "He was a better man than you, any day. You were afraid of him," she raved. "I know. You hated him because I loved him, and he loved me. Get away from me, you—you toad!"

Walters' face flamed. He shot a quick sidewise look at Nona and Rock Holloway. But he was cool and patient.

"Hysterics," he said to Nona. "I guess I'll have to leave her to you, Miss Parke. See she gets home, will you? Sorry about all this fuss. Couldn't be helped, the way things stood."

Rock said nothing. He had declared himself. This was a matter between these others, interesting, dramatic, and with hints of passionate conflict. Rock knew Nona Parke's side of it. What she had told him about Doc Martin was fresh in his mind. And there was Martin's attitude and actions toward Elmer Duffy. She, like himself, stood silent, while Alice leaned against the log wall and lashed at her foreman, her breast heaving, a fury blazing in her pansy-blue eyes.

Walters stepped off the porch and mounted his horse. The riders were crossing the flat at a walk. Buck lifted his hat to Nona, flung "So long, boys!" over his shoulder to Rock and Charlie Shaw, and loped away after his men.

A very cool hand, Rock reflected. Smooth and dangerous. He had denied

that Dave Wells mentioned anything. Rock felt that to be a lie. It was simpler now that he had established his real identity. But he wasn't done with Buck Walters yet. No! Rock couldn't quite say why he had that conviction; but he had it very clear in his mind.

CHAPTER XI.

RIDERS ON A RISE.

IS the excitement all over?" Charlie Shaw asked, grinning. "Guess I'll go put my *caballo* in the barn. I'll go back an' cut my string this afternoon."

"Round-up over?" Nona asked.

She had put one arm protectingly about Alice Snell. That disturbed young woman, her tawny hair in a tangle, her cheeks tear stained, stared at Rock. Her eyes expressed complete incredulity, surprise and a strange blend of grief and wonder.

Charlie nodded. "Glad, too," he said. "Hope you don't send me with that outfit this fall."

"Some one will have to go," Nona said dispiritedly.

"Oh, well!" Charlie shrugged his shoulders and took his horse away to the stable. Nona led Alice inside. Rock stood his rifle against the wall and sat down on the porch steps to roll a smoke. He found the fingers that sifted tobacco into the paper somewhat tremulous. Odd that a man could face a situation like that with cold determination and find himself shaky when it was all over. Rock smiled and blew smoke into the still air. He could see the teams plodding in the hayfield. The whir of the mower blades mingled with the watery murmur of the river. A foraging bee hummed in a bluster of flowers by his feet. Except for these small sounds, the hush of the plains lay like a blanket, a void in which men and the passions of men were inconsequential, little worrying organisms agitated briefly over small matters, like flies on the Great Wall of China.

He sat there a long time. Charlie came back and went into the bunk room. Rock saw him stretch out on a bed. Good kid—loyal to his friends and his outfit. What a mess there would have been if a fight had started. Like the Alamo. Two of them intrenched behind log walls, and thirty angry men in the open, spitting lead. Alice Snell must certainly have thought a lot of Doc Martin. Rock could see the look on Buck Walters' face when she flung her scornful epithets in his face. Funny about Doc and Nona Parke and Elmer Duffy. Not so funny, either. Hearts were caught on the rebound. Alice Snell was worth a second look. Passionate, willful, beautiful. Her fingers had clutched his arms with a frenzy of possession, when she pleaded with him to get away from danger. She was certainly capable of loving.

Nona came out. She, too, sat down on the edge of the porch near him. She stared at the haymakers, off down the river, where that hanging squad had departed, up at the banks where the plains pitched sharp to the valley floor.

"Isn't it peaceful?" she said absently.

"Yes, by comparison. Sweet Alice calm her troubled soul?"

"How can you joke about it? I made her lie down. She's in a terrible state—all on edge. I didn't think she was like that."

"Like what?" Rock inquired.

"I didn't think she had it in her to feel so much about anything. She's heartbroken," Nona said. "Doc, it appears, meant a lot to her. She just babbles about him."

"Everybody seems to know that but you," Rock told her.

"I don't understand it," Nona said slowly. "Doc—oh, well, I guess he made love to her, same as he did to me."

"You blame him?" Rock inquired. "She's attractive. Offhand, I'd say she loved this rider of yours a heap. You didn't have any use for him except in his capacity as a cow-puncher. Sometimes, I've noticed, a man craves affection. If he can't find it one place he'll look elsewhere. Maybe he was in love with you both. You're funny, anyhow. You didn't want him, yourself. But it seems to jar you because he consoled himself with another girl."

"It isn't that," she replied in a bewildered sort of fashion. "Why should he lie to me? Why should he quarrel

with Elmer Duffy about me—make an issue of me—if—if——"

"I don't know. I do know that I may have a man-size quarrel with Elmer, myself, now, if Buck Walters makes a few more public cracks about my run-in with Mark. Elmer's apt to brood over that, and I'm handy if he concludes it's up to him to get action over a grievance. And it's likely he will."

"What'll you do, if he does?" she said anxiously.

"Oh, take it as it comes. There's something fishy to me about all this upheaval. Of course I can savvy why Buck Walters wanted to get your man, Doc. Alice would be reason enough. Buck's face gave him away. But I somehow don't believe that's the whole answer. Perhaps both Elmer and Buck are such honest, God-fearing cattlemen that the very idea of rustling would make them froth at the mouth simultaneously. But I don't know."

"I don't believe for a single instant that Doc Martin had anything to do with any rustling whatever," Nona declared. "I don't care what these Burrises said, or anybody."

"I'm not an awful lot interested in that, now," Rock remarked thoughtfully. "It would appear from the way these fellows were ready to act that there has been rustling. Duffy wouldn't back a play like that just to satisfy either his own or Buck Walters' grudge. Between the Seventy Seven and the Maltese Cross, ranging around forty thousand cattle, a few rustled calves by the Goosebill don't cut so much figure, except as an excuse for action. No; 'there's more in this than meets the eye,' as Shakespeare or some other wise gazabo said once. You have lost calves. yourself."

"Yes, I know I have, and I can't afford to. I certainly hate a thief."

"So do I," Rock murmured. "Still, I don't hate you."

"Me?" she uttered in astonishment. Her head went up imperiously. "What do you mean?"

"You steal hearts." Rock said calmly. "You admitted it. You told me you did, only, of course, you said you didn't mean to."

THE blood leaped to her cheeks. It was the first time he saw her momentarily at a loss for words, embarrassed by an imputation.

"It worries me a little," Rock continued meditatively. "You may steal mine. Of course, you don't intend to. You hate to do it, as the fellow said when he took the town marshal's gun away from him. But, on the other hand, you don't care a boot if you find you've got the darned thing. You're immune. And mine is an innocent, inexperienced sort of a heart. It's useful to me. I'd be mighty uncomfortable without it. Maybe I'd better pull out while the going is good."

"You want to quit now?" she asked. "There won't be any more trouble, I think," she said stiffly. "And I'm just getting used to you. I hate strange men around. Can't you think of me as your boss instead of as a woman? Oh, dear, it's always like this!"

Her distress was so comical, yet so genuine, that Rock laughed out loud.

"Good Lord, Nona—everybody calls you Nona, so it comes natural—I'm the world's crudest josher, I guess," he declared. "Say, you couldn't drive me off this range now. I promised you, didn't I, that if my admiration for you did get powerful strong I wouldn't annoy you with it? Don't you give me credit for fully intending to keep my word?"

Nona smiled frankly at him and with him.

"You like to tease, don't you?" she said simply. "You aren't half so serious as you look and act."

"Sometimes I'm even more so," he drawled lightly.

"You were serious enough a while ago," she said. Her next words startled Rock, they were so closely akin to what had been running in his mind not long before. "If Elmer hadn't known you, there would have been a grand battle here. You and Charlie in the bunk house. I would probably have bought into it from one of the kitchen windows. I have dad's old rifle, and I can shoot with it probably as straight as most men. They wouldn't have won much from us. Buck Walters and his cowboys, I don't think."

"What makes you think Charlie would have backed me up?" he asked curiously.

"He did, didn't he?" she asked. "I know that boy."

"Weren't you scared?"

"Of course I was scared," she admitted. "But that didn't paralyze me. It never does. Do you think I'd stand and wring my hands, while a man was fighting for his life?"

"I see," Rock nodded. "Sort of united we stand, eh?"

"Well, neither Buck Walters nor anybody else will ever take a man out of my house and hang him to a cottonwood tree if I can stop it," she said hotly. "There is law in this Territory, if it is not very much in evidence. They don't have to take it in their own hands in that brutal way."

"No," Rock agreed. "And when they do, there is a reason. I am rather curious about the real reason. As a matter of fact, speaking of law, I heard something in Benton which may be news to you. Buck Walters must have known about it, too, which makes his move seem all the more hasty. They have organized county machinery. There is to be an election in about a month for a judge of the superior court, a sheriff, a treasurer, a clerk, and a board of county commissioners. There will be no good excuse for Judge Lynch after that."

"I'm glad," the girl said seriously. "It's time we were getting civilized."

Rock laughed.

"It will take more than a set of duly elected county officers to civilize this country the way you mean. Texas is well civilized in that way, but it is still not so tame that bad men eat out of an officer's hand. Organized law isn't always a guarantee of peace in a country where it's a hundred miles between ranches, sometimes. As often as not, it's some peaceful citizen instead of a sheriff that unlimbers his gun to pacify the bad actor. Ten or fifteen years from now —— Oh, well, what's on the program as soon as Charlie gets home with his string?"

"We'll bring in and brand what few calves still have to be marked," she said. "Then I wonder if you'd mind haying for two or three weeks. Charlie takes a whirl at it for me."

"I'd do pretty much anything for you because you're a good game sport," Rock said quite casually. "I'm not too proud to shovel hay. I may have to do it for myself some time. I reckon I have to earn my wages."

An odd twinkle showed in Nona's gray eyes.

"And perhaps you'll be able to console Alice. She says she will never go back to the Maltese Cross while Buck Walters runs it."

"She didn't have to go there in the first place," Rock said. "She is her own mistress, and she has a home in Texas."

"Well, she's going to stay here with me for a while," Nona said, "until she makes up her mind what to do. So you and Charlie better be nice to her."

"Oh, I see," Rock said. But somehow he didn't feel comfortable about that. He wasn't sure that he cared to be thrown too much in the company of this yellow-haired girl with the pansy-blue eyes and the come-hither smile lurking always about her mouth. He had no intention of stepping into Doc Martin's shoes a second time.

"I expect I'd better get some dinner on," Nona said finally. "After dinner you'd better go with Charlie when he heads for the Maltese Cross and have him show you where those work horses run. We'll need them for this haying business."

Rock went into the bunk room when Nona departed to cook. Charlie Shaw's long form was still draped on a bunk, but he was merely resting.

"Gosh, I'll get caught up on sleep when I get home," he grumbled. "The man who rides with the Maltese Cross don't need a bed. He'd just as well trade it off for a lantern, so he could see to catch his saddle horse before daylight."

"We're going to be hay diggers for a spell, you and me," Rock informed him.

"Don't hurt my feelin's." Charlie yawned. "Have a good bunk to sleep in an' fancy home grub. Make up for all these hardships in the winter. Nothin' to do then but play crib with Nona and take a ride to town once in a while. Say,

there was pretty near something to clean up around here, wasn't there? All will be peaceful along the Potomac now, I guess. Buck was hell-bent to string Doc to a cottonwood bough. They cleaned up the Burrises last night, so the boys said."

"Was the Seventy Seven in on that?" Rock inquired.

"No; not even the whole Maltese Cross bunch. Just Buck and a few of his pets—the hardest nuts in the outfit."

"Then their word was all that was plastered on Doc. No wonder Elmer Duffy wasn't overly eager about the job," Rock commented.

"Just Buck's word, so far as I know," the boy drawled. He turned on his side and eyed Rock attentively. "The other fellows just grunted."

"Yet the whole of two outfits came along to get Doc Martin. And Elmer took Buck's word for it."

"Elmer didn't love Doc exactly, no more than Buck did," Charlie said. "An' I guess Elmer won't love you none, by the look of him when Buck made that crack about you gettin' his brother. So you're the feller that put Mark Duffy's light out, eh? I was in the Odeon myself, once, first summer it opened. Some joint. One of the Seventy Seven men told me about 'Big' Duffy's downfall. But I'd forgotten your name. He told me. I guess you don't need to worry about any of these bad actors troublin' you much."

He stared at Rock with a trace of admiration.

"I don't know, Charlie," Rock answered. "I can't help thinking there was more in this than just jealousy over women, or a few stolen calves. And I have a hunch you could give me an idea what the *real* reason was for Buck being so dead set to get Doc Martin out of the way."

"Forget it," Charlie counseled. "You're a kind of a mind reader. But Doc's dead. Let his troubles stay buried with him. I'd go all the way with Doc if he was alive and in trouble. He was a white man. I think myself that this talk about the Burris boys sayin' Doc was in with them is pure bunk. But it ain't our funeral now. Forget it. Buck's wise enough to leave sleepin' dogs lie—when they're dead. Our job is to look out for ourselves an' the TL an' let the Seventy Seven an' Maltese Cross skin their own cats."

FARTHER Charlie would not go. Nor did Rock try pressing. The boy knew something. Rock suspected it was something he would like to know. But Charlie would not tell, and doubtless he had what seemed to him cogent reasons. Rock conceded that the wisdom of this youth might be sound, so he let it drop. He lay in a bunk opposite to Charlie. They smoked and chatted until the hay diggers stabled their horses for noon, and the half-breed girl called them to dinner.

After that Rock set out with Charlie Shaw to gather in a few work horses ranging by some springs over toward the Maltese Cross. The river made a bend toward the south, away below the Parke Ranch. So they cut across the bench.

Five miles out from home, Charlie, glancing back over his shoulder, spotted a couple of riders on a rise less than a mile behind them.

"Funny we didn't see them," he remarked. "Musta been in some low ground somewhere."

They saw the horsemen sit motionless for half a minute or so, then drop out of sight in a hollow. A mile farther along Charlie pointed out the location of the spring, and they parted. Rock jogged along, keeping to high ground and looking for small bands of horses. A half circle of the springs brought him on the bunch he wanted. A short, sharp dash cut seven or eight TL horses off from a band of broom-tail mares and colts, and he headed them homeward, thundering down a long, gentle slope toward the river. The work horses knew the way better than he, for they knew where they were headed, as mountain cattle know where the round-up grounds lie on the flat. They ran the bench for two miles and dropped into a swale that deepened and narrowed to a ravine scarred by spring torrents. Water holes dotted the dry course of its bed. Small flats spread here and there. Willows grew in clumps. Patches of high service-berry brush made thickets.

The sleek brutes ahead of him settled to a sedate trot. Rock jogged along at their heels, whistling.

Something that felt like the sting of a giant bee struck him on the head. His horse went down under him, as if pole-axed in midstride, throwing Rock clear. And, as he fell, he saw two wisps of powder smoke, blue on the edge of a thicket. His ear had heard two shots, so close together that they were like one.

He wasn't hurt. A heavy mat of grass on turf softened the shock of his fall. He felt no wound beyond that sharp sting on his scalp. His wits worked as usual. He lay quite still where he fell, his eyes on the place where the smoke drifted lazily. His gun was in his hand, and he was searching for movement, although he lay like a man dead. He could hear the rasping death rattle in his horse's nostrils. The beast sprawled on its side a few feet away, a convenient bulwark if he should need one. He noted thankfully that it lay left side up, the carbine scabbarded under its stirrup leather unharmed. The varnished stock pointed toward him invitingly. But he dared make no move toward it as yet.

INERT as a log, both hands clasped on the butt of his Colt, Rock waited for the ambush to show. He depended on that. They would want to be sure. Presently his stratagem and patience were rewarded. A hatless head took form in the edge of the brush a matter of thirty yards distant. Still Rock waited. Another face joined the second. After a time one extended a hand. Rock could see the gun muzzle trained on his prone body, as his own eye lined the foresight on a spot slightly below that extended arm.

Rock fired. That lurking figure in the brush must have pulled trigger in the same breath, for a bullet plowed dirt in the region of Rock's breast. But the man spun and staggered clear of the brush, waving his arms, reeling. He was a fair mark now, and Rock fired again.

The other had vanished. Rock lay waiting. He was in the open, true, and the second man secure in tall thickets. But all about him stood heavy grass. He knew that very little of his body was visible, so long as he did not move.

"One bird in the hand and another in the brush," he exulted.

Crimson trickled in a slow stream into one eye and spilled over his cheek. He wiped it away. That first shot had grazed his scalp. That troubled him very little. That second assassin, still lurking in the thicket, troubled him much more. And at that instant he heard the quick drum of hoofs.

Rock knew precisely how far that thicket of berry brush extended. Their saddle horses would be tied in that. Whether the second man was scared, or merely acting on the prudent theory that he who shoots and rides away will live to shoot another day, did not matter to Rock. He wanted them both. He leaped for his carbine, snatched it, and ran for the brush. One downward glance, as he passed, showed him a dead man. The next second he was in the thicket. A few quick strides took him out the other side.

Straight for the next brush patch, over an intervening grass flat of two hundred yards, a sorrel horse was stretching like a hound in full flight, his rider crouched in the saddle, looking back over one shoulder.

Rock dropped flat on his stomach, propped his elbows, and drew a bead. He hated to kill a horse, but he wanted that man alive, if he could get him. The sorrel ran at a slight angle. Rock could just see his shoulder. He held for that, low on the body, just ahead of the cinch. He was a fair shot with a six-shooter, deadly with a rifle. And he was neither hurried nor excited. His forefinger tightened as deliberately as if he had been shooting at a tomato can.

The horse went down, as if his feet had been snatched out from under him in mid-air, which was precisely what Rock had banked on. His rider, sitting loose, was catapulted in an arc. His body struck the earth with a thud. And Rock ran for his man. There was no craft in that sprawl. The fall had stunned him as effectually as if he had been slung from a train at thirty miles an hour.

He wasn't unconscious, merely dazed.

But Rock had a gun in his face before he got control of his senses. And, after disarming him, Rock did exactly what he would have done with a wild steer he wanted to keep harmless. He hog-tied him, hands behind his back, one foot drawn tight up to the lashed wrists, with a hair *macarte* off the dead horse.

Incidentally, Rock examined the sorrel horse, which bore the Maltese Cross. Rock didn't know the man and had never seen him before. He was none of the riders Rock had seen either at the Cross round-up, or in the vigilance committee that morning.

Rock stood looking down at the man reflectively, for a time. Then he took him by the armpits and dragged him over the grass back to the very thicket where the ambush had been held. He walked through to take a look at the body on the other side. Rock did not know him, either. But he took his weapons and a short search of the thicket presently located a saddled horse securely tied.

This beast also carried a Maltese Cross. Rock took him by the reins and went back to his prisoner.

CHAPTER XII.

STACK DECIDES TO TALK.

THE crimson stream kept trickling down over Rock's face. He had no pain except a burning sensation on the top of his head, but the crimson flow annoyed him. He finally hit upon the expedient of stuffing the black silk handkerchief which he habitually wore about his neck, into the crown of his hat, adding thereto a smaller one from his pocket. Then he jammed the crown tightly down on his head to absorb the flow. That done, he rolled himself a cigarette. Then he stood looking speculatively down at his captive.

"Are you Joe Stack or Bill Hurley?" he inquired.

"Stack," the man grunted. He stared at Rock out of sullen eyes.

"Then I suppose that was Mr. Hurley that I downed, eh?"

The man assented with a nod. Those were the names of the two hard citizens Buck Walters kept hanging around the Cross home ranch, so Charlie Shaw had told him. Rock was not in the least surprised to find his guess correct. Men who had acquired notches on their guns in the South were not usually averse to adding more notches when they drifted North—either for profit or satisfaction.

"Well, you took on a contract," he said. "And you have fallen down on it. I am going to tell you a few things, Stack, then I am going to ask you some questions. You're a Texan. Did you ever hear of Steve Holloway who was a U. S. marshal at Abilene for a spell? I expect you did. He cleaned out a nest of outlaws up in the Childress country, where I understand you made yourself a reputation. Steve was my father. Then there is Tom Holloway, who is a captain in the rangers. 'Long Tom' they call him. He's an uncle. Then there's Ben Holloway who owns the Ragged H down on Milk River, not so awful far from this neck of the woods. He's a cousin of mine. There are other Holloways scattered here and there west of the Mississippi. Most any one of them would go a long way to shoot a skunk, especially of the two-legged variety. I'm something like that myself. You were sure hunting big game when you camped on my trail. Did you know it?"

The man didn't answer. But the look of apprehension in his eyes deepened.

"And Buck didn't tell you? Maybe he didn't know, himself," Rock said. "Now, why did Buck Walters set you to kill me the way he got Doc Martin killed? Will you answer me that?"

"You got me foul," Stack muttered. "I tried to get you, an' you got me, instead. But I ain't talkin'."

"No?" Rock said very softly. "Well, I was raised in an Apache country, Stack. I expect I can *make* you talk."

He turned away with a frown. No use wasting words. All about in the thicket were dry twigs, dead sticks. He gathered an armful of these, broke them up into short lengths, and dumped the lot by his prisoner. He took out his knife and whittled a lot of shavings. Once he stopped to roll another smoke.

"Don't you reckon you better talk, Stack?" he suggested.

The man's mouth shut in a tight line.

Rock lit the fire with the same match he used for his cigarette. When it began to crackle briskly he laid hold of the boot on Stack's free foot and jerked it off. The man's face went livid. For a second he struggled in a momentary panic, then lay still, his face gradually turning ashy, little beads of moisture breaking out on his forehead.

Rock addressed him quite casually.

"I want to know just why Buck Walters is so anxious to have me killed off. I want to know what sort of skin game he is working on the Maltese Cross, and how he works it. I want to know why he was so eager to hang Doc Martin when he thought he had failed at bushwhacking him. You know why, I am pretty sure. Cough up what you do know."

"I don't know nothin' except that Buck offered me and Hurley five hundred dollars to put your light out. That's all I know."

"You are lying," Rock said. "I will jog your memory a little, I think."

WITH a jerk he drew the man close to the fire and thrust his foot at the small, hot blaze. Stack jerked his knee up. Rock put his spurred foot on that cocked knee, forced it down, and stood on it with all his weight. The heat made a singeing smell rise from the man's sock. His eyes bulged. He set his teeth in his under lip. Rock stood over him, holding him helpless. Outwardly Rock was hard and merciless, but inwardly he felt his stomach turning. He hated the thing he had set his hand to. It was a contest of a sort between his fundamental humanity, his sense of decency, and the nerve of this cowardly assassin. And Stack weakened a trifle before Rock felt he could go no farther with that fiery ordeal.

"Oh!" Stack groaned. "Let up! I'll tell you."

Rock kicked the glowing coals aside. His own face was white.

"Spill it all," he snarled. "I know enough to tab you if you try to stall."

For the next ten minutes words tumbled out of Stack in short, jerky sentences. Here and there Rock put a question.

"An' that's all I know," Stack gasped at last.

"It's enough—plenty," Rock said. "I'm tickled to death you waylaid me today."

"What you goin' to do with me?" Stack muttered, as Rock stood over him in brooding silence.

"If I were some people I know you'd never get out of this draw alive," Rock said. "You certainly have it coming. I'm not just sure I ought to turn you loose."

"All I want is a chance to get a long ways from this country now," the man declared.

"I wonder what Buck Walters would do to you if you went to him and told him I pried all this out of you?"

"I ain't crazy," Stack protested. "You turn me loose, an' neither you nor Buck Walters'll ever see me for the cloud of dust I'll raise foggin' it to Idaho or Oregon, or some place a long ways from the Marias River. I know when I got enough."

"I expect that would be your best move," Rock agreed.

He bent over Stack and undid the rope. The man sat up, rubbed his foot gingerly, and drew on his boot.

"Now," Rock said sternly, "people like you sometimes say one thing and do another. You may change your mind, once you get hold of a gun again and get a horse between your legs. You may figure you'd like to get even with me. I am not letting you go out of sympathy. I haven't time to bother with you, or I would take you to Fort Benton and throw you in the calaboose and land you eventually in the pen. But I am after Buck Walters—not small fry. It is not going to be healthy for him nor any of his crowd around here very soon. So, I will make you an offer and give you a piece of advice. The offer is that if you will walk out in plain sight on the hill, in about an hour, I will give you back this horse. The advice is that you mount him, head south, and keep going."

Stack rubbed his wrists where the hair *macarte* had sunk deep in his flesh.

"That suits me down to the ground," he said. "I don't never play in a losin' game if I get a chance to draw out. You needn't worry about me changin' my mind. I don't want none of *your* game, no more. But I got stuff at the Maltese Cross I'd like to have."

"Buck Walters is too clever for a man like you," Rock declared. "He would get out of you what has happened before you knew where you were at. And I don't want him to know. He'd probably end up by throwing a bullet into you."

"Maybe. Only I don't think he'd be there at the ranch," Stack declared.

"What makes you think that? Where would he most likely be."

"I have only got a hunch," Stack said slowly. "But I think he's goin' North for a spell, with a hand-picked crew."

Rock considered this gravely.

"Look," Stack offered. "I ain't hankerin' to take a chance with Buck. I don't see nothin' in this country for me no more, nohow. Can't you stake me to an extra horse, a bed, an' some grub? Then I can light right out."

"You've sure got gall," Rock said coldly. "To ask me to stake you to anything after trying to kill me."

"Well, long as I'm alive I got to eat," the man retorted. "I got some money on me, but it might be quite a ways to another job."

Rock regarded the man for a moment. He was not moved by any feeling of kindness. Stack was a gunman whose services were for sale to the highest bidder. He would kill for money, and he would kill for lack of it. There was nothing of loyalty in his make-up. He would embark on desperate undertakings without any personal rancor toward his victims. And he would desert with as little compunction if the game didn't seem worth the candle.

Stack had had enough of Rock Holloway. To save his feet from being toasted, he had divulged information which made northern Montana no place for him. He had blood money in his pocket. With a horse under him, a dead running mate behind him, he would leave for new fields, where his peculiar talents might find suitable employment. Buck Walters would be a long time finding out what had become of his two thugs, if this one had a horse, a blanket, and a little food to start him on his journey.

"You don't get no extra horse," said Rock. "I'll bring you back this one. A Maltese Cross horse is as good for you to ride out of the country as any. I'll stake you to a blanket and a little grub. You can take it or leave it."

"You're the doctor," Stack agreed indifferently. "I'd like another cayuse, but if you ain't got one to spare——" He shrugged his shoulders in acceptance of those terms.

Rock swung into the saddle and left him. He had all the guns. He galloped down the ravine after Nona Parke's work stock, picking them up where they had stopped to graze, half a mile below. He had to haze them into the ranch, catch a fresh mount, secure the things he had promised Stack, and return here.

After that—well, riding fast toward the Marias, with an ache beginning to make his temples throb, Rock could still smile with anticipation. It was worth a sore head. He would very soon have a weird tale to relay to Uncle Bill Sayre in Fort Worth. He would surprise that estimable banker. And it was not impossible that he might surprise Buck Walters even more in the immediate future.

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE WARPATH.

ROCK staved off Nona Parke's agitated questions when he asked for food. He robbed his own bed reluctantly, but a promise was a promise, apart from his desire to have Stack out of the country between dusk and dawn. The blood on his face and the strange sight of him riding a Maltese Cross horse stirred Nona to a curious pitch. But Rock moved fast, told her nothing, and got away again.

He made the round trip in an hour. As he drew up on the brink of the ravine, Stack walked up to meet him, carrying on his back Rock's saddle which he had stripped from the dead horse.

"I reckoned you'd want this," he said genially.

Rock sat on his own horse, watching the man ride away. Stack headed south. As far as Rock could see him, he bore straight for Fort Benton. He would never turn back, Rock felt assured. Stack had shot his bolt. There was a certain strange relief in that. He marveled at the queer compound of savagery, cupidity, cunning and callousness that characterized such a man. They were rare, but they did exist.

Stack admitted that Hurley had shot Doc Martin. He admitted that he and Hurley were to share five hundred dollars for ambushing Rock. He didn't seem to have any emotion about it, except a mild shame over his failure. He didn't seem to regard Rock with anything except a grudging admiration for beating him at his own game. Owning himself beaten, he withdrew. And, at that, Rock muttered to himself, Stack had nothing on Buck Walters when it came to vileness and treachery.

Rock turned his horse and rode homeward, reaching the TL about supper time. He was tired. His head ached intolerably, now that the bleeding had ceased. When he took off his hat and removed the handkerchief compress, he could feel the slash cut by that bullet. A quarter of an inch lower! By such narrow margins chance operates. Rock sat on the side of his bed, wondering if he should wash and bandage that wound. Now he began to fear that it might give him a good deal of trouble. He hoped not, because, unless he had guessed wrong, some rapid-fire action lay ahead of him. And while he pondered thus, Nona walked into the room.

He scarcely remembered how he had accounted to her for the crimson stains on his face. But her quick glance took in the discolored handkerchief and the matted brown hair. She stood over him with a worried look.

"You *are* hurt," she said. "What happened?"

"Fellow took a shot at me—one of Buck Walters' men. Keep that under your hat," he warned. "It's only a scratch."

She bent over his head and parted the hair with gentle finger tips.

"It isn't bad," she murmured. "But it must be painful. And it ought to be cleaned. I'll get some stuff and dress it."

She returned in a minute with a basin, scissors and carbolic acid. Very deftly she snipped the hair away from about the wound, cleaned it with a solution that burned like fire, and drew the edges together with a patch of court-plaster. Then she sat down on the bed beside Rock and said earnestly:

"Now tell me about it."

"Nothing much to tell," Rock demurred.

"You mean you won't?"

"Not just now," he said. "It has nothing to do with you, anyway. Buck seems to want me out of the way. I am quite a bit wiser about things than I was this morning, but I still have a few guesses coming. There's nothing to worry about. Don't let on to any one that I have been shot at. I will say a horse fell with me and cut my head."

"But it does worry me," she protested. "I feel uneasy. Something's got to be done about this, if a man riding for me can't go anywhere except in danger of his life."

"Something is going to be done about it," Rock assured her. "Darned quick, too! It isn't because I am riding for you. It is because I am supposed to be dangerous, just as Doc was dangerous for something he knew or guessed. He was foolish enough to tip his hand to Buck. I am not going to talk. I'm going to get busy. All you can do is to wish me luck."

"I do," she murmured. "I wish the Maltese Cross had never come into this country."

"In that case I wouldn't be here," he said. "And I'm darned glad I came."

"Why?" she asked.

"Oh, lots of reasons." Rock smiled. "I'll tell you some of these days, when the dove of peace spreads her wings across this part of the world."

"I wish you'd tell me," she begged. "I hate mysteries. I'm getting so I go around here with my heart in my mouth, wondering what terrible thing will happen next."

"I don't think anything more will hap-

pen around this ranch," Rock declared. "I'm the center of this trouble, and I'm going to take myself away from here—for a while. But I'll be back."

"I'll be sorry to see you go," she whispered. "But perhaps it's best, if you are going to be ambushed at every turn."

She looked down at the floor frowningly for a few seconds. Rock stared at the curve of her neck, the scarlet twist of her lips, the dark cloud of hair, and a queer breath-taking sensation stirred in him, an almost uncontrollable impulse to draw her up to him. He shook himself. Why the devil should a woman have that effect on a man? And Nona seemed to be unconscious of it—even to be irritated by the manifestation of a feeling she was the factor in arousing.

NONA got up. She looked at him with such frowning composure that Rock couldn't meet those level gray eyes. It seemed to him they read him through and through.

"Come along to supper. It's all ready," she said.

Rock shook his head. "Don't feel like eating," he replied. "After a while I'll have a cup of coffee, maybe; but not just now. Will Charlie be back to-night, I wonder?"

"I think so."

"I'm going to pull out at daylight," he told her. "If I am gone before you get up, so long."

"I'll be up," she said briefly and left him.

Charlie Shaw came jingling his spurs across the porch at sundown.

"Did Buck have anything to say to you while you were at camp?" Rock asked.

"Didn't see hide nor hair of him," Charlie replied. "He took one of the wagons, about half his crew, a bunch of saddle stock, and pulled his freight as soon as they all got back from that session here this mornin'. So the boys told me."

"I thought the spring work was all over," Rock commented.

"It is."

"Nobody know where Buck headed for?"

Charlie shook his head.

"I'll bet a dollar to a doughnut," Rock said, "that he took with him only his special pets."

"You'd win your bet," Charlie growled. "I didn't count noses, but the hard pills were among the missin'. How'd you guess?"

" 'Birds of a feather.' " Rock quoted the old proverb. "I'm leaving you, myself, in the morning, Charlie."

"What for?" Charlie inquired.

"Well, for public consumption." Rock smiled. "I'm pulling out because I find life here much too exciting. I don't like vigilance committees and private wars. Privately, between you and me and the gatepost, I'll be back before long. And I'm coming back with bells on."

Charlie frowned.

"Kinda hate to see you go," he said. "But I guess you know your own business best."

"Did Doc Martin ever tell you about finding a set of corrals with a branding chute, tucked away somewhere in the Sweet Grass?"

"Hell!" Charlie exclaimed. "How'd you find *that* out?"

"Did he tell you where they were?"

"No," Charlie shook his head. "He didn't tell me nothin'. If he'd kept as close a mouth to everybody as he did to me, he'd be alive yet, I guess. I know he did, that's all."

"And he made some sort of crack at Buck about this, didn't he?" Rock hazarded. "After that the fireworks began."

Charlie nodded.

"Doc was awful outspoken when he got his back up about anything," he said. "Buck tried to horn him away from the Maltese Cross on account of Alice, I guess. They had words about it. Nobody was around to hear what was said, but Doc told me he put a bug in Buck's ear about range bosses with ambitions to get rich off the outfit they worked for. I asked him if he meant that Buck wanted to grab Alice an' the outfit, with a parson's assistance, an' he just grinned. I told him if he knew anything he better keep his mouth shut where Buck Walters was concerned. Been better for him if he had."

"I wish he had, too," Rock said. "He'd be alive now, and he'd be darned useful. I got ideas about Mister Buck Walters, myself."

"How?"

"Better not be too curious, kid," Rock advised. "What you don't know won't hurt you. Better you aren't mixed up in anything. Nobody aims to hang you to a cottonwood, or bushwhack you in some lonely coulee. I only asked you about these mysterious pens to check up on something I found out. If you don't know, of course you can't put me wise."

"Have they got anything to do with us bein' shy a few calves this spring, d'you suppose?" Charlie asked thoughtfully. "Because, if it has, I might get mixed up in it yet. I don't know as I'd sit tight an' keep quiet if I thought anybody was rustlin' off Nona. She needs all she's got."

"That I don't know, yet," Rock said frankly. "I can tell you this much, Charlie: If there is any connection between what I know and suspect and Nona's missing calves, she'll get 'em back with interest."

"Gosh! You sure got me goin'," Charlie grumbled.

"Don't let it get away with you," Rock told him. "Keep mum. I'll be back here again, by and by. If anybody inquires about me, say I quit the Marias because there was too much high life around here to suit me."

THE boy grinned and said no more. In an hour the TL was severally and collectively asleep. It seemed to Rock that he had no more than closed his eyes before they opened again at the first streak of dawn. He had caught up his two horses the night before. Now he went down to the stable to feed them. A lot of miles lay ahead of those ponies. When he came back to the house, smoke streamed from the kitchen chimney, and Nona was making coffee and slicing bacon. The two of them were the only souls astir. It was still an hour and a half before the regular rising time.

"You didn't have to get up at this unearthly hour," Rock protested.

"I heard you, and I didn't want you to go away without your breakfast," she said.

"For a fellow that has no use for men," Rock teased, "you are awful darned good to them. You'd make an excellent wife for a ranchman."

"I am a pretty darned good ranchman myself, without being a wife, thank you, Mister Holloway," she retorted.

"You won't escape forever," he told her. "Some of these days somebody will spread a wide loop and snare you."

Nona slid three strips of bacon on a hot plate and set it before him, with a toss of her head.

"Men," she said disdainfully, "seem to think that a woman's chief business in life is to be captured by some man."

"Well," Rock said between mouthfuls, "when you stop to consider it, isn't it? It seems that way, when you think of it."

"Fiddlesticks!" She laughed. "That may be some women's ambition, but not mine."

"It isn't an ambition," Rock murmured. "It's just human nature. You ask Alice. When you get to be a cattle queen, you'll find yourself a heap more interested in men than you are in cows. You're darned haughty about this poor worm man, right now. Your father was a man, old girl, and I expect your mother was glad of it."

Nona stared at him, half astonished, half amused.

"I don't know whether you're preaching," she said artlessly, "or drumming up trade for a matrimonial bureau."

"Neither," Rock said. "Just thinking out loud, that's all."

He rode up to the house and, dragging out his bed, lashed it across the black horse. Sangre stood shaking his glossy head, with the white star. Rock swung up. He hesitated a second. He wanted to say good-by, and still—— Then Nona came out of the kitchen with a package in her hand.

"Here's a lunch," she said. "You didn't say where you were going, but if it's an all-day ride a bite will come handy."

"Thanks!" He tucked it in a saddle pocket. "Well, here's hoping there's no

more excitement around here till I come back, Nona. And if I don't come back, you'll know it's because I can't, not because I don't want to."

"You're not going on the warpath after Buck Walters, are you, Rock?" she asked uneasily. "Please don't. It isn't worth while. A man like that always gets what's coming to him. Let him be."

"I'm going on the warpath, but not the way you mean," Rock answered. "I am not going after anybody with a gun in my hand and blood in my eye. Not yet. Listen! Let me whisper something in your ear."

Nona stood beside Sangre, one hand resting on the red horse's curved neck. Rock bent down as if to whisper. And when Nona turned her face up, he kissed her lightly on the red mouth that was beginning to haunt him and to trouble him wherever he went, very much to his dismay.

And when she drew back with startled eyes, Rock touched his horse gently and rode away without a backward glance. If he looked back, he would turn back, whether to apologize or plead, he could scarcely say. For a young man who had always been rather egotistically sure of himself he found his breast filled with a strange commotion.

"That," he sighed at last, with a backward look into the Marias Valley from the south bank, "is sure a hell of a way for a fellow to treat a girl that got up at daybreak to get him his breakfast. Well, I guess it's either kill or cure."

AS the sun rose, a hot ball in the east, flinging its careless gold over the bleached grass, that rolled away to limitless horizons, and Rock gradually left that familiar, pleasant valley far behind, he thought less and less of that unpremeditated kiss and more and more of the business in hand. He had set out on what seemed a mad undertaking, but there was method in his madness.

He came down to the bed of the Missouri and into the streets of Fort Benton shortly after noon. He let his horses rest and munch hay in a livery stable for three hours. Then, with a little food tied on his pack, he embarked on the ferry and so gained the southern shore, whence ran the great freight trails to the Judith Basin and farther to towns along the Yellowstone, threaded like forlorn beads on that steel string which was the Northern Pacific Railway.

His specific destination was Billings, two hundred miles in an air line southeast. But first he turned aside into the rich grazing lands of the Judith Basin to find Al Kerr of the Capital K. It was a far cry to the Odeon and Clark's Ford on the bleak plains of Nebraska. But Rock was riding into the Judith to draw on a promise the little man had made him that night under the stars.

He forged southeast all that afternoon, picketed his horses overnight by a rippling creek, wiped the dew off his saddle at dawn, and rode again—rode at a jog trot, hour after hour. He met a stage and held converse with the driver, passed on and came to a stage station on that rutted artery of travel to Lewistown. Here a hostler gave him specific directions. And at sunset he rode into the home ranch of the Capital K. The first man that hailed him was Kerr himself.

"Well, well, well," Kerr said. "You have shore been a long time gettin' around to pay a sociable call."

"Can you stake me to two horses in the morning?" Rock asked, after they had exchanged greetings. "I got to hotfoot it on to Billings early."

"Sure," Kerr said. "Give you the best we got."

They sat up late that night, talking. The Capital K had taken over a lovely valley watered by a shining stream, bordered by natural meadows. Kerr had concentrated all his cattle there. They swarmed by tens of thousands over a radius of forty miles. The little man was well content. He would move no more. He had preëmpted a kingdom, and there were no more worlds to conquer. He had built a substantial house and brought his family from Texas for the summer. But, beyond these visible evidences of prosperity, he didn't talk much about himself. Rock's story engrossed all his attention. And to the tentative, provisional request with which Rock ended, he gave hearty assent.

"Sure, I will," he declared. "Hell, I'd do it like a shot, just on your own account. As it happens, I know Uncle Bill Sayre darned well. He loaned me twenty thousand dollars on my unbacked note, one time. I had a speakin' acquaintance with Dave Snell, too. You go on to Billings and get word to him. Once you get back here I can throw an outfit together for you in a matter of hours. I have saddle horses to burn. An' I got men that'll foller you to hell and back again. By gum, that's some formation up there, if you got it figured right. Same old story—the beggar on horseback. What a fool that man is. Ain't satisfied with a good thing. Tryin' to grab the earth, regardless."

"It may be covered up so that it'll be hard to get at him personally," Rock said. "But if I can make sure of the Steering Wheel, I can force his hand. It looks air tight, but there's always a weak spot in that sort of undertaking you know."

"You watch he don't dynamite you. He may have a joker up his sleeve as well as an ace in the hole," Kerr warned. "I have heard of Buck Walters plenty down South. He's a smart man. He's got to be that an' a cattleman, besides, or he'd never got in so strong with Dave Snell. If you get the goods on him, don't give him a chance—the dirty dog. Gosh, a man that hires his killin' done is lower'n a snake in the bottom of a forty-foot well."

CHAPTER XIV.

HOT ON THE TRAIL.

ROCK chewed a pencil butt until it looked as if it had been mouthed by an earnest puppy. He wrote and erased the length and breadth of half a dozen telegraph forms before he evolved a suitable communication. And finally he thrust the lengthy message through the wicket at the operator. The man pawed over the sheets.

"All one message?" he asked incredulously.

"One message," Rock assured him.

He counted the words.

"Gee whiz, partner, that'll cost you a young fortune," he said in a tone compounded of surprise and awe. "That ain't a telegram. It's a letter."

"Send her just the same," Rock requested. "And get it on the wire as soon as you can. How long will it take to get an answer?"

"Depends. It'll have to be relayed from St. Paul to Chicago and then to Fort Worth. With close connections and your man on the job at the other end, maybe four hours, maybe twelve, maybe longer."

"Is there any way I can get quick action?" Rock asked. "It's darned important. Time is money."

"Gosh, money is certainly no objection to nobody that sends two-hundred-word telegrams," the man replied. "I might ask the St. Paul office to rush it if they can."

"Look!" Rock laid a ten-dollar gold piece on the counter. "That's to grease your axles. Go as far as you like to get that message hurried. Shoot her quick. I'm going to the N. P. Hotel and turn in. The clerk can tell you my room number. You get the answer to me hot off the griddle when it comes. If I'm asleep, wake me up."

The operator grinned, as he pocketed the ten. "I'll get you all the action there is," he promised.

Rock dragged himself across the street, too tired to seek a restaurant, despite his hunger. Within twenty minutes he was fast asleep, at three in the afternoon. Billings went about its daily affairs. The sound of rattling wagons in the street, the voices of men, the intermittent bang of carpenter's hammers and the whine of saws floated in through his open windows on the hot summer air. These sounds receded and died away, powerless to break the deep slumber of weariness. Rock was really exhausted.

A pounding at his door wakened him. Dark had closed in. His room was like a cellar. For a second, in that subterranean gloom, Rock struggled to remember where he was, and why he was there. Then sleep fell away from him like a discarded garment, and he leaped up, opened the door to a man in shirt sleeves, with a green eye shade, a lantern in one hand, and a telegram in the other.

"Here's your wire from Texas," he said. "Just come."

Rock ripped open the envelope.

> Act on your own judgment. Will back any action you take. Suspected this. Coming north, first train.
> SAYRE.

"Thanks. There's no answer," Rock told the operator, and the man left. Rock fumbled for a match, lit a lamp, and read the telegram again. It told him nothing, but it authorized him to act. Very well; he *would* act. He looked at his watch—ten thirty. He had slept seven hours. He felt fresh. He dressed. The clerk in the hotel office told him where he could find a night lunch counter. This Rock located. Fortified with ham and eggs and two cups of coffee and a cigarette, he sought the livery stable where his tired horses stood in stalls. No use depending on them to carry him back to the Capital K. He had ridden them too hard. But he had to go. Therefore, he routed out a sleepy proprietor and made a bargain with him for a rig and a driver. Twenty minutes later he was burrowing through the night, in a buggy behind a pair of slashing bays, his saddle and bed lashed on the back of the rig, and a cheerful youth driving.

Over rough roads and smooth, over stretches where no road at all marked the rolling land, nodding beside the driver, dawn found Rock looking down the northern slope toward the Judith country. They halted by a spring, grazed the team, fed them grain, and went on again. Midafternoon brought them to the Kerr Ranch, a hundred and ten miles in seventeen hours.

AT sunrise the following morning Rock turned north once more. But this time he rode with a dozen men at his back, the pick of the Capital K, who, when Rock frankly asked them if they were willing to follow him and burn powder, if necessary, laughed and told him to lead them to it. Ahead on the trail rattled a chuck wagon drawn by a four-horse team, tooled by a capable cook. A hundred head of saddle horses, urged on by a wrangler, made an equine tail to the rolling ragon. And every man carried a rifle under his stirrup leather and a belt full of shiny brass cartridges, ready for action.

They reached Fort Benton in two days, swam their stock, and ferried the wagon. Twenty-four hours later Rock pointed his outfit down to the Marias Valley, a mile above the western end of Nona Parke's upper fence. He sat on his horse on the rim and stared north to where the blue spires of the Sweet Grass stood like cones on the sky line. He gazed at those distant buttes with something akin to anticipation. Over there lay the solution of a problem. It might prove a battle ground, and he might draw a blank; but he did not think so. He sat there visualizing mentally what strange sights those insentient buttes had imperturbably beheld, what nefarious secrets lay darkly in some scarred ravine or mountain meadow. And, away beyond the Sweet Grass, the Steering Wheel crowd on the Old Man River had a finger in this devil's pie. Or did they? That he would presently discover.

And, while he pondered, fretfully impatient because another night and day must elapse before he could breast the steep escarpments of the Sweet Grass, he saw a rider lope up along the river flat. His men were staking tents for the night and disposing their beds. Rock rode down the bank and crossed the flat. As he neared the camp, which already flung a blue pennant from the fire under the Dutch ovens, this rider drew near, a familiar gait and color to his mount. Presently he materialized into Charlie Shaw.

They shook hands.

"How's everything and everybody?" Rock asked.

"Fine. Alice is still at the ranch. She ain't so sad as she used to be. Mentions you quite frequent. Hopes you'll blow back so she can get acquainted. You're a brave man, she says, an' it's awful strange how much you look like poor old Doc. She makes Nona look at her sidewise sometimes. You was a wise man to pull out when you did."

Rock laughed at the mischief in the boy's bright blue eyes.

"I got other fish in the pan, right

now," he said. "I guess you'll have to console Alice."

"I wondered where a round-up blew in from," Charlie said. "So I rode up to have a look. What outfit's this?"

"Capital K from Judith Basin."

"There ain't no such outfit this side of the Big Muddy, that I've ever seen," Charlie remarked. "That's the Kerr outfit from Buffalo Creek, ain't it? What do you aim to round-up over here?"

"Oh, hidden branding pens and men that hire gun fighters to shoot up other people, and such." Rock had lowered his voice discreetly.

"You runnin' this round-up of undesirable stock?" Charlie questioned.

"Uh-huh. Borrowed some men an' horses from old Al, and came over here on a—— Oh, well, call it a prospecting tour."

"I kinda suspected as soon as I seen your phiz," Charlie murmured. "You'll be goin' up around the Sweet Grass for a spell, eh? You full-handed?"

Rock laughed.

"Do you crave excitement that much?" he bantered. "Don't you reckon Nona needs you worse than I do?"

"Not for a few days. I might be darned useful to you, if you're lookin' for corrals in out-of-the-way places."

"Oh, no!" Rock said. "A few days back you sung a different tune. You're remembering things you'd forgotten. You do know something, then?"

THE boy shook his head. He got down off his horse. Rock followed. There was a clear space of dusty clay by Charlie's feet. He squatted on his spurred heels.

"Not the way you think," he said in an undertone. His boyish face grew sober and intent. A trace of excitement warmed his eyes. "What you said that last night started me thinkin'. I got uneasy. I never did have much likin' for Buck Walters. Too darned smooth and high-handed—too arbitrary. I got to thinkin' that if anybody was puttin' over somethin' in the rustlin' line, why should they overlook the TL? A little outfit is always safe to pick. So I organized myself the next day and whooped it up for the Sweet Grass. An' I found that set of corrals with the brandin' chute that Doc mentioned. I didn't know where they were, but I worked on round-up all around the Sweet Grass last summer an' this spring. I knew where not to look for such a thing."

"And you found them? Did you find out anything else?" Rock questioned eagerly.

"Nothin' to find out. The only two outfits that ever touches those hills is the Cross an' the Seventy Seven. Neither outfit ever used those pens."

"But they have been used?"

"I rise to remark they been used," Charlie declared. "Used plenty—used recent. I have a hunch they're goin' to be used again pretty pronto."

"Why?" Rock demanded.

"Well," Charlie grinned, "Buck an' six of his pet snakes are camped on a creek about five miles from them corrals—layin' low and doin' nothin'. An' there's heaps of cattle in their vicinity. An' five riders with pack outfits an' about forty loose horses joined 'em from the North yesterday afternoon."

"Yesterday afternoon?" Rock took quick reckoning of the distance and the hour. "How do you know?"

"I seen 'em," Charlie murmured. "I lay low, lookin' at 'em. I rode all night to get home. I was out of grub, an' between you an' me an' the gatepost, I didn't want none of that outfit to catch me circulatin' there alone. I don't hanker to get caught in no lonely coulee all by my lonesome."

"You couldn't see what brand was on the horses those fellows rode in from the North?" Rock went on.

"Uh-uh. Too chancy. I pulled my freight. That bunch wasn't there on no picnic."

"Well, I'm going up there with these boys on a picnic party." Rock smiled sardonically. "If you're fond of picnics, you can come along. You'll be welcome as the flowers in May. I may go farther North—plumb up into Canada. But first I would like to look at these mysterious corrals on the Sweet Grass. And I would like to know what Buck Walters is doing there."

"Will I come? Say, watch my smoke!" Charlie grunted. "You might as well amble down to the ranch with me, while I collect my bed and three or four horses."

"I don't think I will," Rock declined. A swift memory of the startled, indignant blaze in Nona Parke's eyes when he stole that farewell kiss troubled him. "You can tell Nona anything you want. Better bring along your Winchester. There's liable to be dirty work at the crossroads."

Charlie laughed and swung up on his horse, declining Rock's invitation to supper. He had an odd job or two to see about that evening, but he would join the Capital K with a string of horses by dusk. The two hay diggers, he told Rock, were good, reliable men, and, with Nona fortified by Alice Snell and Mary Vieux, it was all right to leave the ranch alone.

Rock smiled at Charlie's air of responsibility when he said that. He couldn't imagine Nona Parke being gratified at such manly solicitude for her welfare, nor of being in need of Charlie's protection under any circumstances—according to her. But it was decent of the kid to feel that way about her, just the same. Loyalty untainted by sentimentalism. To Charlie wild horses, hard riding, moving herds, night guards, the trail, and all that vast panoramic sweep of the range, with its incidental excitements, crowded the importance of women as a part of life into the very background. And so far as Nona Parke was concerned, Rock half wished that he could say the same of himself. But he couldn't truthfully. He was too fundamentally honest to deny the impulse behind that stolen kiss. He had ridden too much with Nona and watched her too often, with a clear consciousness of what was happening to himself. He couldn't help it. Damn it! How could a man help his feelings?

And he shrugged his shoulders impatiently and joined his men, as the cook called, "Gru-u-b pi-i-le!" He loaded his plate with food and squatted on the ground to eat. But his mind grew busy with abstractions. Things sometimes worked curiously in harmony toward a given end, almost as if there were a design, a pattern of some sort, a definite impulse from some obscure source. He had expected to spend days seeking those hidden corrals. Joe Stack had known about them, too, but without knowing their location. They were not something Doc Martin had dreamed about. And here was Charlie Shaw prepared to lead him to the very spot.

Rock looked away to the north, coffee cup in hand, with a thrill of eagerness. He despised murder, theft and betrayal of a trust. He was hot on the trail of all three, unless he had made an error in deduction. If he were in error, he would be laughed out of Montana, and his name made a synonym for a fool, and his works would be derided on every range between the Marias and the Texas Panhandle.

But the laugh, Rock felt in his soul, would be on another man; if, indeed, any unseemly merriment should arise out of this matter, which had already cost two lives and bestowed upon him a hurt of which his chafing hatband still reminded him.

CHAPTER XV.

POPPING GUNS.

VIEWED from the southern approach, the triple buttes of the Sweet Grass Hills rise like immense cones abruptly from the level of the plains. Gold Butte stands in the middle. West Butte looks toward the Rockies. East Butte faces the rising sun. Between each the prairie flowed in glades, carpeted with grass, dotted with sloughs, and threaded by aimless streams. It was, indeed, as if some whimsical giant had snatched three peaks off some distant mountain range and set them there for geologists to puzzle over.

Upon East Butte, the larger of the three and the most northerly, where the plains began to wrinkle and lift to foothills, like a grassy sea frozen into immobility, as it laved the shore of the peak, Rock camped his wagon. At daybreak, while the sun was yet merely a promise uttered by a golden haze in the east, he rode with all his men up that precipitous slope. An hour's climbing brought them to the top, but not to the uttermost pinnacle; for that was a gray, rocky spire, where bands of mountain sheep took

refuge against less sure-footed creatures. They had climbed to a shoulder that brought them under the rim rock, around to the head of the north slope.

Milk River lay a shining silver thread in its valley, with broken country extending on either hand, deep canyons and gray sage flats. They looked from this height into a foreign land, for the Canada line ran east and west, six miles below. Like a monument the Butte towered over the boundary and over a wilderness. In all the Sweet Grass country no man had as yet laid the foundation logs of a home. Within a radius of fifty miles the land was as it spread when Columbus brooded on the poop of his caraval, except that the buffaloes were gone, and wild cattle from Texas grazed where the bison had recently fed.

East Butte threw a long, westward shadow, away past its fellows. Its eastern declivities blazed yellow in the eye of a sun just clear of the horizon. The riders sat there, watching the sunbeams hunt slinking shadows out of every hollow. Birds twittered in thickets about them. The air was full of pine smells and the scent of the aromatic grass that gave the hills their name. It was cool and fresh at that sunrise hour, five thousand feet above the sea.

"Lord," one rider drawled, "if you could marry this here grass and scenery to the Texas climate, you'd have a paradise to live in."

Rock and Charlie Shaw had their heads together. Charlie was pointing at something.

"You can see where those three coulees come in," he said. "There's a peach of an open basin. A place like a park—maybe three-four hundred acres. The corrals are one side of that, under a bank, tucked in the edge of some pines. Down where you see that white clay bank, Buck Walters' outfit was camped on a creek."

"How close can we all ride without showing ourselves?" Rock asked.

"That depends on whether there is anybody on lookout," Charlie told him. "If there is any monkey business goin' on, they will have an eye peeled, you can gamble. Somebody could be lookin' at us now, if he was rangin' around. But we could go on a mile or so together by keepin' in the bottom of that gulch. It's timbered."

THEY moved down into this hollow, quiet now, for Rock had explained to them that they might happen on men who would not welcome visitors. The gulch Charlie indicated made a screen for their passage. It was full of lodgepole pine, slender, graceful trees, with tufted tops like ostrich plumes. The earth was a litter of dried needles, a carpet for shod hoofs. The jingle of a spur, the faint clank of a loose-jawed bit mouthed by a fretful horse; a low squeaking of saddle leather—these were the only sounds, as they rode. Suddenly the draw ended. Grasy contours showed through a screen of timber. In the edge of that Charlie Shaw pulled up.

"It's pretty open below here for a crowd," he suggested.

"How far now?" Rock inquired.

"Coupla miles."

"I don't want to show a squad of armed men around here till I know what we're going up against," Rock mused. "If we got to take action, it would better be a surprise party, with us doing the surprising. I think you and me had better scout a little, Charlie."

"I was goin' to suggest that," Charlie said.

"All right. You boys lay low here," Rock ordered. "From the edge of this timber you can look down over the slope, without anybody seeing you or your horses. If we should happen to get in a mix-up, there will be guns popping. And if they pop too long and loud, you had better come running. I don't want to stage any wild play, if it can be helped, but, if we have to throw lead to protect ourselves, we will. Otherwise, we will be back in a couple of hours at the outside. Now don't show yourselves unless you have to. Use some judgment."

The riders got down off their horses, stretched their legs, and rolled cigarettes. Rock and Charlie Shaw bore along in the edge of the timber. A narrow plateau, open, grassy, almost level, ran along under the low, pine-swathed ridge, where they left the riders. Off to the left a

hillside lifted a stretch of jack pine and scrubby juniper. They darted across a narrow bit of open and trotted along under cover once more.

"Not far now—not so far as I thought it was," Charlie said after a time. "I remember this place."

In a few minutes he pulled up, lifted his face, and sniffed.

"Say, we're right on top of them corrals," he whispered. "An' I'd say they was populated. Smell that?"

"Wood smoke," Rock muttered. But he knew that with the smell of burning wood there was mingled another, more pungent odor—the smell of burning hair. He had sweated around too many branding fires not to recognize that.

"We better leave our horses here," Charlie suggested. "Only a few steps to where we can get a look from a bank right above the pens."

Rock nodded. They took no chances of their mounts shifting, despite the fact that every cow horse is trained to stand on dropped bridle reins, as if he were anchored. They tied them to saplings. Carbines in hand, they stole warily to a point where the thicket inched out on the edge of a drop-off. They were on a narrow bench. Behind them, like a series of huge steps, other benches rose, one above the other, to a bare grassy ridge.

From the timber they could not quite see over the brow. They dropped on all fours, crawled a few yards, crept, then crawled on their stomachs and, at last, lay peering down a sharp slope.

Rock's eyes lit up at the activity below. The corrals were right under them. He could have cast a stone into the fire where the irons glowed. The hidden pens were built the shape of a dumb-bell. Two circular inclosures made the knobs. A chute connecting the two was the grip. Either pen would hold fully five hundred head of stock. The one nearest them was jammed with cattle.

Three mounted men worked in this uneasy mass of horned beasts, forcing them, one by one, into the chute. There, at the most constricted part of the passage, an ingenious arrangement wedged each animal fast, while through an opening in the wall of poles an artist with a running iron sent up little puffs of smoke from scorching hair and hide.

Rock couldn't read the brands, either the old or the new ones, at that distance. He had no need. He knew as well as if he had been sitting on that fence that the brand those cattle bore when they had passed through the chute was not the mark seared on when they were frisky calves. They carried a different mark—the mark of a different owner, deftly superimposed over the first. The old brand and the new could only be what he knew they must be, because he could recognize more than one man diligently laboring in the dust and the heat.

Buck Walters was there, unmistakable in his high-crowned hat with the silver band; also, Dave Wells, long, lean and efficient. Neither was a common-looking man. Rock knew every characteristic pose and action of Dave Wells. Buck Walters loomed as distinctive. He could swear to them.

A GROUP of saddle horses stood outside the corrals. Rock counted. Three men mounted, three working at the fire—six. Out on the flat, where the grassy basin spread like a pocket in the vast skirt of the butte, two more riders rode herd on a bunch of cattle. Eight men in sight.

"That stuff on the flat isn't worked yet, I don't think," Charlie whispered. He, too, was counting noses. "So they'll probably have a herd of rebranded stuff down the canyon on the creek. Likely be two men on herd there."

"That makes ten. That tally all of 'em?" Rock asked.

"No, it don't, darn it," Charlie said. "Buck had six riders besides himself. This hombre from the North joined him with five. That's thirteen. Coupla more somewhere. What you goin' to do about this, Rock? We got 'em red-handed."

"I guess the best bet is to go back and get the boys," Rock whispered. "We got here unseen. The bunch can make it, if we go careful. Then we'll surround these festive stock hands and see just what all this secret industry means."

"I wonder if——"

Charlie's wonder was cut short. He

straightened out with a gasp, and the contortion of his body coincided with a sharp crack above, so close that it seemed in their very ears. Rock's head twisted. He saw the upper half of a man's body against the morning sky, on a bank above the brush that concealed their horses. He was drawing a careful bead on Rock with a rifle, and Rock rolled sidewise, thrusting up the muzzle of his carbine. Partly hidden in the long grass, Rock made a difficult target. Twice the lookout fired. Both bullets shaved Rock. He loosed two shots, himself, without effect, save to make the rifleman draw back. For the moment there was silence, while an echo went faintly back in the hills.

Lying flat, Rock parted the grass and looked over for Charlie Shaw. The boy had gone over the edge. His body had lodged against a cluster of wild cherry, twenty feet below. Another scalp for the enemy, Rock thought, with anger burning in him. But his wrath did not close his eyes. He saw that the men at the branding fire had dropped irons and were mounting, and that those in the corral were stepping their horses over lowered bars.

Of course they would have lookouts posted! And if that bunch of predatory thieves ever got on the bench above him, he was trapped. His own men couldn't hear gunfire at that distance. It would be all off with him before they could buy into the game, anyway, if he had to face that bunch, single-handed, where he lay. Pretty fix! Rock gritted his teeth. He had been a little too sanguine—taken rather too long a chance. He had to move and move fast.

He began to worm himself hurriedly through the grass. Mount and ride; get out of gunshot and draw pursuit after him; decoy this enterprising aggregation right in under the guns of his own crew. Excellent! That would be a master stroke of retaliation. Rock's nimble brain saw all this in illuminating flashes, while he moved.

The fellow above him kept firing at the quivering grass tops, shot after shot. Bullets bored into the mold beside him. He didn't bother to shoot back. A kingdom for his horse—yes, two kingdoms! He could hear hoofs beating earth now. He found himself on the edge of the timber. Erect, four strides, a snatch at the tied *macarte,* the smack of his leg across the saddle, and he went crashing through the brush.

HE was none too soon. The man above was yelling to those below. They were riding to head him off. Rock could hear the drum of their galloping. He laughed. He was above pursuit, ahead of it. Nothing, he felt confident, could gain on the rangy beast between his legs, bar accident—a badger hole, unseen in the grass, or a chance shot at long range.

The second was a chance. Because he meant to show himself—must show himself, to draw the pursuers hot on his trail right under that low ridge on which his riders lay. He did not mean to skulk in timber. They might lose him altogether, and they might possibly surround him. And he was hot with the memory of the agonized twist of Charlie Shaw's face, as he slid over the bank.

So now he took a chance and bored into the open. Long, bare slopes slanted upward, contours that tried the wind and limb of stout horses. Behind, spread in open order, like skirmishing cavalry, riders drummed the turf. They were not so far behind that a bullet couldn't reach him, but they were far enough to make shooting from the back of a plunging horse a futile business.

A yell arose at his appearance. Half a dozen guns barked at him. The bullets whined, as the wind whines in taut cordage. Rock kept his carbine in hand, not to shoot, but to hold safe. If his horse went down by a fluke, he wanted no broken gun stock to stand off these ugly customers.

They would kill him with a good deal of satisfaction and a certain amount of venom. For their own safety, they must. Rock looked over his shoulder. The lookout who had shot Charlie had come clear of the timber and was converging with his fellows. The day herders had quit their cattle to join the chase. The hunt was up strong. They would follow him to hell. He had spied upon their

operations in that secluded hollow. Rock could imagine them confident of getting him. They had all that wild country to run him down, as hounds run down a wolf.

And when the bulk of that race was run, with a steep slope still to breast before he could thunder along that open plateau, overlooked by his own riders, Rock was not so sure that he would win. For a mile he had gained ground, had saved his mount a little, and still opened a gap. Now the gap was closing slowly, but inexorably. By the time he reached that bench, they would be close enough to throw lead. If he didn't reach that level, they would have him on an open side hill, and they would riddle him before the firing drew his own crowd.

Very well, let the firing begin. Rock turned his carbine backward and fired repeatedly. They did not bother to reply. They were gaining, and they would shoot when they were ready. Their horses were fresh at the corrals. His mount had gone fifteen miles that morning. The brute was game. He did not falter. Head up, tail like a pennant, he took the short, steep slope with gallant leaps. But it slowed him.

The pursuit swept to the foot of the hill. It, too, slowed. Rock had reloaded his carbine. He fired at random now and drew reply, a fusillade that whistled close. Surely those Capital K riders would come alive and swoop down when they saw a dozen guns belching lead at one lone rider.

Rock's horse scrambled panting over the brow, out on the level. Grass lifted yellow to the ridge above. Pines stood black against the sky, but never the shape of a horseman. And behind him, dangerously close, the heads and shoulders and horses of those angry thieves came over the lip of the hill. They were shooting now in a continuous stream.

Rock's horse went out from under him, leaving him for a moment, it seemed, suspended in the air. He threw up one hand to protect that precious carbine, and fell limber, slack-muscled, by a great effort of will over instinct, ten feet ahead of his horse.

No badger hole had tripped that sure-footed beast. A bullet had done the work. He lay on his side with scarcely a quiver, a convenient bulwark to which Rock hastily crawled, and, flat on his stomach, he laid his carbine across the sweat-warm body.

A MOST astonishing thing happened. As his forefinger sought the trigger, that squad of riders jerked their mounts, each back on his haunches. For a moment, the extended hands holding six-shooters, seemed poised and uncertain Two or three began to reel in their saddles. One man slid off slowly, headfirst. Then the gunfire broke loose again. But they did not charge down on Rock. He pulled, saw a man fall, drew down on another, deliberately and unhurried—smiling, in spite of the hot rage in his heart. For he knew his own men were in the fight now. Behind and above him a staccato burst of firing resounded above the nearer shooting. *Pow! Pow!* Rifles. *Pow! Pow!* Another man down. A horse spinning around and around on his hind legs, squealing with pain.

And then out of Buck Walters' group of hesitant horsemen, who were shooting still, their horses plunging this way and that, one rider bent his head and came like a quarter horse off the mark. He didn't shoot, and his gun hand was held stiffly straight before him. He had no great way to come—less than a hundred yards. He rode a coal-black horse with a white face, the same horse he had ridden the day he led his men to Nona Parke's to hang Doc Martin to a cottonwood limb.

For a second, Rock held his fire. He could hear hoofbeats coming down from the pines. He saw those who had pursued him break and turn tail, shooting over their shoulders.

And this frenzied fool was coming straight at him, at Rock, at a man entrenched behind a dead horse, with a rifle in his hands.

The hate on Buck Walters' face, the passion, and the sudden *pang! pang!* of his six-shooter fascinated Rock, even as he let the tip of the carbine sight settle on Buck's heaving breast.

At twenty yards he fired. Walters straightened in his saddle. His mouth opened, as if in one last incredulous "Oh!" and he toppled sidewise.

But the black horse kept on, like a charging lion, like a cougar launched on its spring, like anything animate or inanimate that has acquired momentum beyond control. The brute was either blind or mad, or both. For one instant Rock hesitated. It seemed childish to shoot down a riderless horse. Surely the brute would see where he was going and turn aside. He had never seen anything like that. The black's eyeballs were staring, his mouth foam-flecked with blood. Crazy. Hit perhaps. Running amuck. Rock flung up his carbine and fired. But he had waited a fraction of a second too long. The black horse loomed in the air right over Rock, and, as the bullet paralyzed him, came down in a heap, with crimson spurting from the hole Rock had drilled in the white blaze of his face.

One flying hoof struck Rock, and a tremendous weight smashed down on him. For a second or so, he seemed to be gifted with a strange, magnified awareness of all that was taking place. He could see his own men sweeping by on either side with exultant yells, firing. He could see figures prone on the grass, a couple of saddle horses galloping aimlessly, with stirrups flapping. It was all illuminated with an unearthly radiance, a light brighter and whiter than any sun that ever shone on the plains. In the midst of this transfigured reality, very strangely —wondering how that could be—he could see Nona Parke's face, sad and troubled, but very alluring.

Then, as if some one had turned a switch, it all went black.

CHAPTER XVI.

"CERTAINLY NOT SAD."

ON the plain slanting imperceptibly toward the Marias River, a herd grazed south in loose formation, nearly a thousand head of mature cattle. All these horned beasts bore on their ribs a freshly seared brand—the Maltese Cross. Also, rather strangely, considering that the Maltese Cross home ranch lay just out of sight in the valley, taken in conjunction with this foreign brand, the four riders loafing on the fringes of the herd rode horses with a Capital K gracefully curved on each glossy shoulder.

A mile from the leaders of this herd, now occasionally sniffing at water afar, the clustered buildings of the Maltese Cross stood beside the river. In a stout log bunk house, with one door and two windows, a group of sullen-faced men sat disconsolate. The door was shut. Each window was boarded to the top, so that the interior lay in a sort of gray gloom. And, outside, by the single door and by each window stood a bored cow-puncher, doing sentry duty with a rifle in the crook of his arm.

A pleasant, comfortably furnished house of several rooms stood apart from the lesser buildings. In the center room, occupying an armchair, Rock Holloway sat with an elderly, thin-faced gentleman, who stroked a long mustache, while Rock talked.

"I would like to have got them both alive," Rock was saying. "But Buck must have gone loco when he saw what he was up against. I expect, he concluded he would get me then and there, if it was the last act of his life. Which, of course, it was. Wells fought 'em to the last, the boys say. So we got what was left, who didn't feel like shooting it out to the last man. And while we were at it, we brought along all these cattle they worked over—come home from the wars bringing our trophies, you might say. If you know of any Indian fighting, going on anywhere, Uncle Bill, I wish you'd tell me. I think I'd go mingle into it, so I could lead a peaceful life for a while. This last two weeks has been much too hair raising for my taste."

"You done well," Uncle Bill muttered. "You done damn well. My hunch was right."

"As it happens, it don't matter whether Wells or Walters owned the Steering Wheel," Rock said thoughtfully. "We caught 'em red-handed, with the goods on 'em. Funny, how things work out. If I hadn't had trouble with Mark Duffy, I'd never have seen the Steering Wheel or

known there was such an outfit across the Canada line. If Buck hadn't been so eager to shut Doc Martin's mouth first, and then transferred his attention to me, as soon as he found I'd been with this precious outfit up North, I would not have tumbled to his game. I began to smell a rat when I saw him and Wells together in Fort Benton. When I got Stack to talk, of course, it was simple to put the whole thing together, seeing that I'd wondered just where the Steering Wheel got a whole herd of fresh-branded steers so early in the spring. All I had to do was make a few marks, like those on a piece of paper to satisfy myself. It's an old trick—almost as old as the crime of forgery which you bloated bankers are always hounding men for. But it was well thought out, just the same. Buck was a pretty brainy man. He would have stolen the Maltese Cross blind in two or three years."

Uncle Bill stared at a piece of paper lying on the table. Rock had made certain marks on it a few minutes earlier. To a range man the meaning was as words of one syllable to an eighth-grade schoolboy. He had demonstrated in four figures how easy it was to transform a Maltese Cross into a steering wheel. The change was easy, as both men knew, when it was a finished product on the ribs of a steer. It was a suspicion-proof job, once the hair had grown out on the worked-over brand.

"Yes, sir, you done well," Uncle Bill repeated. "I can tell you how it started —this Steering Wheel business. I found out before I left. Buck borrowed twenty-five thousand dollars a year ago last winter on the strength of his prospects as coadministrator of Snell's estate. He used that money to buy twelve hundred head of cattle in the Panhandle. But I hadn't connected him up with Dave Wells or the Steering Wheel brand. The how of it, as you say, don't matter so much now. We got to get them cattle out of Canada. My idea would be to clean everything outa that country. If Wells or Buck Walters has any kin or creditors to put in a claim, we can settle with them. Eh?"

"I'd grab the Steering Wheel, lock, stock and barrel," Rock advised. "They may have stolen that herd in the South, for all we know. No, hardly. I told you the brands, didn't I? That's how you found out he bought 'em?"

Sayre nodded.

"There's a heap to do," he ruminated. "I have this whole darned thing on my shoulders now. Say, Rock, will you take hold here for me? You can name your own figure to run the Maltese Cross till this estate is cleaned up? Will you?"

Rock sat thoughtful for some seconds.

"I'll tell you 'Yes' or 'No' to-morrow, Uncle Bill," he said. "Right now, I don't know——"

He relapsed into frowning silence. After a time he said:

"I wonder if there's a buggy around this ranch? I am too darned stiff and sore to fork a horse, and I want to go up to the Parke ranch."

"There sure is," Uncle Bill replied. "I drove one out from Benton. Say, Alice is up there, one of the men told me. How'd it be if I come along an' drive you? I want to see that young woman."

"Fine," Rock agreed. "Kill two birds with one stone. Alice'll be wanting to pin medals on us, I expect. She was death against Buck Walters. I don't blame her much, seeing he killed off a boy she'd set her heart on."

"Yes, I heard about him soon after I got here," Uncle Bill observed. "They say he was a twin for you."

"Quite a lot like. That resemblance got me into a heap of trouble."

"Maybe you could console Alice," Uncle Bill suggested hopefully. "She's a mighty fine girl, and she is going to be a mighty rich girl."

"No, thank you, kind sir. I ain't marrying for either good looks or riches," Rock murmured. "Let's get that buggy hitched and be on our way, Uncle Bill."

Sayre, grinning, went to call a man.

"I think them boys around the ranch are all right," he confided to Rock, as they went rolling across the river flats. "I don't think they are the sort Buck would mix into his nefarious schemes. Swear they didn't know he was crooked, anyhow. So I expect we got to give 'em the benefit of the doubt."

"Probably," Rock agreed, with more or less indifference. He had done his job, and he was ill at ease in mind and body for the doing. Let Uncle Bill or some one else fret about the welfare of the Maltese Cross and the loyalty of its riders. He had other things on his mind just then.

"Say, Uncle Bill, although there was not much mixed stock among these stolen cattle, there was some," Rock said, after a long time. "And this girl I've been working for is shy sixty or seventy calves this spring."

"We'll brand a hundred for her on fall round-up," Sayre said largely. "A couple of hundred, if you say so. We'll treat our friends right and give our enemies their due. I listened to that towhead boy rave about Nona Parke this morning. Always did admire a woman with brains to undertake things and the spunk to see 'em through. You tell her I said so."

THEY fell silent. A breeze from the west played on their faces, killing the sweltering heat in that valley. A little bunch of Nona Parke's horses tore out of a low place, snorted, and wheeled to stand, with heads high, watching them pass. The river sang its ancient crooning song, white on the riffles, dark and still in the pools that mirrored overhanging willows. Beautiful, Rock thought, peaceful, tranquil beyond words. The last time he had crossed that flat—— It made him shiver a little to remember. He was still sick from building a fire at Stack's feet, and his head swam sometimes from pain. But that was past. The bushwhackers and hanging squads would ride no more. There had been close shaves. Yes. Perhaps the gods had flung a protecting mantle about him, so that he could come back and enjoy this in restful security. He had no great pride or joy in his success; only a mild satisfaction, a relief that it was over. And he found himself afflicted with a strange mixture of eagerness and nervousness, as they drove in to the TL.

Uncle Bill drew his team to a halt by the kitchen door. A saddled horse stood there—a Seventy Seven mare. Rock got out of the buggy. Perhaps he had disposed of one enemy only to encounter another. He did not want a feud with Elmer Duffy. But who could fathom another man's moods and tenses? And Rock was not organized for war. Still, a man must do the best he could, always.

"I'll drive this team down to the barn and tie 'em to the fence," Uncle Bill said. "I don't see no ranch hands around to take hold of 'em."

"What do you think this is? A livery stable?" Rock scoffed. Uncle Bill grinned amiably and drove on.

Rock stood, uncertain. He suspected that was Elmer's mount, and he hadn't come there to exchange either civilities or animosities with Elmer. He was tempted to go on to the porch and the bunk house. He could hear voices in the kitchen. But he was instinctively direct. He hated subterfuge. If Elmer Duffy was there, what did it matter? He granted the man common sense equal to his own.

He stepped, hobbled rather, to the kitchen door, for he had a very sore leg, where Buck Walters' frenzied horse had fallen across him. A stray bullet had furrowed a streak under one armpit. He had been fortunate, but these minor injuries crippled him and made his step uncertain. His actions were slow.

As once before he had approached Elmer Duffy unseen, from the rear, so it happened now. Elmer was talking. Rock didn't catch the words—had no wish to—but the note in his voice was pleading. And Nona's expression was of annoyance, even of worry. But her eyes lit up at sight of Rock. And that swift change on her face warned Duffy. He swung on his heel, just as Rock called: "Hello, people."

A scowl formed on Duffy's homely, angular face. He didn't speak. His countenance spoke for him. A storm gathered in that look, Rock felt. What he could, he did, to ward that off.

"Like the cat, I came back," he said easily. "Somewhat the worse for wear. Say, Elmer, you should have been in on the big doings up in the Sweet Grass with us. Did it ever strike you that Buck Walters was making some queer moves around here lately?"

Duffy looked puzzled. After a moment he asked briefly:

"How?"

"Stirring up a lot of agitation over petty rustling," Rock said casually, "when he was stealing wholesale from his own outfit, the Maltese Cross."

"Buck Walters stealin' cattle! What you talkin' about?"

"They say you should never speak ill of the dead," Rock went on, "but what I tell you is a solemn fact. Some of his crowd went over the divide with him. The rest of them are on their way to jail. We got them dead to rights, working over the brand in a set of hidden corrals on the slope of East Butte. There's been some excitement, I wish to remark. Uncle Bill Sayre, the other executor of the Snell estate, came up from Texas. He's tying up his buggy team down at the stable. You know Bill Sayre from Fort Worth, don't you? You've heard of him, anyway."

HE addressed his remarks directly to Elmer who glanced out and saw a tall figure approaching the house.

"Well, by heck!" he said in frank astonishment. "That's the darnedest thing I ever heard of. You say Buck is dead?"

Rock nodded.

"I was on his trail. He knew it, I guess. That's why he was so anxious to put me away. He started a war, and he got what was coming to him. He had worked the brand on nearly two thousand Maltese Crosses that we know of already.

"I'll be darned," Elmer said again feebly. "I wonder if that was why he was sicking me onto you?"

"I expect," Rock said coolly. "He made a dirty break that morning, here. He was pretty deep, Buck was."

Duffy shuffled his feet, then looked at Nona and at Rock.

"No hard feelin's about that hangin' expedition?" He inquired diffidently.

"None whatever." Rock shook his head. "You spoke for me like a man, Elmer, when you were satisfied who I was. I thank you for that."

"Well, shake on it." Duffy suddenly held out his hand. "You never bamboozled me, anyway. I respect you enough to admit I'd rather be friendly than fight."

"Same here," Rock agreed heartily.

"Guess I'll step out an' say hello to Uncle Bill," Duffy said quietly. "Then I guess I'll split the breeze. So long. So long, Nona."

So he went. As he stepped out, Alice Snell from somewhere about the house espied the elderly gentleman from Fort Worth and ran to meet him with welcoming shrieks. The three of them stood in a knot talking.

"So it was you that Charlie went off with!" Nona exclaimed.

Rock nodded.

"Say, mind if I camp myself in a chair, Nona? I've got a game leg, and I'm more or less caved in otherwise."

"Goodness, yes. Here." Nona came around the table, dragging a chair to him against his protest. "What happened, anyhow?"

"Plenty." Rock sank thankfully on the seat. "I went up to the Sweet Grass with that outfit, looking for something, and I found a heap."

"Trouble?"

"Lots of it. What I really came up here to tell you, Nona, is that Charlie got shot," Rock said wearily. "I'm sorry, because I partly got him into the mix-up. He knew where these hidden corrals were, and he went along to show us. But he has lived it out three days now, and he seems strong. He's a nervy, husky kid. I think he will be all right. I sent him on to Benton in a wagon. He will have the best of everything that can do him good. He helped us clean up a dirty mess."

"Tell me about it," Nona begged. "All about it, please."

Rock began at the beginning and told her briefly, but clearly, all that had happened since the day Uncle Bill Sayre called him into Fort Worth and laid a mission on his shoulders, down to the present. She sat staring at him, mute, impassive-faced, but with a queer glow in her eyes.

"I am glad that man is dead," she said at last. "Now we can all go about our business, easy in our minds."

"Can we?" Rock said. "I wonder?

What was Elmer so earnest and so eloquent about when I came in?"

Nona flushed.

"Oh, pestering me to marry him, as usual," she said. "He makes me tired."

"Yes? And I have a sort of feeling in my bones that when I get all right again, if I should come back to work for you again, I'd make you tired like that, too," Rock said dispiritedly.

"You?" Nona looked at him earnestly. "We-ll—you're different."

"Eh?" He stared at her unbelievingly. She was smiling at him. A bit wistfully, it is true, but smiling. He couldn't find any of that old imperious disdain. A ripple of amusement crossed her face and vanished.

Rock disregarded his game leg. Impetuously he rose. So did Nona. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked searchingly into the gray pools of her eyes. He could read nothing there. It seemed to him that his heart was coming up into his throat to choke him.

"Darn you!" he whispered. "Do you like me, or don't you?"

She looked up at him with a smile, just the faintest quiver of a smile.

"To tell the truth," she said, in a breathless sort of tone, "I like you a heap—and that's saying a lot—for me."

A minute or so later, Rock tilted her head away from his breast, to stare down at her with a strange misgiving. The gray eyes uplifted to his own were wet, shiny and filled with tears."

"Why, honey," he asked, "what's the matter? What's gone wrong now?"

"You silly thing," she murmured. "Don't you know that there are two times when every woman cries? When she's very sad, and when she's very happy. And I'm certainly not sad!"

"The Strongest Man on Earth," by Roy Norton, in the next issue of THE POPULAR, *is a regular two-dollar book. The story is laid in the most appealing locales imaginable—the circus and the Arabian desert.*

VIEW OF A CITY SKY LINE

THE variety of architecture seen in the sky line of an American city is bewildering to one who attempts to classify it, and yet charming to the layman, because of its very audacity. In this country, we have taken at random from all the architectural forms in history, using each form to suit our own whims—and to the rocks with criticism. We are not worried by incongruity, for we know that there is a real beauty in this careless assorting of types. It is not enough merely to pass off American architecture with a contemptuous shrug, with the observation that we have no native style, and that we must, therefore, ape other lands. Emerson has unwittingly defended, in one of his essays, the seeming inconsistencies seen in metropolitan sky lines. Regarding New York City from one of the East River bridges, one sees a vast skyscraper pointing upward like the magnified spire of some Gothic cathedral, and, right next to it, a squat office building of some thirty stories, built with ponderous Roman severity. Not far away, one may see a Venetian palace, set close to a bank building with a façade of Egyptian columns, such as Cleopatra must have passed through many times in her life. Moorish temples, Greek residences and Turkish domes may rub elbows in the next block. One skyscraper goes up and up, and, at the very top, there is a house that might have been taken from a Swiss mountainside—a chalet. The roof is gabled and painted green. And why not? This is all but part of that sturdy American independence that laughs gayly at traditions. We have an entirely new kind of architecture that shows itself in everything we do, and all these apparent inconsistencies are reconciled in its consideration—the inner architecture of our spirit, a stancher form than all the others. This is the country of the grin!

The High Price of Bangles

By Captain Ralph R. Guthrie

Author of "The Savage Core," "The Wedding in Gulkana," Etc.

The story of a man who, thinking he loved a little human bangle, managed to get into rather a tangle. Presented, by large, from a humorous angle.

THE love of bangles—glittering, prismatic, iridescent bangles—flashing from the round, white arms of beauty, or from the graceful circlet of a chandelier—wherever found, in whatever form—is a passion springing from sources too deeply hidden to be uprooted by such culture as can impregnate the soul of man in the span of a short lifetime.

The "Widow" Lee, handsome in the autumnal weeds of a nearly extinct mourning, fairly vibrated with the frustrated desire to be as sparkling as the paste jewelry around a soubrette's neck.

"I am," she informed Bill Rowland one evening, after a gay party in the Helpful Rest Road House, "just like one of those diamond tiaras. Me and diamonds don't show up well in the dark. The man who makes a marital gem out of little Emmy, had better figure on at least a million for the setting."

"Then I reckon you don't love me as you ought, Emmy," gloomily muttered Bill, the boss stone mason, with his eyes bent on his work-worn fists. "You know I could never make the grade. You know mighty darned well I couldn't."

But the widow sighed and nestled her blond head against the knotted muscles of his arm, causing the pulses therein to quicken hilariously.

"I'm not so sure about that," she cooed. "As for loving you—of course I do! I'm just the sort of woman who can make men do things—attract lovers only to send them inspired out into the world to set the rivers afire with their deeds. I'm worth more than an empty-handed young man, Bill! Get your million and come back and get me."

This would have sounded very selfish and egotistical to anybody but the moonstruck and simple-minded Bill Rowland. To him it meant only one thing: Emmy

Lee was a straight-from-the-shoulder hitter and a fair-minded lady in addition to her countless other charms. Some girls would have taken a chance on those big hands of his and asked nothing further until after the ceremony; but Emmy must have a setting. She came high. She would be his only in exchange for a million dollars.

"Gosh! What a woman! Just like one of those bangles," he thought.

Bangles were to play a considerable part in the life of Bill Rowland. In a short time, responding to the centripetal-centrifugal force of the kind of a woman "who can make men do things," he went faring forth into the world, along dim trails in hyperborean latitudes, claiming fellowship, at last, with that great army of sturdy beggars who importune Nature with their alms pans in the gold diggings of Alaska. As he mushed and sluiced over hundreds of miles of mountains, along a score of obscure and nameless creeks, his mind amused itself conjuring up pictures of Emmy Lee in the various regal settings a million can buy. She wanted bangles. *She* was the bangle *he* wanted.

AT last he ran across others who wanted such things. There was Jim Lott, who possessed a wife and sufficient worldly belongings and should have been happy, but he was not, because he wanted a little sparkle in his igloo under the drifts. Every person he met on his travels was practically in the same fix, among them being little Nuluka, who could not be compared with Emmy Lee, except that they both——

Well, the desire to scintillate is more nearly universal than Bill thought. And in isolated communities, under the midnight sun, transportation costs must be reckoned on top of the normal price of luxuries.

From a Kentucky county seat to the Upper Yukon, and thence a thousand dog-team miles northwest, beyond the Kobuk, and east and north to Nigatuk, and again east and south into the mysterious Endicott Range, with its heaven-piercing peaks rip-sawing the summer skies, to Kugura, a native village which has been there since remote ages and owes its existence to the transient and perennial caribou supply—is a long call.

Kugura has seven hundred souls; but, what is of far greater importance to the chance wayfarer, four times that number of dogs. Bill Rowland was particularly interested in the malemutes and had turned aside to get a new team from the surplus of Chief Iktikutu. Here he learned that another white man was in the vicinity, sluicing for grub money. So Bill decided to pitch camp.

All things considered, Kugura was the best native village Rowland had yet seen. There were some hot springs there which tempered the climate and kept the grass green on certain areas the year around. Vegetables grown in its local gardens, taking full advantage of two months of constant daylight, were twice the size of any in the States and far more succulent. There was an abundance of game and fish.

"I'll stay here," announced Bill, "until I've high-graded a few pokes, and my memory of the trail has sort of seared over. Then I'll mush on."

So he took a neat little cabin, built a stove out of an old gasoline drum, knocked up a birch-pole bunk, and scoured the village for a picture calendar to add the subtle touch of a cultivated taste to his abode. Nuluka had one that suited him exactly—a polyglot composition in color, showing a beefy Chicago lady, dressed like an Egyptian dancing girl, looking through a grove of stately oaks at the Taj Mahal. Its title was "A Dream of India."

"Say, gal, that's swell!" sighed Bill. "Just as natural as life, and Injia all over. What you ketchum this picture?"

"No ketchum," replied Nuluka, suddenly interested in her moccasins. "Me give um."

"You give it! Nice gal!"

Nuluka really deserves more credit for her part in the transaction than here appears, because, being the youngest and favorite daughter of old Chief Iktikutu, she was in more of a position to demand than to dispense gifts. Besides, a calendar such as this is worth more than two malemute pups and a hundred pounds

of dried fish—to any Eskimo maiden. This particular object of art was several years old and the only one in Kugura.

BILL took it proudly home, and thereafter his Sundays came on Tuesdays, which did not annoy him much, because he was living in the wrong month, anyway. What *did* concern him was the newfound knowledge that, despite his yearling beard and sunburned features, there was still that about him which made him desirable to a girl's heart. He thought he would like to hear something more of this youngster princess, so he wandered over to the cabin of Jim Lott to ask questions of Mrs. Lott, who happened to be Nuluka's elder sister. Mrs. Lott's dark and slightly almond eyes twinkled angrily.

"My sissy Nuluka, she go ketchum make you present big pictoo; you ketchum pictoo he belong me," she announced sourly.

"How ketchum old your sissy?" demanded Bill irrelevantly. "You know how old, Imoka?"

The sister of Nuluka held up all her plump digits, dropped her left land, and held up five, indicating fifteen.

"She dam' fool give you pictoo belong him me," she added. "She think, mebbeso, ketchum pictoo back—you, too."

Jim Lott explained:

"They're sort of rivals for first place in Kugura," he said. "When I came up here, Nuluka was only a little brat, and all she was good for was to chew skins for parkas. Even then there was jealousy between them. When I learned their language, and after Imoka and I were married all right and tight according to tribal law, I got to tellin' 'em about social affairs among white women. Squaws who marry white men, like me, I said, are the top o' the heap. Everybody respects 'em, says I. Anyway, I says, a woman is the big boss when he has lots of fine things, which my wife, as a squaw-man's woman, has."

"That argument is sound enough to suit anybody," declared Bill. "At least, so far as Indians are concerned."

"Yes; well, right there I hit a snag. You see when Imoka took me, she stepped down out of the princess class, while Nuluka stepped up. Imoka couldn't exactly claim to be better than the favorite daughter of the chief."

"That ought to suit Nuluka, though," suggested Rowland. "What's she complaining about?"

"Plenty! She's got to get married pretty soon. If she takes just a common buck of the tribe, she's not goin' to be half as good socially as Mrs. Lott. That's why she gave you that elegant picture. She wants to hook up with a white, same as Imoka has done. That's the way the land lies. Savvy?"

"No chance!" asserted Bill proudly. "I'm already as good as hooked up, with the finest little woman in the world. She's just waiting for me to make a million and come back and get her."

"A million!" exclaimed Lott in surprise. "Hell! She don't *want* nothin', does she?"

"She's worth it. Anyhow, that's what she wants, and I'm bound to pan it out before I go back."

The squaw man leaned back in his chair and elevated his feet to the swinging door of Mrs. Lott's range. Then he turned his hairy face and allowed it to split wide open in a crooked grin.

"Sounds good!" he declared sardonically. "But what you'll do is settle down here in Kugura and marry an Injun, and then Imoka and Nuluka will be fighting to the end of their days. What's your gal like?"

Bill told him enthusiastically and at length. With almost childlike candor, he confessed that Emmy Lee was a fairy creature, right out of the storybooks, winsome, cultured, educated and transcendentally alluring. He continued to paint her in his best phrases for a quarter of an hour, until Lott finally cut him short.

"I get her," he said. "She's a nice little woman. Small and dark and good looking, with a mouth full of mush. You are beginning to forget her already. If you wa'n't, you wouldn't have to work so hard tryin' to describe her."

"No," replied Bill stoutly, "I shall never forget, and I shall make my million."

LOTT reared back in his chair and keenly eyed his visitor, a faint, sardonic smile showing behind the tangled beard.

"Gotta have a million, eh?"

"Not a cent less."

"And if you had a million, all yourn, this little whippet in the States would marry you, I s'pose?"

"She would."

"Not hankering to have it just in gold, is she?"

"Nope."

"I'll think it over," declared Lott, scratching his head gingerly. "It ain't goin' to do me no good to rush you some mighty good advice, inasmuch as it would take you a year to do anything a-tall. But I know where anybody can get a million dollars' worth of ore for the lugging. Stake your claim and haul out your ore —or oil, or whatever it happens to be—I ain't sayin'—and get it to market. Nothing more. I'll think it over. Meanwhile, you leg it down and see old Chief Iktikutu and ask him if Jim Lott can deliver one of the biggest bonanzas in Alaska."

The next morning Bill Rowland was in the igloo of the chief, listening to a weird tale.

Iktikutu, in mixed English and Eskimo, told him that Jim Lott, ten years earlier in his life, had pushed far into the Endicott Range, penetrating a wilderness which never before had borne the footprint of man, and there stumbled on a mineral valley so laden with riches of various sorts that he had returned half crazy and talking to himself. In making the trip, Lott had suffered so much that he had lost his prospecting nerve and couldn't be induced to go back. In the course of time he had taken one of the chief's daughters as his wife, and apparently he was now content to scrabble for "pay" and hold on to his prestige, as the only squaw man in the village. Meanwhile, the secret remained locked up in his bosom. And there it had promised to stay.

Back to the squaw man's shanty went Rowland, curious to know what kind of a bargain Lott would proffer him in exchange for so much wealth, fully expecting the conditions to be too hard or complicated to accept.

"Now," said Lott, "I'm goin' to tell you what you can do to get this big claim, which I was telling you about last night. I'll guarantee that you will know, when you prospect it, that it's worth more than any one million; but I won't guarantee nothing more.

"I said last night that it would take more'n a year to get to it, and this is why. My wife and I want you to get that gal down in Kentucky, and if you don't get her, we want to be sure that if you marry Nuluka—which we think you will—she won't be the best fixed woman in the village. My wife has her heart set on it, savvy? Them two females is jealous of each other. However, we don't want to stand in your way if you should want to marry Nuluka," he concluded.

"I don't want her," growled Rowland. "I'm working up to marrying Emmy Lee."

"Sure! But you might slip. Funny things like that happen up here, next to the pole. Well, all we asks is that, if you do marry Nuluka, she won't stand as high in the community in which she lives as Mrs. Lott."

"All right. What are you working up to?" demanded Bill. "I'm listening."

"It's this. My wife, which is the Mrs. Lott I just mentioned, was down to Point Barrow once and saw a hanging lamp in the trader's store there, and it had a passel of long glass beads on it that turned all colors when you lit the wick. If she had one of them, everybody in Kugura would know who is who in these diggin's—make her solid with the town. I want one of them lamps in swap for my claim."

"You don't mean you'd give a million for a lamp?" gasped Rowland. Why, the darned things don't cost more'n fifteen bucks at the uppermost."

"Ten ninety-eight is all they cost," corrected Jim Lott impassively. "But you've got to go fifteen hundred dog-team miles to Circle, to put in your order, and then you've got to sledge it back. There ain't no good trail for the first five hundred miles, so it will cost upward of a thou-

sand dollars to deliver the article, and probably two winters' work cutting sledge room for the dogs. How does it strike you?"

"I'll do it," declared Rowland.

"Then, when you have delivered the lamp as specified, I'll mush over part of the way and direct you the rest to the claim. We'll do it with pack dogs, the following summer. It's only four hundred miles."

THE rest of that summer was spent in financing the trip after the lamp and in hunting and fishing with Nuluka, who seemed to consider herself part of his equipment, whenever she saw him start to stroll off with a gun or fishing rod over his shoulder. In a few short weeks Bill discovered that he never had any luck with game unless the girl was with him. Later still, he was positive that his trips would be an absolute failure and not worth taking, in case household duties kept her at home.

Nuluka was a splendid little sport, carrying her own share of the burdens, helping to dress the kill, and keeping her tongue quiet during those intervals when a moody spirit made him desire to walk in silence. She never tried to flirt with him, or went especially out of her way to win his favor. She was just there; and when he turned to speak to her, her long silken lashes fell over the soft-brown eyes, and she poised her lithe young body, as if to take flight, should he try to lessen the distance between them.

Rowland often wondered if it wouldn't be nicer if Emmy Lee was the kind that would studiously avoid the cuddly impulse. And after he had made this first left-handed comparison and was properly ashamed of himself, he went ahead and made others. The girl Nuluka grew on him, day by day.

As for Emmy, of course he hadn't heard much from her since the day he set out on his Alaskan adventure. There had been a letter waiting for him at Fairbanks and another at Nome. He had replied to them both—then silence. You miss letters horribly the first six months in the arctic. After that it matters less and less, if the incoming boats or sledges bring you no mail. Under the glorious balance of the northern lights, the human soul obtains a degree of recompense for its isolation in the nearness of God. So perhaps do the winged yearnings of those left behind fail to arouse more than a sympathetic smile in heaven. Emmy was "no hand to write," anyway.

The snow began to sift gently down on the tundra flats in late August, and in September Bill harnessed up a sixteen-dog team and started south, Nuluka following him meekly the first ten miles, and then parting from him without a word, to mush homeward with leaden feet. It was a miserable trip, with constant upsets on the raw trail, during the first five hundred miles. It took him three months to reach Circle, but he did reach there and in good condition, and he got his order in for the lamp, received the same in another six weeks, and made a record return trip to Kugura before the May thaw.

Nuluka met him ten miles out on the trail at about the same spot where she had parted with him. Bill considered this a wonderful coincidence, since he was not expected until the middle of the following winter. The girl's face was chapped and bleeding, and her eyes were swollen almost shut from snow blindness, which should have told him that she had been coming out there every day lately, firmly believing he would be hastening home to her, Her first question was:

"Ketchum fine lamp with beads?"

"Yes," replied Rowland.

"Hum!" remarked Nuluka and, as he approached with outstretched hand, poised, as if getting ready for flight.

The only noticeable parcel on the sledge was a huge box, in which the lamp reposed, amply swathed in yards of matted excelsior.

The shanty of Mr. and Mrs. Jim Lott was filled to the bulging walls with excited villagers that night. Even Nuluka was present, probably prompted by curiosity or the native's unquenchable appetite for bright spectacles. The brilliant chandelier, with its crystal pendants flashing forth an intricate maze of colored patterns upon ceiling, wall and floor, seemed well worth all the toil, suffering

and expense it had cost. The townspeople were agog. Old Chief Iktikutu was warmly congratulatory, and Lott and his wife were in the seventh heaven of adoration and delight. When the ensuing night-long potlatch was over, everybody but Nuluka was willing to swear that Bill Rowland had done a noble thing. Mrs. Lott's future in Kugura apparently was assured for as long as her bangles continued to scintillate.

All of this was very nice to Bill Rowland, but he was glad when things settled down, spring came smiling up from the south, and Lott was ready to lead the way to the land of promise. Early in June, well laden with supplies, the two men set forth together east and south, skirting the Endicotts, pushing tentatively farther and farther into the unknown wilderness. In August they stood at the rim of a vast, long valley, through which passed a warm wind, and Lott turned to hasten homeward.

"If you keep on down this valley a hundred and forty miles," Lott declared, "you will come to its end. There will be two peaks there, at your right. Go in between them and down the other side, and you will be there. So long and good luck!"

"There's a million there and no fooling?" demanded Rowland for the hundredth time since they had set out.

"There's more than a million there, and you can bet on it," was the prompt reply. Nevertheless, Bill thought he saw a sardonic grin on the other's face, and it gave him several hours of somber reflection, as he mushed on into the solitude.

The valley's end was reached, the peaks located, together with the pass which lay between. Bill passed over with the first snow of winter on his back, and into a veritable prospector's paradise.

AT first Bill could see nothing unusual about the valley he had approached with such pains. It was long and narrow, and its sides were somewhat precipitous, with ranges of the Endicotts on either side. In the middle distance was a lake which reflected darkly the lordly mountains and the stunted birch. It was about as completely hidden as a valley could be, and a single glance sufficed to tell him that there was but the one line of approach beneath his feet. This was not a trail, either, but a sort of slide, which a skillful man might negotiate precariously.

It was only after two days spent in the valley that Bill began to realize that it was indeed different from any place he had so far visited. Lott had warned him that the only drinking water was to be found near the descent—a tiny dripping spring which issued out of a crack and was promptly devoured by the powdered shale siftings beneath. He had told him, however, that he must reach the lake before the real value of the prospect could be determined. That meant that he would have to return approximately twelve miles every third day in the summertime to fill his water bag. In the wintertime, of course, melted snow would suffice. Nevertheless it was unhandy.

The next thing that struck him forcibly was the utter absence of any kind of game, including birds—and the silence. There was no wind when he got down off the pass.

Pushing on energetically, he could make only five or six miles a day. Dogs he had none, for Lott had taken all back with him because, he had declared, there would be no feed for them. The valley was practically enmeshed with darting glacial currents which appeared and tasted soapy from seeping oil from the shale beds.

Oil! He thought he knew now of what the alleged wealth of the valley consisted. He divined why the lake looked like ink, the nearer he approached it; why there was no game, no fish, and no drinking water except high up on the mountainsides. His very footprints oozed full of the murky, slimy fluid which more and more, day by day, went to drive the spindles of the world, which, in short, made the wheels go round.

By noon of the third day he was rationing his drinking water, but he stood on the brink of the lake and beheld what is probably the most tremendous surface oil pool in the world—a bottomless, still, black reservoir of fluid wealth. Millions

of barrels of it, confined in a lake half a mile wide by seven in length.

Bill sampled it, tasted it, and at last used a double handful to start a fire of green birch wood. He could not drink it, however; but a light snow had fallen. There was nothing to worry about until next spring.

His elation was not unaccompanied by grave doubts. A practical man like Bill Rowland was bound to know that here transportation would be the big thing. Here were millions in oil, but where was the market? Over fifteen hundred dog-team miles away it was, and even if it was just over the Endicotts, how the blazes could it be managed? There are many places beyond the arctic circle where oil has seeped out, forming large lagoons, and an oil company has corralled most of them, but apparently it has found no means of egress.

"Well," declared Bill to himself, as he prepared to make permanent camp, "there is all winter ahead to think it out. At least, I'm better off than I was. I have Jim's claim all sewed up in writing, and I'm on the spot. How can a man consider himself gypped when he gets a regular bonanza for a hanging lamp?"

Nature was kind in furnishing firewood and oil to keep him warm. He contrived a birch-wood shack, like an igloo, and built a stove of stone. After a while he constructed a large basin to catch snow water, but he couldn't keep out the taste of oil, and finally he had to abandon it until spring. In September he recrossed the mountains, killed a couple of caribou, and, after heroic battles with the slippery heights in zero weather, got his meat home and cached. For nine months thereafter he lived on a short ration of caribou stew and tea, and he came out of the long winter as thin as a razor-back shoat. He was so despondent by that time that he was almost ready to give up his fortune in disgust.

BUT with spring came bears, and in May a small "brownie" fell before his rifle and was lugged into the valley and to his shanty, piecemeal. When the ground thawed, the snow water became tainted again, so he spent the month of June completing his reservoir; and then there was no more rain, so he was obliged to transport water the full length of the valley in skins. Until now he had been too busy keeping alive to give much thought to his great wealth.

He decided to complete the exploration of the valley. This he undertook very painstakingly, covering every inch of the mountain walls. There was no other outlet than the pass that had let him in, and that was too steep to be considered. Twice he was obliged to go outside to find food, and then, all too soon, winter bared its teeth against him, and he had to take thought of his food cache. By the time he had slaughtered four caribou, he was fully disgusted with himself, like many another millionaire who doesn't know what to do with his wealth. He spent the winter making up his mind to abandon the claims and all it stood for, in the spring.

But Bill wintered well on a strictly carnivorous diet. June came, with its warm, invigorating air and thoughts of Emmy Lee hopefully waiting. He went out after some more meat, refilled his reservoir, and resumed his investigations, intending to sketch his holdings thoroughly, prepare a feasible plan of getting the oil out of the valley, and return to civilization to chance selling out on a wildcat prospectus. He did not leave that winter, however, for in prodding around the eastern end of the valley he discovered an inconceivably huge deposit of tin ore, and tin is worth eight hundred dollars a ton. He was willing to swear that there were a thousand tons scattered about. If he could figure out a scheme of getting the tin transported to Fairbanks, he would be able partly to finance a way out for the oil.

The third winter in the valley was the worst one he had ever experienced. Long before spring came, he ran completely out of meat and was obliged to live on strips of bear and caribou hide, boiled with reindeer moss.

He began to suffer from malnutrition and finally from actual starvation. At last he pulled up stakes and struck out over the pass, looking for snowshoe rab-

bits and ptarmigan, finding scarcely enough to keep body and soul together, camping at night on the lee side of boulders and sometimes in snowdrifts. The horror of two months' constant battling against grim disaster wore down his resistance and led him so far afield that he lost his directions, and summer found him hundreds of miles distant from his claim, staggering, hollow-eyed, in pursuit of food. In this deplorable condition, a trapper from Kugura found him one day and guided him back to the village, at once the richest and the poorest man in the territory. Nuluka was waiting for him at her father's igloo. She had a letter from home, conveyed to Kugura by an explorer, the previous summer.

The letter was from Emmy Lee and read:

DEAR BILL: I know you will be interested to know that I was married last month to a real jewel of a man. You know how long and how patiently I waited. You never did come, Bill. I couldn't wait any longer. The man who got me you will remember as Hod Sawter. He gives me a setting such as I've always wanted. Not much money to speak of, but you know how fond I was of good horses. Well, Hod owns a fine big livery stable. Bangles like me come high.

"Hell!" exclaimed Bill, and threw the letter out the window. Then he turned to find Nuluka sitting in the doorway, watching him with her dark, pleading eyes. As he stepped toward her with outstretched arms, she poised doelike, but, instead of taking flight, she sprang joyfully and tearfully into his arms.

"Bill," she murmured, "you ketchum marry me, mebbeso?"

"Yes," growled Bill from the depths of his lonely soul. "Me ketchum, all fair and regular—you bet!"

"Then Bill," cooed Nuluka, "me wanta be big woman this village, savvy? Jim Lott he say he not know about tin when he sell um claim. You love me mebbeso?"

"Like sixty!" swore Bill.

"Then you go trade um back Jim Lott—ketchum lamp," she pronounced softly.

Which was just like a woman, whoever she may be and wherever found, and explains why there are to-day two squaw men in Kugura.

BOBBED HAIR IN THE BUSH

BOBBED hair will never be popular in northern Australia, if male authority continues to rule the bush. According to a British traveler, Mr. Michael Terry, the native industry is confined to ropemaking, and the hair on the head of his wife furnishes the raw material for the native ropemaker. Without so much as by your leave, the native husband—whom Mr. Terry observed at a camp near Billiluna—seizes a handful of his wife's hair and saws it off with a sharp-edged stone. With a fistful of hair, he then proceeds to make a ball.

With this ball of hair in his hand, he works like a saddler twining thread. Using a rough bobbin made of two green twigs, he proceeds to make a coarse string. Not only his wife, but his mother-in-law, as well, supplies the ropemaker with her tresses. One need not be gifted with a vivid imagination to see what a powerful retaliatory weapon our Western mothers-in-law would furnish their daughters' husbands if the Australian custom were adopted in these parts. Many a wagging tongue would be silenced by a threat of the bobbing stone.

Honesty, Inc.

By Mark Reed

Author of "All Motives Lacking," "Useless," Etc.

Here is a prize fighter so straight that he exhausted his supply of profanity in a herculean effort to keep another man from throwing a fight to him.

"PETE DUGAN of Moline wins by a knock-out!" As the referee concluded his count and shrieked his announcement, the din redoubled. Straw hats were hurled. Cigar butts were ejected that throats already hoarse might cheer some more. Groups of men slapped each other on the back and yelled, "Pete! Pete! Oh, you Pete Dugan!" in unison, with tears of joy in their eyes. Others equally jubilant fought their way to the canvas-covered platform, only to find that the hero of their ovation had already disappeared. Here, undaunted, they clung to the ropes and added their voices to the tumult until the Calhoun Athletic Club rocked and roared from cellar to rooftree.

All this warmth of demonstration, however, was misleading. The bout between Brunneman of Davenport and Dugan of Moline had been neither of national nor even local significance. No title had been at stake. The purse had been fifty dollars, winner take all. It was midsummer; baseball was hogging all the space, and the glory at most would be a quarter column in the *Gazette*. Yet the crowd of two hundred lingered, cheering and applauding. They had received their money's worth, as was always the case when young Pete Dugan fought, and they wanted the world to know their satisfaction.

One spectator alone seemed to be of a different mind. He was a lean, dapper young man, in a blue serge suit and panama hat. At the beginning of the ovation he had put on his yellow gloves, hunted up his cane under his chair, and withdrawn to one side of the hall. Here he had lighted a cigarette and given himself over to a thoughtful scrutiny of the crowd, his worldly restraint contrasting sharply with the rough-and-ready spontaneity of the Calhoun club members. He had seen similar scenes of turbulent enthusiasm in the East. It was the same

everywhere—East or West, North or South. Men would pawn their watches to see a good fight.

"By George!" he thought. "I'll do it. There's more than one way to get out of this town!"

MAKING his way through the crowd, he opened a narrow door in back and picked his way down the dark stairs which led to the showers and lockers in the basement.

Pete Dugan was lying supine on a long table, indifferent to the sounds of victory going on over his head. He had taken a good deal of punishment, but his thick chest and powerful jaw were equal to it, and, as he rested there, with eyes closed, he had not a thought in the world beyond the orange that he was contentedly sucking. Over him, thumping and pummeling his bruised muscles, stood a young Swede, with a heavy shock of yellow hair. In the morning Ole Linstad was a tailor; during the rest of his day he applied the knowledge of physical training, which he had brought over from his native country, to the welfare of Pete Dugan, or played pinochle.

It was upon this picture of rest and rehabilitation that the dapper young man of the panama hat and the slender cane entered. Approaching the big fellow on the table, he extended his hand.

"Dugan," he said, "you put up a good fight."

Dugan opened one eye. "Yeah?" he said.

"My name's Conger."

At sound of this name, the conqueror of Bill Brunneman rose abruptly on his elbow and exchanged a fearful glance with his rubber. Then he saw with relief that this Conger was not the Conger he recalled, and Dugan sank back comfortably. The visitor slowly circled the table, obviously for the purpose of getting a thorough view of the figure upon it.

"What did you weigh in at?"

"One hundred and fifty-eight, sir," volunteered the rubber, seeing Dugan was silent.

"Middleweight, eh? How old is he?"

"Yust twenty-four, ban't you, Pete?"

Dugan nodded curtly. Who the bloody blazes was this dude, snooping around here, anyway? Dugan returned to his orange and motioned Ole to get to work. The visitor, however, was in no way dismayed by the lack of reception. He renewed his cigarette, hummed a few bars of, "Way Down South in Dixie," and waited for his personality to sink in. Already he saw that the rubber was becoming impressed.

"Has he been fighting long?"

"Four years, sir, off and on. He has knock out six fellar and won eleven decision."

"Aw, shut up, Ole," muttered the recumbent fighter; "he ain't interested."

"On the contrary, Dugan," interrupted the visitor, "I am vastly interested. Pardon a personal question, but are you making your living with the gloves?"

The figure on the table held silent.

"I t'ank you ought tell him, Pete."

"Aw, you can tell him if you want."

Ole Linstad was nothing loath. He would rather talk about Pete Dugan than eat.

"Ay tell you, Mr. Conger," he croaked, "Pete is good, but nobody but yust a few of us knows it yet. He don't make whole lot of money when he fights, so he has a yob on the side."

Young Conger smiled. "Has a job on the side, has he? What at?"

"He be night watchman at the E. C. Conger factory, sir."

The dapper young visitor's smile turned into a roar of joy.

"Hey, what's the joke?" demanded Dugan, sitting up abruptly.

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering. Does the old man know it?"

Dugan considered.

"Shure, I don't know as he ever heard of me. But he will; so what's so damn funny about that?"

"No offense, Dugan. It just happens the old boy is my father."

Dugan's jaw dropped. "Yeah," he said, surveying his visitor with sudden interest.

"Yes," went on young Conger airily, "I've been representing the old man's business in the East for several years. Now I'm helping him out at the factory, temporarily. By the way, while you're

off fighting, who watches that confounded hell hole?"

An angry light showed in Dugan's eyes.

"Hey, I'm not sneakin' out on me job! I get one night a week off, and on that night I fights, if I can."

"Sure, sure. I get the idea."

Young Conger's brow knit heavily, and he walked around the table, humming to himself, his mind apparently on far-away matters. Then he stopped abruptly and brought down his cane upon the table with a sharp smack.

"Dugan," he said, "you look good to me."

"Yeah?"

"And I know what I'm talking about. I've been following the ring in the East. Seen all the big fighters. Know all the big promotors personally. As a matter of fact, I've been wanting to get into the game, myself. Only difficulty was that I couldn't find my man. Dugan, you're the man I'm looking for."

"Yeah?"

"Come under my management, and in two years I'll put you across. Well, how's it listen to you?"

THE big fellow swung his legs over the edge of the table and stared, running his hands awkwardly through the short bristles on the top of his head. Ole watched him, his dull-blue eyes wide with excitement.

"Pete," he begged, "why don't you say something?"

"No trouble about terms, I assure you," went on young Conger affably. "Well, how about it? Will you take me up?"

Dugan, overcome with emotion, ransacked his mind for adquate words.

"Will—will a duck swim!" he finally managed to exclaim.

Half an hour later, in the writing room of the Planters' Hotel, over two bottles of near beer, they drew up an agreement. Young Conger was to furnish all needed capital, take Dugan East, put him in training, and, as soon as Dugan was ready for bigger company, make his matches for him. The terms were a fifty-fifty split on all profits.

"Think that's fair, don't you?"

"Shure," said Dugan, "that's fair."

Young Conger looked at his new acquisition, scarcely able to conceal his amusement. In his clothes, the recent conqueror of Bill Brunneman was not impressive. Unfortunately, he was not tall—if he had been, he would have been heavyweight timber—and all his weight was centered about his shoulders, chest and head. In fact, the whole upper part of him seemed bursting from his clothes. His neck was practically as wide as his head, and, if anything, his jaw was broader than his forehead, while his close-cropped hair stood up with a straightness that gave the upper part of his face the air of being in constant terror. But this terror was offset by his mouth and eyes which combined into a perpetual grin of guileless good nature. It seemed incredible to young Conger that this raw young husky could be about his own age. He felt fifteen years older, and, as he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror before them, he realized that he looked it. It gave him a sense of security.

"Now, then," he said, "we're all set. Throw up your job, and we'll start East to-morrow afternoon."

"I can't go to-morrow."

"Of course you can. You've got to. I want to get out of this hole!"

Dugan's jaw stiffened, and for the first time young Conger realized just how massive and square the jaw that he intended to promote was.

"I gotta work my week out," said Dugan. "Help's scarce. They may be havin' trouble to find a new watchman."

"Oh, that's *their* worry."

Dugan shook his head.

"I gotta work my week out," he repeated.

Young Conger laughed and gave in, deciding he would wait till they were out of town before he put the screws on. As they rose to separate, he raised his glass.

"Heads up!" he said. "Here's to Pete Dugan, future middleweight champion."

A flush of pleasure swept over the young Irishman's face. He picked up his glass, when suddenly it crushed to pieces in his hand, the liquid running out in little jets through his fingers. In

the intensity of his excitement he had squeezed the glass too hard. For some reason young Conger felt uncomfortable. There was a whole-hearted power about the callow young one-hundred-and-sixty-pounder that gave him misgivings. He felt much as he did once at the age of fifteen, when his father had just given him an enormous Boston bulldog, and he had wondered if such a ferocious beast would ever acknowledge him as master. But his mood, as he slapped Dugan on the shoulder in farewell, was one of the airiest self-assurance.

"Won't be able to see you to-morrow, old man," he said. "I have the financial ends of our partnership to attend to. Take care of yourself."

THE next morning Dugan was up bright and early to collect his purse from the Calhoun Athletic Club. He put in a busy day receiving congratulations and paying his bills preparatory to leaving town. More than one of his friendly creditors was inclined toward generosity when the Calhoun club marvel approached with his slender roll.

"Oh, forget it, Pete!" they said. "Take it with you for luck!"

On each occasion, however, Dugan knitted his brows and went into a trance of hard thought.

"Hell, no!" he would finally ejaculate. "Kape it for luck, yersilf!" And then he hurried off before they could argue the matter, leaving the money behind him.

Two days elapsed before Dugan was informed that a man had been found to take his place, and he hastened to apprize his manager of the fact. Young Conger was in bad temper.

"Well, it's about time!" he said. "We'll clear out on the seven-thirty train in the morning. I'll attend to reservations. All you have to do is meet me at the station. Get that?"

"Yeah," said Dugan thoughtfully, "I think so."

That night, as the budding middleweight stepped off the trolley on the outskirts of the city, for his last night's work, a feeling of sadness and depression came over him. There lay the E. C. Conger plant before him, its windows dark, a single plume of white smoke floating from its tall chimney out into the starlit sky. Dugan's guardianship of this huge plant for three years had meant a lot to him. Not a few authorities would have told him at the outset that the position of night watchman in a furniture factory was not the prescribed way in which to train for big guarantees. They would probably have suggested iron foundries, or the Michigan woods. But, as it had turned out, the night job had not done so badly by him. He had had his mornings to sleep and his afternoons for gym and road work. And more than one of his bouts had been won because the less fortunate tyro facing him had spent the day shoveling coal or driving a truck, and hence had entered the ring with a tired feeling.

Ordinarily Dugan made his rounds in thirty to forty minutes, which gave him twenty minutes to doze or chat with the engineer, who shared his midnight vigils before he started out again. But to-night a peculiar conscientiousness animated him, and he began to do his rounds in half-hour turns, poking into out-of-way places, performing his duties with the thoroughness of a man who is facing his last opportunity to give full measure. Frequently he and the engineer "swapped off;" that is, Dugan stoked, and the engineer did the rounds. But to-night at this suggestion, Dugan balked.

"Nothin' doin'," he said. "I'm too nervous to stay still."

"I don't wonder at that," returned the other. "It's a great stroke o' luck bein' backed by the boss' son himself. He's a smart-looking man."

"Yeah," said Dugan, "he *looks* smart enough."

It was some time after midnight when Dugan, descending the stairs from the varnishing room, saw a faint thread of light under one of the doors below. His pulse quickened. Was he going to have a fire on his last night? He sniffed. There was no smell of smoke. Tiptoeing down the stairs, with amazing softness for a man of his bulk, he crept toward the streak of light. It was under the office door. Taking his gun from its holster, he entered. Before the safe in the farther

corner crouched a figure vaguely outlined in the light of its own searchlight.

"Throw 'em up, me boy!" said Dugan.

Startled, the figure wheeled about. It was young Conger.

"Oh, hello, old man!" he said, brushing off his knees, "I forgot to take our tickets out of the safe, and I had to come down for them this evening."

"Evenin', is it?" said Dugan, looking at the clock. It was ten minutes of two. Then he indicated with a wave of his revolver the thin package of bills which young Conger had in his hand. "Funny-lookin' tickets, those!"

"Oh, don't be a damn fool, Dugan. I naturally had left our traveling expenses here, too."

BUT Dugan had already moved to the telephone, his weapon still pointed at his newly acquired manager.

"What you going to do?"

"Call the police."

"Not on your life, you're not. This is the old man's business. It's no concern of yours why I am here, or what I am taking from the safe!"

Dugan rubbed his free hand back and forth over his bristling hair and tried to think it out. His orders were to notify the police or the fire department, as the emergency might require, and then he was to—— Ah, that was it! Old "E. C." had had an alarm placed in the office, which connected with his big white home on the bluffs overlooking the river.

The office was so dimly lighted that young Conger did not get Dugan's purpose till the latter was almost at the glazed red box by the door. Then he sprang for him.

"For God's sake, Dugan, listen! If you call the old man, your trip East goes up in smoke. I'll give it to you straight. I thought I could get him to back me in the fighting game, but the old pelican got on his high horse and said I'd have to stick to the factory. So, when he wouldn't give me a loan, I decided to take one."

Drawing a paper from his pocket he shoved it under Dugan's nose.

"See!" he said. "Everything's all on the level. I'm leaving my note in the safe, and as soon as we clean up on a fight, we'll pay him back."

At this moment Dugan smashed the glass of the alarm. With a curse young Conger grabbed the revolver from his hand, but, before he could use it, a left uppercut caught him just above the eye, and he spread his length on the floor. He rose, an expression of amazement on his face.

"What the devil do you mean?" he demanded, striving to regain his dignity. "You can't strike your manager."

"Shure I can," said Dugan. "Sit down, or I'll be doin' it again."

Young Conger wavered; then caution got the better part of dignity. Seating himself in a swivel chair, he began to wipe the bruise over his eye with a silk handkerchief. Dugan drew up another chair and sat down opposite him. For some moments they eyed each other across the flat mahogany desk.

"Dugan, you're the dumbest prize fighter I ever saw."

A worried look came into Dugan's face. "Yeah—am I?" he inquired anxiously.

"You're darn right you are. Now, listen: In about five minutes the old man will be here. He hates prize fighting. I didn't know it till I asked him to back me; but he does. Now, what's going to happen when he shows up? He's going to pin a rose on me and kiss me farewell. First your manager's gone; next, he's going to fire you; then your job's gone."

"Do you think so?"

"I'm certain. So snap out of it. If you ever want to pry loose from this town, I'm your only chance. In three years, maybe two, under my wing you'll be in green grass. Without me, you'll stay out here in the corn belt and rot!"

Dugan nodded gravely, implying that he saw only too clearly the possibilities of this sordid future.

"Well, then, come on! We've time to clear out before he gets here. We'll hoof it to Rock Island and get the first train out. How about you?"

Dugan indulged in his favorite gesture of rubbing his hand over his bristles.

"Come on! Think fast! The old man won't prosecute. Stake my life on it!"

"Yeah?"

"Well, damn you, how about it? Are we clearing out, or are we sticking here like a couple of suckers?"

Dugan ruminated.

"We're stickin'," he announced finally.

Young Conger sank back in disgust.

"Dugan," he said, "a bird as dumb as you ought to be put on exhibition and shown all over the country."

A faint glint of amusement showed in the fighter's eyes.

"Do you mean because I'm honest?" he asked.

BEFORE young Conger could answer, there was the sound of a motor outside, and a tall, lean old man, with a profile like a badly nicked hatchet, strode hurriedly into the office, his lanky limbs clothed in a pale-lavender dressing gown. At sight of the two young men doing business over his general manager's desk, he stopped short. His keen, hawklike eyes took in the packet of bills on the floor, the squareness of Dugan's jaw, and the purplish patch over his son's eyebrow.

"Huh! Thought you'd rob a safe for your backing, did you?"

The younger Conger rose, pale but affable. One could not say that he was steeled for a last effort, for there was none of that metal in him. Rather was he oiled and polished, with his tongue working on ball bearings.

"Father," he said, "permit me to introduce Mr. Dugan, the man you are keeping from the middleweight championship of the world."

The old man glared at Dugan.

"If I'd known you were a prize fighter," he said, "you'd never been night watchman in *this* factory."

Dugan flushed angrily, but before he could find an answer, his manager was speaking for him.

"But gaze upon him, governor! If ever there was a winner, he is it. Look at his neck! Look at his jaw! Look at his shoulders! I admit he seems dead above the neck, but in the ring he thinks like a streak. He's a born fighter."

"Shut up! I don't want to hear any more about him."

"Good Lord, governor, broaden out, can't you? I admit I'm a flop in the furniture business, but as a sporting promoter I have it in me to go far."

"Go far! You bet you have!

"A neat sarcasm, I admit. But from now on, I go straight, so help me!"

"Go straight? You haven't it in you. I've given you twenty chances already. And what's been the result, every darn time? More debts—more business neglected—more mix-ups with those Eastern gold diggers! No, sir; you're just like your great-uncle. He could no more resist being crooked than a snake. He was the trickiest gambler the length and breadth of the Mississippi in his day, and he has cropped out all over again in you. But, by the Eternal, I'm going to pound your uncle out of you. You're going to stay right here in this factory under my nose till I make a man out of you!"

Young Conger rose.

"Oh, no, I'm not!" he said. "Sorry, but I'm on my way. So long! So long, Dugan!"

The old man's fingers clenched and unclenched helplessly, as he saw his son heading for the door.

"Want me to stop him?" said Dugan.

The elder Conger cast a despairing glance from prize fighter to manager.

"If you can!" he said.

"Hey, you," said Dugan. "Come on back!"

Young Conger looked over his shoulder and saw the black nose of an automatic leveled across the mahogany flat top. He retraced his steps reluctantly and flung himself into a chair.

"Hell!" he muttered. "Don't I have the most accursed luck!"

This was too much for the figure in the lavender dressing gown.

"You young fool!" he snorted. "What accursed luck did you ever have that you didn't bring on yourself?"

Young Conger pointed at Dugan.

"I mean him. Who'd thought when I did locate a winner that he'd been so darn honest he wouldn't let another man steal for him?"

For the first time the choleric old furniture manufacturer took a good look at his night watchman.

"That's so, Dugan," he said. "You

had a lot to gain. Why didn't you let my son get away with this robbery?"

Dugan shifted uneasily and seemed to spar visibly for words.

"Aw, I don't know. It—it didn't seem to come natural."

"Huh! Didn't seem to come natural—didn't seem to come natural!"

Muttering to himself, the old man drew his dressing gown tightly about his thin haunches and paced up and down the office. Then he stopped and had a drink at the water cooler. Dugan watched, a stolid grin on his face. A queer pair of birds, this father and son!

With an abruptness that startled him, the elder Conger drew up a chair to the desk and sat down.

"Dugan, what were the terms of your contract?"

"A fifty-fifty split."

"Too damn generous! Got one of those contracts about you?"

In a moment two small documents were on the desk before him. Fastening his thin, bony fingers on them, the old man tore them into a thousand pieces and tossed them into the wastebasket.

"Dugan," he said. "The terms are these. I furnish the capital for twenty-per-cent profits. The rotter [illegible] my right furnishes whatever he thinks he has to furnish, for twenty per cent. And you furnish the fighting and the honesty for sixty per cent. Is that satisfactory?

"Yeah," said Dugan, "that's all right."

Whereupon, then and there, with the packet of stolen bills still at his feet, the elder Conger drew up memoranda for the incorporate firm of Conger, Dugan & Conger, and the three partners affixed their signatures. When this was over, young Conger rose, smoothing his coat down in the manner of a man about to make a speech.

"Governor," he said in a voice full of emotion, "I expect I have said some hard things the past few days. I apologize. You're a white man—and a sporting man, too."

The elder Conger looked at his son.

"Sir," he said, "it's my opinion you wouldn't know a white man if you saw one. And as for this fellow on my left, I think he's a thug; at least, he looks like one. Now, understand me: this is your last chance. I'm going to will the factory over to your cousin. If you ever pull the smallest sign of a crooked deal, or waste a darn cent of money on anything but Dugan, your goose is cooked. The capital stops. Does that penetrate?

"Of course."

"How about you, Dugan? Do you get me?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Well, it's up to you. You're furnishing the honesty. Sure you're equal to the responsibility?"

"Shure!" Then Dugan became suddenly loquacious. "Mr. Conger," he said, "I'll furnish honesty, if I have to beat that feller up every night of his life!"

A grim smile played about the old man's eyes.

"You two ought to enjoy working together," he said. "And now get the devil out of here. I never want to set sight on either of you again!"

TWO days later found Dugan and young Conger located in the East. However, for the time being they had few ethical issues to face. The elder Conger's stipulations as to advancement of capital had not been overgenerous, and his monthly check was barely enough to meet essential expenses. As they settled into routine, fighter and manager saw very little of each other. Young Conger flitted from city to city, taking in the fights, sizing up possible opponents, and never losing a chance to let his suave and ingratiating personality sink in on those who some day might be of use.

Dugan, meanwhile, was busy with an ax and the single sparring partner which the firm was able to afford. This partner was worthy of brief mention. He was a sailor-pugilist, whom young Conger picked up on the Hoboken water front, so burned out that at thirty he could not even fight in preliminary bouts. However, he was a tolerable boxer, able to go a couple rounds at full steam, and Dugan got a good deal out of him, including long and amazing yarns of fishing on the Newfoundland Banks.

"Yep, fellah," he was saying one day,

"dat school of mackerel was packed in so tight dat when de whale chased t'ro' 'em, he trun mackerel right up on de deck by t'ousands!"

Young Conger, who had entered, burst into a roar of laughter, and from that day on Dugan's partner, rubber, and all-around valet, answered to the call of "Mackerel."

The first money actually taken in by the firm of Conger, Dugan & Conger was in Providence, Rhode Island. The fight went ten rounds, to a decision for a purse of two hundred dollars. After it was over, Dugan dressed in a flurry of excitement. He found young Conger in the hotel lobby.

"Did you git the money?" he demanded.

"Oh, that's all right," said young Conger carelessly. "They are mailing it to me first thing in the morning."

The clerks had barely sorted the mail on the following morning before Dugan was carrying it to his manager's room. He found young Conger still in bed, a breakfast tray on the chair beside his pillow, and the bed covered with crumpled newspapers. He greeted Dugan in high feather.

"Well, old top, we went over big!"

"Did we?" said Dugan absently, his mind on the letter in his hand.

"Now comes the next move. I'm shifting to the coast. I have in mind a little tour extending from Alaska to Mexico City. We'll fight everything in sight that has money. Clean 'em up quick and fast. Are you listening, Dugan?"

"Shure!"

"Then we come back East with a reputation, and they think we're wonderful. Get me?"

"Yeah. Let's be after lookin' over the accounts."

"Oh, forget it! I'll attend to that end of it."

A glint of fury glittered in Dugan's eye. Seizing a corner of the bedclothes in his enormous fist, he yanked them from the bed.

"Git up, an' bring me the accounts," he said. "Mackerel an' I have got to be gettin' to work."

Nettled, but smiling suavely, young Conger set before his partner a notebook and a handful of bills. Dugan dug out a stubby pencil from his pocket and got down to business. As he worked, his body writhed with the effort of concentration. Suddenly he got excited.

"We're usin' too much soap!" he yelled. "An' too many sponges! And too much alcohol."

"Well, that's up to Mackerel. He does the buying."

"Here's a gallon last Thursday; and another gallon last Saturday; and another last night! Shure, I ain't bathin' in it!"

His fist smashed down on the table.

"That damn Mackerel's sellin' what's left over."

Young Conger smiled indulgently.

"Oh, well, let him have his little graft!"

AT this moment the unlucky Mackerel, in striped sweater and with cap pulled well down over his eyes, opened the door to report for orders.

"Mackerel," blazed Dugan, "you're fired!"

"Hold on there!" interposed young Conger, "I do the hiring and firing."

"Gwan, you crook, beat it!" yelled Dugan. "Don't stand there starin' at me!"

But Mackerel was disposed to stand his ground.

"G'wan, I ain't no crook!" he stated hotly.

"Shure, you are! Now, git out! We ain't got no room in this outfit for anny crooks at all!"

When Dugan had returned from firing his rubber, young Conger was picking up scattered bills and righting chairs.

"See here, old man," he said, "don't be so damned fussy."

"Fussy, is it? Honesty's got you where you are to-day, and don't you forget it!"

Young Conger's face darkened.

"Well, if you're so anxious to be honest," he sneered, "suppose you hunt yourself up another trainer who'll work for twenty a week."

"Shure, that's easy. I'll send for Ole."

On the way to the coast they picked up

Ole, who boarded the Denver train with ten new pinochle packs and the news that the older Conger had given out the information that his son had gone East to enter the insurance field.

"Well, he has, at that," said Dugan. "He's carryin' ten thousand dollars on me two fists."

"Now, tell me," said Ole, as they settled back comfortably, "yust how are you two making it?"

"Fine!" said Dugan thoughtfully. "We ain't taken in only enough money yit for our railroad tickets. So we're makin' it fine."

Then began their long trek up and down the Pacific coast. Sometimes Dugan and his staff trained in some small town tucked away in the Sierras. Once they were located in a cottage at the edge of a huge redwood grove on Puget Sound, with the ocean surf to put them to sleep at night. For the two fights in Alaska, Dugan trained in a deserted mining camp outside Sitka. Each time, after he had seen his fighter properly established, young Conger would leave, to hunt up some new opponent; and Dugan and Ole would not see him again until another fight was arranged, and they all met on the eve of battle.

These renewed meetings were sources of never-ending concern to Dugan. Invariably young Conger was at the station to welcome them, and invariably he appeared more elegant and prosperous than the time they had last seen him. Sometimes it was a new diamond stickpin, or a new suit of clothes, or a heavy gold watch chain across his gay waistcoat. And his waistcoats had to change, too; for, as the months rolled by, young Conger was taking on weight. Though he was barely turned twenty-five, he took on the appearance of a man ten years older. His manner became more and more suave; he waved his hands with quick, graceful gestures and paced up and down hotel lobbies with the self-assurance of a man who knew he was getting into the public eye. In sporting circles he was being hailed as "a comer;" and by some few, who had the benefit of bitter experience to fall back upon, as a "pretty slick proposition."

Dugan and Ole eyed this increasing affluence with distrust.

"I bane cooked," said Ole, "if I see how he does it. Does he rob a bank?"

"Search me," said Dugan. "Annyway, he ain't robbin' us. I'm makin' him show me the books after every fight."

However, there was no cause for complaint. In fact, quite the reverse. Dugan was rounding into menacing shape. Each time the purse was better, the crowd larger, and young Conger's battle strategy more annihilating. The former favorite of the Calhoun Athletic Club still adhered rigidly to his policy of giving the customers their money's worth. He fought each fight to the death. The papers began to mention him as a prospect worth watching, as the man who some day might dethrone Harry Kettlety, the newly crowned middleweight champion of the world.

"Gimmie two years, Ole," said Dugan, "and I'll be ready to eat that bird."

"Yes, py yingo, in two year I tank you be champion."

A week later came the battle of Denver, in which the choicest representative of the Rocky Mountains lasted but six rounds against Dugan's attack. The winner was slightly groggy for half an hour after it was over, but, as soon as his brain cleared, he got busy. The guarantee, with their share of the receipts, amounted to nearly six thousand dollars, he figured. It was time dividends were declared. But young Conger was becoming as inaccessible as a corporation president. Finally Dugan got him over the telephone at his hotel.

"How about a whack-up?" he inquired.

"Sorry, old top! Haven't a minute's time. Big things in the air."

"I'm comin' over."

"Not on your life you're not. I want some sleep. See you in the morning."

Finding there was not another train leaving Denver that night, Dugan decided to risk it. But he was outside Conger's room at nine the next morning, his jaw set with bulldog determination. He knocked, and, thinking he heard some one inviting him to enter, Dugan threw open the door. As he did so, he heard young Conger saying:

"Not a chance, I tell you. Not a chance! I got him sewed up in a three-year contract."

BUT he had not time to figure out what this meant. There were half a dozen men in the room, and at Dugan's entrance they all rose. Dugan had a sense of being precipitated into a whirl of excitement. The room was dense with cigar smoke. Two telephones were ringing. There were papers and telegrams strewn upon the floor, empty glasses and bottles on the table, and, if young Conger had wanted sleep, he had not got it; for his bed was undisturbed. except from the imprints of the men who had sprawled upon it.

Instantly Dugan was introduced. The chatter of names, which he could not remember, confused him. He only saw that Conger's companions were like himself, smooth, affable, prosperous-looking individuals. They at once made much of the newcomer. They asked him floods of questions. How he felt? What kind of blow had felled his opponent? Whom he wanted to take on next? One or two, more practical, made a joke of slapping him on the back and feeling his muscle. The rest looked him over like a race horse, on whom they were going to stake enormous bets. Dugan stared about, dazed. He felt like taking these sleek gentlemen, two by two, out into the corridor and knocking them cold. But he only grinned affably. He had come to the room with one idea in his head. and it stuck there.

He motioned Conger to one side.

"I want to see the books," he said.

Young Conger threw up his hands so hard that his white cuffs shot to the tips of his fingers.

"Good Lord, man!" he said. "Have a heart! I'm up to my neck in business now."

Dugan set his jaw.

"Don't stall with me," he growled.

The bland young promoter smiled.

"Stall!" he exclaimed. "Hear him, boys! He says 'stall.' Can you beat it?"

There was a roar of laughter. Dugan looked confusedly from one smooth proposition to another. Apparently the joke was on him. Before he could think of anything to say, young Conger was slapping him heartily on the shoulder.

"Pete, you old war horse, you run along and tell Ole to pack the duds. We're leaving to train for another fight, on the four o'clock this afternoon. See you then. I'm going along, too."

As the door closed behind Dugan, young Conger shrugged and spread out his hands, palms upward, in a gesture of complete satisfaction, signifying that he was master of the situation.

"There you are, boys. Didn't I tell you? Eats out of my hand! And his skull's growing thicker all the time. I know. I measure it with calipers after every fight."

From the car windows, late that afternoon, Dugan and Ole studied the shadows of the mountains, as they stretched forth on the gray wastes of sagebrush.

"There bane no doubt about it," said the Swede after a long silence. "We bane headed East."

The next morning young Conger saw fit to take them into his confidence. They were engaged in a half-hearted game of pinochle, when he appeared in their section. Never had they seen him in a more jovial mood. He slapped Dugan on the knee, and offered Ole a cigar. But the latter was no longer under the spell of the Conger charm. His keen blue eyes watched from under his yellow thatch with intense suspicion. For the moment, however, the young promoter was too absorbed in his own mood to be aware of anybody else.

"Boys," he said, "listen while I spill the big news. Two months from to-night we're fighting Harry Kettlety, at some place not yet designated, for five thousand guarantee, and fifteen per cent of the gate receipts. What do you know about that?"

Dugan's jaw dropped.

Ole was the first to find his tongue.

"But, Mr. Conger," he exclaimed, a touch of genuine tragedy in his voice. "Pete ban't ready for Kettlety yust yet!"

Young Conger waved an elegant hand.

"Come again, Ole—come again! Kettlety's way overrated. I saw him a month

before he landed the title. He's cheese. He'll drop to the first real fighter he gets up against."

"The hell he will!" said Dugan.

Young Conger turned.

"Don't tell me you're afraid of him."

Dugan's eyes snapped.

"Ever see me afraid of annybody?"

"Never, old man, never! Fear's not in you."

"No," said Ole, "he ban't even afraid of you."

Young Conger was immensely amused.

"Ole," he said, "you score. You're the greatest little trainer that ever stepped off a Scandahovian boat, and you're working with the greatest middleweight that ever stepped into the ring. So don't you two boys worry. I'd never let you in for a flop. Kettlety's our meat. Yes, sir, my friends, two months from to-night we'll all be right up on top—right where the long green berries grow longest! And that's the place to be!"

For a long time after his manager left, Dugan stared in stony silence from the car window.

"Be you tankin'?" inquired Ole anxiously.

"Yeah," said Dugan grimly, "I think so."

The sagebrush was now giving way to vast fields of wheat, with an occasional set of farm buildings in the distance, appearing like some collection of children's Noah arks marooned on the swell of a green sea. Occasionally these buildings were close enough for Dugan to make out the radio antennæ stretched from house to barn, or some convenient tree. Last night these inarticulate-looking wires had vibrated to the accounts of his victory over the "Rocky Mountain Wild Cat." In two months they would be picking up his fight with Kettlety. Would it be another triumph? Young Conger's tremendous self-satisfaction worried him. At length he turned.

"Ole," he said, "Mister Conger was terribly pleased with himsilf."

Ole nodded.

"I'm thinkin' he wouldn't have been so pleased with himsilf if he had just done something honest."

Again Ole nodded.

BUT subsequent days revealed nothing of an underhanded nature in young Conger's latest plans. Arriving East, he at once took his men into the Connecticut foothills and located them in a large cottage at the edge of a lake, about thirty miles from where the fight was to take place. True, for some days the hustling young manager was loath to make an accounting, but one evening, when Dugan jumped to his feet, with fists clenched and the lust of murder in his eye, the accounts were quickly brought out. About midnight the books were declared O. K., and then, over a drink of medicinal sherry, the first dividend of Conger, Dugan & Conger was voted, and the checks made out.

After lunch the next day Dugan and his staff were dozing in their hammocks on the veranda, when an automobile horn sounded, and a long, low roadster, with a glistening green body and a khaki weather top, rolled up. Out of it stepped young Conger in a linen motor coat. Dugan rose with a hostile gleam in his eye.

"Nice car you've got," he said.

Young Conger turned and seemed to consider his car's excellence for the first time.

"Oh," he said carelessly, "it'll do for this season."

The moment he had disappeared into the cottage, Dugan grabbed up a piece of chalk, with which he had been doing mathematics concerning his weight, and began to figure on the side of the house. Ole watched him.

"Could he get it on his dividends, do you tank?"

"Yeah, he might," admitted Dugan grudgingly, "if he bought it on the installment plan."

After young Conger acquired the new car, his visits to the training camp became fewer and briefer. But he was not niggardly in his stewardship. Food and supplies arrived regularly, and every few days some new opponent arrived to be battered around the ring which had been set up under a large beech tree at the edge of the lake. The camp settled down to an almost somnolent existence. Little from the outside world penetrated to this pugilistic fastness. Evenings were given

over to pinochle, or sitting on the veranda, while from across the lake came the faint sound of a church bell calling the local villagers to prayer meeting. On cloudy days Dugan and Ole frequently fished, and occasionally a newspaper man dropped in to break the monotony. But middleweights do not command heavy-weight space, and he never stayed long. Barely long enough sometimes to step down to the ring and shake his head dubiously, as he saw Dugan sparring with his partners.

One day Ole, though it was against young Conger's orders, begged a newspaper from a reporter. To his amazement he read that Kettlety was rounding into the best shape of his career, and that odds were being given in his favor of four to one. A sinking sensation came into the Swede's heart, and he tried to keep the paper from Dugan. But the latter, coming up suddenly, took it from his hand.

"Huh! Four to one!" he grunted. "Let 'em lose their money."

Nevertheless, a pall of gloom began to settle down over the Dugan camp. It was too much to ask a man with barely eighteen months of real fighting behind him to take on Kettlety at the height of his career. And young Conger's gay reassurances that Kettlety was "a cheese," "a hollow shell," and "a big hunk of press-agentry," did little to clear the air. Then, to add to the depression, a solid week of cloudiness and rain set in. The camp became dark and chilly. Mildew formed on the canvas of the ring despite Ole's struggles to scrub it off, and when one morning he and Dugan sought to cheer themselves up with hook and line out on the lake, the fish would not bite.

To Ole this was the last straw. Tears formed in his eyes, and the corners of his broad mouth quivered.

"Pete!" he blubbered. "Our luck be all gone. I tank we better yump over board."

"Oh, shut up!" muttered Dugan, and, with a look of murder in his eye, he spat savagely on his bait.

Two hours later he drew in a pickerel about a foot long.

"Look at that, you squarehead!" he yelled. "We ain't licked yit!"

On the day of the fight, young Conger failed to appear at camp, but, in his place, a gawky youth from the neighboring village drove up in a local limousine and announced with importance that he had been detailed to take them to the scene of the evening's entertainment.

The approaching conflict was being handled by Dan Mesereau, the State's most active boxing impresario, and with characteristic shrewdness he had engaged for the event the baseball park of a large manufacturing city. All the big sporting centers were within comfortable motoring distance, and, as Dugan and Ole drew near, the highways became black with traffic. Turning a sharp angle, they saw ahead of them a gray hulk of concrete bleachers. Small boys were already climbing telephone poles, ready for that thrilling hour when the square ring in the arena below would stand out in the darkness like a patch of gold. Beyond rose a score of smoking chimneys.

"What do they make in this burg?" asked Dugan.

"Brass, I tank."

Dugan scowled.

"Huh!" he said. "They won't nade to make any brass for me takin' on Kettlety, at this stage of the game."

"Oh, Pete," sighed Ole, "if you was only a year older, or if this year was yust next year!" Then he tried to be cheerful. "All the same, you can lick him!"

Dugan's jaw set.

"Shure!" he said, "Kettlety ain't got a look-in to-night."

As their car threaded through the gathering crowds at the entrance, they heard a voice somewhere, calling out:

"Here's your chance! Seven to one on Kettlety. Any more takers?"

"Seven to one, Ole!" muttered Dugan. "The saints know I ain't that bad!"

When they descended to the dressing rooms, young Conger had not arrived, nor did inquiry throw any light on his whereabouts. Under the door, however, a telegram addressed to "Patrick Dugan" had been shoved. It was from the firm's senior partner and read:

Ugly rumors afloat. On my way to investigate. Watch yourself. E. C. CONGER.

Dugan blinked at it thoughtfully for some time.

"Watch *mysilf?*" he muttered. "He means watch me manager."

Folding up the telegram neatly, he tucked it in the pocket of his dressing gown. Then he spread three blankets on the table and wrapped himself in a fourth.

"Ole," he said, stretching out on the table, "when that crook who's managin' me shows up, gimme a call."

It was nearly nine thirty when Ole awoke him. Already the preliminaries were well under way, and the crowd, perhaps with an instinctive desire to save its voice, was stamping on the boards laid over the concrete seats. The entire structure throbbed to the rhythm. Something of the fever of the excited thousands above had penetrated into the dressing room. The air seemed hot, electrical, surcharged with emotion, as though a distant conflagration was sweeping nearer. Dugan, as he raised on his elbow, saw Ole, his eyes wide with concern; and behind him was young Conger, leaning jauntily on his cane.

THE young manager had dressed for the occasion. He was wearing a cream flannel suit, with the faintest indication of a black stripe in its texture, and in his lapel was an enormous red rosebud. Dugan sprang up and fumbled for the telegram in his pocket.

"Hey, you! What's the meanin' of this?"

The contents of the telegram were obviously a shock to the immaculate manager. For a moment his face flushed.

"My Lord, Dugan," he said, "you're old enough at this game not to fall for the rumor stuff. The air's full of it, sure! But it always is. The old man is following his first fight, so he don't know any better than to take it seriously——"

"Yeah, but——"

"Oh, snap out of it, man—snap out of it! Let me do the worrying. Your job's to lick Kettlety. And if you get in there and give him all you got, the fight's yours. Keep covered up and work for a chance at his jaw. That's all you got to do. Work for his jaw."

"I yust heard the odds be seven to one."

Young Conger wheeled.

"What the hell do we care if they are! Dugan's a dark horse. Of course they aren't betting on him. But that's their tough luck—not ours. Well, how about it, Dugan, are you fighting to-night, or are you laying down?"

Dugan's hands were brushing savagely through his bristling hair.

"Shure, I'm fightin'!"

Young Conger smiled. It always amused him to see Dugan on the edge of battle. The thickset fighter's nerves, usually buried far beneath his epidermis, seemed to poke through to the air and find stimuli that tantalized the young Irishman into a mild frenzy. His mental processes quickened, too. The draft from an open door drew from him volumes of profanity. All in the compass of fifteen minutes, he scolded, sulked, shadow-boxed, and dropped into abysses of meditative silence. It was temperament, the God-given gift to fighter, actor and poet alike.

"You're damn tootin' I'm fightin'!"

At sight of Dugan steaming up, young Conger breathed more easily than he had for weeks. Once get that mass of energy, stored up through weeks of training, into the ring, and nothing could stop it but Kettlety's glove, or the clang of the gong at the end of the tenth round. Dugan, once unleashed, could be counted on to fight to the death, and in this case there was going to be no death. That was looked out for. Things were breaking right, and, as young Conger took his ringside chair, his agile fancy was already spending a fortune running well into six figures.

When, ten minutes later, Dugan climbed into the ring, he saw Harry Kettlety for the first time in his life. Kettlety was the rangy type of scrapper. He had long arms and a slight bend forward, as though he were peering down at his antagonist. His jaw, too, was long, and his face had a sour, thoughtful look. Gossip had it that he was too self-contained to get mad. No headlong rushes for Kettlety; he studied his opponent and bided his time, meanwhile keeping him-

self covered with one of the best defenses in the game.

It was not until near the end of the second round that matters got going. At this point a startling thing happened—startling, at least, to Dugan. Kettlety feinted, then let loose a right hook. Dugan saw it coming—the powerful arm beautifully arched, the glove slightly bent in. Dugan tried to block it, but his defense was a thousandth of a second too slow. The blow got him squarely at the base of the jaw. But at least thirty pounds of Kettlety's weight was *not* behind it. Dugan could not believe his senses. The blow had been pulled.

Well, Kettlety might be holding off, anxious to give the crowd its money's worth. A moment later, however, there was no doubt about it. Kettlety was deliberately giving him an opening. It was beautifully faked, but there it was, an opening as big as a church for a right to the jaw. Dugan calmly ignored it. Then there it was again—an opening through which loomed a championship. With all his weight Dugan let drive, but when his glove struck his opponent's face it was open.

THE slap rang out over the crowd, as though a child was struck in a silent nursery. Kettlety, thus warned, rushed in. There was a furious exchange of blows. Two wicked jabs to Dugan's eye sent a thin trickle of crimson circling around his cheek bone. The crowd roared, thinking that at last it was about to see some real action.

But, as Dugan returned to his corner, he knew differently. Kettlety was throwing the fight. No man, no matter how arrogant his confidence in himself, would dare leave two such openings. During his minute's rest, Dugan pondered, while Ole tenderly wiped the crimson from his eye. The scene two months previous in the Denver hotel came back to him. That crowd of smooth birds hanging around young Conger. The betting of seven to one. Then in a flash he saw the whole situation. Kettlety would throw the fight. There would be a big clean-up for young Conger and all his friends on the inside. In six monhts they would stage another battle. This time the betting would shift; this time Kettlety would not throw the fight. Again there would be a clean-up. At last young Conger had shown his hand. He was no little piker out to filch the hard-earned profits of a poor young fighter; he was manipulating a gigantic gambling ring. And somewhere out in those receding circles of chalky faces sat E. C. Conger, watching the whole business. Dugan jumped to his feet wildly.

"Hold on!" begged Ole, pushing him back. "The bell ain't sounded yet. Yust a minute. You got him going!"

"Goin' hell! I gotto make him fight!"

Below him, at the edge of the ring, he saw young Conger, his face twisted into a snarl of exhortation.

"Go in, Dugan!" yelled the young gambler. "Go in! A right to the jaw! Clean him up! You got him! Go in! Go in, for the love of Mike!"

The ensuing round removed any lingering doubts which Dugan may have had. Kettlety staged a gorgeous boxing exhibition, but there was no kill in him. Twice he gave Dugan cleverly concealed openings, and twice Dugan ignored them. The crowd began to suspect something. Cries of, "Get in and fight!" "Action—action!" "You're yellow as a pair of lemons!" disassociated themselves from the tumult of sound and struck Dugan's consciousness.

"I'll make yuh fight, yuh bum!" he snarled, and, going into a clinch, he poured into Kettlety's ear a string of epithets that would have made an angel see red.

But when they came out of the clinch, Kettlety was only glowering sourly, without malice, and to prove it he drove a right to Dugan's head and smeared it with a deft twist of the wrist and head. Dugan, lost to anything but rage at this treachery, took the clean card and wrote on it an uppercut to the ear. Kettlety staggered, and his face went white. Dugan, aghast, helped him go into a clinch, and, as Kettlety recovered, tried to insult him into fighting, but got only a few genial digs in the ribs for his pains.

As he sat in his corner, Dugan rubbed his gloves fiercely through his bristles. It

was unbelievable. Never before in his career had he met an opponent who wouldn't fight. The ignominy of winning from a man who wanted to present you with a knock-out on a silver platter appalled him. He ground his teeth with rage. What was he going to do? At last Ole had tumbled to the true state of affairs.

"Mug the davil—mug him!" he whispered hoarsely. "Mebbe you get his goat!"

Whereupon, Dugan opened the fourth round with the most insulting series of faces that his rancor and his disgust could devise. He stuck out his tongue and made queer, jeering grins. Once he put his glove to his nose, as though the stench of Kettlety's fighting was too rotten for him to endure. It was all to no avail. Kettlety boxed on. But it was all technique and no heart. Dugan tried to turn the tables and to leave an opening or two on his own account. But Kettlety was blind to openings. As the bell rang, he heard the radio announcer yell into his "mike:" "Dugan's round by a hair!"

It was infuriating beyond human endurance. Ten million unsuspecting folk hanging on the outcome of a framed fight. His jaw set.

"I'll make yuh fight!" he muttered, glaring across at his opponent. "I'll make yuh fight!"

"Mebbe you better lick him," advised Ole. "We yust as soon win if he don't!"

"Shut up, you fool!"

AS he rushed out for the fifth, Dugan went straight into a clinch. He had already hurled at Kettlety all of what might be called the popular scurrilities of the ring. Now he dug down into the muddy memories of his youth for some new ones. In his boyhood days, spent on the river front of East St. Louis, and in the saloons of Cairo, he had heard about all that one man has ever said to another in the way of insult. The referee was trying to pull them apart, but Dugan clung fiercely, and, thrusting his mouth close to Kettlety's ear, he hissed out a deadly phrase.

What this phrase was, it is not necessary to say on these pages. Suffice it to explain that it did not touch upon Kettlety's parentage; nor did it impugn his courage, or even his morals. It dug down deeper than that. It called into question his very manhood itself. As the referee hauled them apart, Dugan saw fire in his opponent's eye. Kettlety was mad. There was a gorgeous exchange of blows, and Dugan felt the full weight of a right to his eye. Nothing "pulled" about that crack! It affected Dugan like a bugle call to battle. At last he could fight. If he could lick Kettlety now, it would be on the level.

But in a moment Kettlety seemed to lose his fire and become the graceful boxer again. Dugan rushed for a clinch and talked to him some more. Kettlety hurled him off and, with a snarl of rage, pressed in on him. Dugan stood his ground and tried to exchange blow for blow. As the gong brought the round to a close, he heard the announcer shriek:

"Kettlety's round."

Dugan trotted to his corner happily. As his vision cleared, he became conscious that Kettlety's corner was in a turmoil. A half dozen men on the ground below were yelling and gesticulating instructions, but Kettlety only waved his gloves over his head in sign of total dissent. Then Dugan saw that his own corner was in a similar panic. Young Conger had climbed up and was leaning over the ropes.

"Get in!" he begged hoarsely. "Get in! Clean him up quick, or you'll lose him!"

Dugan nodded absently.

The sixth began with two terrific onrushes. One quick look at Ketttlety, and Dugan saw his purpose was accomplished. The cold-blooded champion was at last roused. His features twisted with rage; his eyes glared with the desire to kill, all his plans to throw the fight forgotten. Dugan gave a grunt of satisfaction and hammered for a tiny mole of hair to the left of Kettlety's chin. One clean cut on that target spelled possible victory. But his blow never reached its objective. It was blocked by a lightninglike shift of Kettlety's gloves, and a stinging uppercut to Dugan's eye warned him of what might come.

Dugan had hoped to trade his opponent blow for blow, and to wear him down. It couldn't be done.

Lowering his head, he bore in. As he did so, he felt a rain of blows on his skull and shoulders. So close, that he was almost touching Kettlety, he raised his head and looked up. There was his target. Summoning all his weight, he drove in an uppercut. Kettlety's face went white. He staggered back and automatically covered himself. For a moment he seemed to sink, then he pulled himself together, and, with a sudden return of energy, got in two quick blows.

The bell sounded.

Dugan groped his way back to his corner slowly. In that failure to drop Kettlety, he had seen his hopes of a knockout go whistling up the wind. Another year of work, a half dozen more big fights like that Denver scrap, and he might have done it. But not this time, except by a miracle. Ole had been right. He wasn't ready for Kettlety. Young Conger's trickery had queered him. The hell he wasn't ready! He'd show him.

The round was a replica of the previous one, except in its end. Again Dugan rushed in, and again he took a battering for the sake of a jolting blow to Kettlety's jaw. But this time Kettlety did not stop for any lip-cutting retaliation. He struck straight, hard and true. The blow sent Dugan to his knees, and for the fraction of a second a black bandage seemed drawn across his eyes; then his brain cleared, and the black bandage floated away. With one knee on the canvas, he waited for the count of nine. As it came, the bell sounded. He was saved—at least, for another round.

The crowd settled back pleasurably. There was to be more to this thing. While Dugan was down, it had been roaring like a monster for its prey. But no longer was there a querulous note in its voice. The querulous note had changed to a deeper, more contented timbre. The crowd was happy.

It seemed to Dugan that he had hardly sat down when the bell sounded again. He struggled to his feet, steadied himself, found Kettlety's bearings, with the one eye through which he could still see, and moved in cautiously. Kettlety, weaving, his long body, as sinuous as a snake's, his shoulders stooped, came in quickly. Dugan feinted, struck for his target, missed, tried to counter with a left, and seemed to hit something. Then he felt his head jerked back. Instinctively he planted his feet. The black bandage was over his eyes again. He wouldn't go down. He tried to raise his arms to cover his heart and face. They seemed to be an eternity in moving. He could feel the muscles tugging at the elbow joints. Would he ever get them up? He had never known what heavy arms he had before. He caught a glimpse of Kettlety's features, drawn with effort, a thin stream of blood coursing around his chin, one eye nearly closed. He would get that other wide-open eye, with his left, if he could ever draw his arm back. Ha! That was it. He had connected again.

But Kettlety was still there in front of him. Now—one more! He would get nearer. If his legs would only stop stumbling. He shook his head savagely to shake clear the obscuring bandage, and then he lunged in. There was a blinding flash.

IN the dressing room below, Dugan lay, an inert figure, with several coats folded under his head. Over him hovered Ole, his tears mingling with the water he was squeezing from his sponge. At the head of the table a doctor was holding a bottle of salts to Dugan's nose, while midway, two reporters were striving to unlace the gloves on his tightly clenched fists. In the background crowded a circle of curious faces, among them the hawklike countenance of E. C. Conger. Suddenly Dugan's two gloves wrenched themselves free and moved to his face in the position of cover.

"He's coming to," said the doctor.

Dugan sat upright, blinking at the group around him. At last he grasped the situation.

"Well, how about it?" he demanded. "Was I licked on the level?"

There was a chorus of affirmatives. Dugan glared with fierce satisfaction.

"You bet I was!" he said.

By

FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Girl of Rio," "Tin Hats," Etc.

Marching

THE STORY

In 1866, just after the Civil War, the Indian situation in the West was difficult, for the discovery of gold in the Indian territory had brought a rush of gold seekers, and the redskins rose up in arms. Under Red Cloud, an army of fifteen thousand assembled, and against this foe were sent battalions of very poor soldiers, composed of conscripts and disgruntled Civil War veterans, who had expected to be demobilized after the close of the war. They feared the savages and detested their job.

Commanding one of these battalions was the gallant Lieutenant Casper Molton. Of his command, he was the only presentable man, and his appearance drew the approval of General Stone, in command of all the Western forces. Stone assigned Casper to the difficult task of delivering his men into the hands of Major Foster, at Fort Appleby. The way lay through one of the most hostile sections, and Casper's reward, if he succeeded, would be a captaincy.

Arriving at Julesburg, one of the most thriving towns of the old West, Casper happened to see a lovely young lady who was watching the arrival of the soldiers. Their eyes met. But the girl vanished into the crowd, and Casper was not able to locate her later, when his time was free. This young lady was a Southerner who had been bound, with her father, into the West, because of the poverty and humiliation they had suffered after the war. Her name was Lucy. Just before the soldiers arrived in Julesburg, she had suffered a loss in the death of her father, Major Lattimer, who had been shot in a fight over a card game. Her pride had made her spurn the town's charity, and she was now about to continue her journey Westward, accompanied only by her colored servant, Anthony.

Lieutenant Molton, despairing of ever seeing her again, led his command, the next morning, toward Fort Sedgewick, his next stop. There he met Major Foster, the commandant at Fort Appleby. Foster insisted on taking command of Casper's men, claiming that the lieutenant's assignment ended with the delivery of the men into Foster's hands. Casper had to submit to this, though he greatly feared that the major's inexperience would lead the detachment into danger.

As the battalion proceeded toward Appleby, its path and Lucy's converged and met, and Lucy was forced to accompany the soldiers, for protection from a threatened Indian attack. The Indians, later, made a half-hearted sally against the train of soldiers and wagons, but without much success. There had now grown up a definite enmity between the major and Casper, caused not only by dissension over military matters, but also by their rivalry for Lucy's hand. The major had the advantage, since Casper, when they finally reached Appleby, would be under his orders. Foster, unable at the moment to vent his dislike, would then have ample opportunity. The next stop before Appleby was Fort Laramie.

With menacing Indians on every side, the little company of soldiers forged on to the relief of an undermanned and isolated fortress. There were sanguinary encounters with the savages, and unlooked-for developments in the struggle of the two principal officers for the affections of the lovely girl who was their traveling companion.]

Men In Four Parts Part III : : :

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE THUNDERING HERD.

THE head of the column debouched from a pass between two hills, in which Casper half expected to find Indians, upon a rolling plain. Here the vegetation seemed to be brown, instead of the grayish green to which they were accustomed, and the lieutenant was startled by a girlish exclamation directly behind him.

Turning, he saw Lucy mounted upon one of Major Foster's horses, squired by the gallant quasi commander.

"What funny bushes!" she said. "Look, lieutenant, they are moving!"

The bushes certainly were moving, for Casper had already recognized buffalo, the largest herd he had ever seen. As a wild animal, the buffalo is extinct, for the herds in the Yellowstone and in Canada are preserved only by man's carefulness, and it seems like a fable to relate that they roamed the Western plains by the millions; nevertheless, there are plenty of persons still living who saw the great herds of the '60s and '70s.

In the clear air of the Far West, this vast brown mass did not look unlike the tufts of sagebrush, at a distance of several miles, spreading to right and left as far as the eye could see. A few buffalo had been encountered east of Laramie, and Major Foster and the scout had killed half a dozen; but the majesty of this herd was overpowering for a moment, and the travelers could hardly credit the evidence of their eyes.

Then there came a shout from the column. Already the emigrants were riding up from the rear, eager to get fresh meat and buffalo hides; they were obviously indifferent to military discipline.

Casper stopped the emigrants with a stern command, and they hesitated, not certain whether to defy him or obey.

"We'll organize a hunt, and you men will get your share," he declared; "but you will have to obey orders, if you want to travel with this outfit."

"What's the matter with riding right at them? We can't miss hitting them," grumbled one of the horsemen.

"Because we have to make sure that the herd is driven away from us, instead

of toward us," declared Casper. "If one old bull started this way, the whole million of them would come tearing after him, and they would tramp my men and your wagons into powder. Buffalo Charlie can tell you what a terrible thing a buffalo stampede is."

"Yes, siree," declared the old scout. "Can't nothing stop a herd of buffaloes; when they start they keep right on going in a bee line, and you wouldn't even find a wagon tire after they had passed over."

"But if we fire at them, won't they run the other way?" asked Major Foster.

"Buffaloes ain't got no sense, and they don't know anything 'cept 'follow my leader,'" replied the scout. "We got to get up a party and sneak up on them—get them running away from us, and cut out our meat as they pass by. It's safe enough, if you know how to do it."

"Very good," said the major. "You make the arrangements, Charlie. Miss Lattimer, would you like to see a buffalo hunt?"

"I'd adore it," declared the girl, her eyes snapping with excitement.

"Very well. You and I, Charlie, my mounted men and the emigrants can kill all the buffaloes we are apt to need. Lieutenant Molton, I leave you in charge of the detachment. Better halt here and do not move forward until we return."

CASPER could only salute and bite his lip with vexation, for, if the major were going after buffalo, it was his place to stay with the troops. With Buffalo Charlie in charge of the hunt, it was not likely that it would be mismanaged, and Lucy would be safe enough, even though he had no confidence in her particular escort. When he saw them ride forward, he consoled himself a little that the girl gave him a pleasant nod, as she rode with the men, contriving to ride side-saddle on a saddle which was intended for a man. Women still conconsidered it unbecoming to ride astride in the '60s.

Turning his attention to his duties, Casper led the soldiers and the wagons out of the pass and turned them up a hillside, where he called a halt. If, by any mischance, the herd turned toward the detachment, it would undoubtedly plunge through the pass and might not surge over the rather steep hill.

The wind was coming from the north, and Charlie led his little party in that direction, so that the leaders of the herd, scenting enemies, might swing toward the south or west, and not eastward toward the troops and train. After proceeding for a couple of miles in that direction, Charlie turned and began to move cautiously toward the buffalo. They were within half a mile from the herd, when it was evident that the scent had been taken, for the animals began to move away from them, slowly at first, then with great rapidity.

As soon as the herd was in rapid motion, it was fairly safe to ride close to its flank, for the buffaloes moved in a straight line behind the leaders, nor looked to right or left; not even a bombardment caused them to swerve. Though members of the flock tumbled to the ground in front of them, it did not penetrate their thick skulls that there was danger in that particular spot; their instinct was to follow the cows and bulls in the van.

With smaller herds, where they could come close to the leader, the experienced buffalo hunters placed themselves so that the bull would be compelled to circle in order to avoid human scent; whereupon, the whole herd would gallop in a circle, and the hunters could drop them at their leisure, until not a single buffalo was left alive. And so sure were the hunters that the animals would not swerve, that they often ran their horses alongside of the beasts and placed their gun muzzles against their sides before drawing trigger.

But this herd was too vast for anything of that sort, nor was it necessary, as no shot fired into the mass would be wasted. There was plenty of time to reload, because the procession seemed endless, even though the beasts were now terrified and galloped faster and faster.

The dozen men and one woman fired until their rifle barrels were hot, and several score of the great animals were writhing on the ground or were lying still in death. And then the slaughter sick-

ened the fastidious soul of Lucy Lattimer. To kill buffaloes for their meat and skins was reasonable and necessary, but to kill for the love of slaying, for pure joy in killing, to drop the miserable animals when there was no possibility of utilizing so many, seemed loathsome. She glanced at Major Foster. His blue eyes were gleaming with lust of slaughter, and he was firing his breechloader with great rapidity. Charlie was as bad, but he was an old savage. She drew back her horse, turned, and began to make her way toward the detachment. Nobody missed her.

BEHIND her guns were popping, and millions of hard hoofs thundered upon the hard, dry soil; the snorting and puffing of hundreds of thousands of great beasts, and the bellowing of frightened bulls, combined to make a terrifying noise.

Imagine a great triangle with sides several miles long; the hunters at one corner of it, the detachment watching the distant hunt at another, and the third a rocky butte, on the far side of which a portion of the herd had been grazing.

An old bull, that might be likened to a sub chief, plunging along in the rear of the multitude, was turned by this butte and passed on the far side of it, to be followed by several hundred buffaloes upon the outskirts of the herd. When the butte was passed, he was several hundred yards to the right of the main herd. Now he had become the leader of a new herd, which continued straight as an arrow in the new direction.

Lucy, in her progress to the detachment, would cross the path of this upstart leader about halfway between the camp and the triumphant buffalo hunters. Unconscious of impending danger, she was riding easily, unaware that her progress since she left the hunters had been followed through field glasses by Casper Molton, sitting his horse halfway up the hillside. So intent was he upon the horsewoman that he had not observed the division of the herd until Lieutenant Jones suddenly darted to his side.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "She'll ride right into that lot."

Casper turned and saw the mass of shaggy beasts, with the leader out in front, tearing along at the speed of a fast horse. With a shout he put spurs to his own horse and dashed madly down the hillside. He was a little farther from the girl than the buffaloes, but he had a good horse which he was driving without mercy.

A few moments later Lucy saw her danger. Had she returned to the hunters, she would have been safe, for the buffaloes would not have turned; but she was not acquainted with the habits of the American bison, and she did the worst thing she could have done—attempted to cross the path of the herd. Casper waved her back, but she had not yet seen him. The buffaloes were a mile away, and she underestimated their speed. Kicking her horse with the one foot which was in a stirrup, she plunged ahead. But her mount was not a noble animal like that ridden by Casper, and he was by no means as fast.

The leader of the bison was a hundred yards away, and Casper was the same distance in a different direction, when Lucy drove across the front of the herd. By the time she had reached its far side, the beasts were only a hundred feet away, but she would win through to safety, thought the frantic young officer, who was now quite near, and he uttered a shout of encouragement. Her horse, however, had become maddened by the approach of the herd, and his instinct told him to turn tail. With a sudden jerk of his head, he tore the reins from her hands, swerved suddenly, and the girl, insecurely seated, was hurled to the ground. Then, with head stretched forward, and tail straight out behind him, the animal darted ahead of the buffaloes.

The girl landed in a heap on the ground, struggled, then lay paralyzed with horror at the row of great, shaggy heads, red eyes and smoking nostrils which were so near. But the old bull passed her sixty or seventy feet to the left, and the herd followed him. To Casper, within a stone's throw, it seemed

as if a miracle had been arranged that she should not be trampled. Then a huge buffalo, on the very edge of the herd, saw the object on the ground ahead of him and charged directly for it. Casper's gun rose to his shoulder, and he pulled the trigger. Only one cartridge; no time to reload; he must kill, or she must die horribly. He was thirty feet from the buffalo, and less than that from Lucy, when the gun blazed; the animal plunged on, then began to topple and seemed to dive forward. With a groan, Casper realized that the beast would reach her. If that great mass fell upon her, she would be crushed. What good to have killed or mortally wounded him? But Lucy, with the instinct for self-preservation which we never lose, began to roll away, and she rolled a yard when the buffalo plumped upon the ground, stone dead, his great head and cruel horns less than a foot from her. If she had not moved, she would have been crushed under him. Ten feet away the rest of the herd thumped by, unseeing or uninterested in the little drama; and then Casper was lifting Lucy in his arms. Her eyes were closed, her face was pale, and he looked at her with anguish, for he thought she might be dead. But in a moment her eyes opened, and she saw his face within a few inches of hers. Sighing, she closed her eyes again, but her fingers gripped his arm and shoulder, as the fingers of a dying man close upon a straw.

NOW the little herd was past; but in the distance the throng continued to plunge along, while the guns still thundered where the kill-maddened hunters stood.

Casper laid her on the ground and bent over her, and Lucy came slowly back to consciousness. This time she smiled when she saw him, much to his delight.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded anxiously.

"I don't think so," she said slowly. "Bruised badly, I reckon, but no broken bones. Oh, it was horrible! You saved me, didn't you?"

"You saved yourself when you rolled out of the way of that dying beast," he declared.

"But you shot him—you killed him. How did you know that I was in danger?"

"Something told me. I guess I'll always know when you are in danger."

"But how did you happen to be here? The major told you to stay with the troops."

"I was watching the hunt through my field glasses, and I saw you leave the party and start back. Then Mr. Jones noticed that a big butte, a few miles below, had caused part of the herd to split off and head between you and camp; so I started over to see what I could do."

"I reckon it was lucky for me," she said, with a sigh. "I certainly am grateful, Lieutenant Molton. If there was any argument that you saved my life back near Horse Creek, there's no question about it now."

"Please," he protested, coloring under her grateful gaze. "I'm happy to serve you."

"Then, perhaps, you had better let me get up to see if I am all in one piece."

He helped her to rise; she felt of her arms and legs, then smiled up at him and said:

"I seem to be all here."

"It's a mile and a half to camp," he reminded her. "If you will ride my horse, I'll walk beside him."

"Oh, no, sir, I couldn't force you to walk. Besides, after my experience, I wish it were possible for a lady to ride astride, as some of those emigrant women do."

Then will you permit me to take you in front of me?" he said, trembling at his audacity.

She smiled and nodded. "For the second time. It seems to be becoming a habit, Mr. Molton."

"A delightful habit."

"A matter of necessity this time."

Leaping into the saddle, he leaned over, caught her under the arms, and swung her before him.

"Laws, sir, you are strong!" she said.

The girl kept her eyes closed during the short ride, and he noticed that she

was very pale; as a matter of fact, she was suffering the reaction from her appalling experience.

FROM camp, meanwhile, the drama on the plain had been watched with excitement by every soul in the outfit, and loud cheering welcomed them as they rode up. The emigrant women lifted Lucy from her perch and carried her off. Their ministrations, if a trifle rude, would be less awkward than masculine attentions. Jones grasped Casper by the hand, slapped him on the back, and congratulated him on his horsemanship and marksmanship and the headway he must have made with the young woman. As Casper dismounted, he saw a group of men approaching and recognized them as galvanized soldiers, from among whom one came forward, shuffling and embarrassed. It was the little sergeant with whom he had exchanged views back at Horse Creek.

"What is it, my man?" Casper asked.

"Begging the lieutenant's pardon, we want to say that we think it was a fine thing you just done, suh. Being Southern men oursel's, we admire that young lady and want to thank you for saving her. Yes, sir, we certainly feel glad you done it, and we just want to say you stand ace high with us, sir."

"Thank you—thank you all. I know if a Northern girl were in danger, you boys would do just what I did."

"Yes, suh. Reckon we feel the same 'bout lots of things, if we do come from different sections, suh."

"Shake," said Molton. "If you boys want to please me, just forget all about the war and let's be comrades together."

Then men shuffled away, and then Casper picked up his field glasses and turned them again on the hunting party.

The herd had shifted a little farther westward to avoid stumbling over the dead bodies of their members, and the hunters had followed them. Casper counted several score of brown dots on the plain, indicating fallen buffaloes, behind the gunners who were still firing. Apparently, they had been oblivious of the peril from which Miss Lattimer had been saved. That a young and beautiful woman, the only woman with them, could have withdrawn, and her departure passed unnoticed, is hard to believe; but when men have the blood lust it blinds them to everything else. Bulls and cows were still going down beneath their fire, and the stampede continued. It continued for two hours longer. From the distance of the camp, the entire surface of the plain seemed to crawl, and Casper could not yet distinguish the rear guard of the herd.

Evidently out of ammunition, the hunters withdrew after a while and, dismounting, began to cut up and skin several bison that lay well out of the present path of the moving mass.

Casper turned his back upon a spectacle which, astounding as it had been at first, had become monotonous. Like all men of the period, he would have scoffed, if he had been told that the buffalo would soon vanish from the earth. As readily would he have believed that the grass would not grow or the winds would not blow; yet he was intelligent enough to regret useless slaughter. A comparatively few of the slain buffalo would provide the detachment with all the fresh meat it could use, and, as it would rapidly spoil in transit, since refrigeration was unknown, there was no way of taking advantage of the great kill to feed the column for more than two or three days.

Although the buffalo was delicious eating, it was not the flesh, but the hide, which was responsible for its extermination. Buffalo skins made fine warm rugs and robes, and it became fashionable to use them as wraps for traveling and for lap robes in the buggies, carryalls, democrat wagons and stages of America and Europe. A steadily mounting price for hides whetted the enthusiasm of the hunters, and the indiscriminate slaughter continued for nearly twenty years after this great hunt. Then the last of the herds disappeared in the Rockies and were seen no more.

It was nearly nightfall when the hunters returned, after loading two wagons, which Casper sent to the scene of the hunt, with hams and skins. Major Foster reported that they had killed one hun-

dred and eighty-one buffaloes, of whom only twenty-five were utilized for the detachment. There was not even time to skin most of the remainder, and the dead animals were left as they had fallen, to be eaten by wolves, coyotes, and other wild beasts.

That night a dozen camp fires glowed, and the company feasted upon steaks of a flavor that our modern epicures have never tasted and never will sample again. The bison, as a variety of flesh meat, is lost to us.

In the morning the men took up their march greatly refreshed and filled with an unaccustomed vigor. The buffalo meat lasted three days, then had to be thrown away; while the wagon with the hides perfumed the atmosphere to such an extent that it was placed far in the rear of the detachment.

Major Foster was filled with contrition when he learned of Lucy's experience and chided her gently for departing without warning. He also mourned her horse, which had fled ahead of the small herd of buffaloes and was never seen again. Most probably he was trampled, for the buffaloes in stampede could wear down a horse.

CHAPTER XIX.

ANANIAS OUTDONE.

IN the afternoon they heard distant firing and assumed that Indians had encountered the herd and were replenishing their larder; but the sound of guns grew fainter, and then was audible no more, which meant that the red men were following the herd and moving away from the outfit.

Incidentally, the slaughter of the buffaloes by the whites was another of the grievances responsible for the present Indian war. As the bison was the chief food supply of the Indians, who subsisted entirely upon meat, they exhibited much more moderation in their hunts than did the whites; for they killed only enough for their immediate needs and were satisfied. The disappearance of the buffalo, rather than the carbines and sabers of the United States cavalry, was responsible for the final submission of the tribes, who, wandering over great plains and mountains that were unproductive, were starved into good behavior. While the buffalo roamed, we might defeat, but never conquer, the Indians; when the herds vanished, they became dependent upon government rations.

The country through which the soldiers were marching was not to be described as beautiful, though it deserved the adjective "grand." Hills and valleys, without a tree; rocky masses, deep cuts, stretches of sand, stone mountains, and plains covered with long, coarse grass, which was sufficient for fodder for animals, but lacked the rich, ripe shade of green of the grass of the East. Only along the banks of streams containing water were luxuriant vegetation and occasional groves of trees, and many of the watercourses were dry, and the vegetation dying.

It was deceptive country, for it gave the impression of being easily inspected, and the air was so dry and clear that the vision ranged for many miles; yet thousands of enemies could be concealed within a short distance of the moving columns, in gulches and ravines, that were invisible until the troops were almost upon them.

By signs visible only to him, Charlie knew there were Indians about, and he reported that there was a large party moving parallel to the column, not many miles away and undoubtedly watching every move made by Major Foster's command.

"When you're most sure there ain't Indians, that's where they're most plentiful," he assured the major. "That's the way it goes."

One night he entertained the group around the major's camp fire, which consisted of Foster, Lucy, Molton, and Jones, with tall tales of a fabulous region, which he set somewhere in Wyoming, across which they were now moving.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," he told Lucy, who had been exclaiming over the wonders of the trail. "There's a country up on the Yellowstone where the Indians think old Beelzebub has his home. I was up there once, and I ain't

sayin' he don't live there, though I never seen him."

"Tell us about it," said Foster, winking at Lucy. Charlie, who never missed anything, saw the wink, but his expression remained inscrutable.

"I was moseyin' round that country when I saw a wonderful elk, biggest feller I ever seen and within easy gunshot. 'You're mine,' I sez, and I takes aim and fired. Say, that elk never moved, but went right on grazin', though he ought to ha' been dead. I fired again; same thing happened. So I got mad, clubbed my gun, and sez to myself, 'If the feller is blind and stone deaf, I'll run up on him.' I start running and come bang into a solid wall of glass. Lady, it was a mountain made out of glass, and that elk was on the other side of it. The darn hill was just like a telescope lens; probably the elk was half a mile away, and it brought him up to within a hundred feet."

A burst of laughter greeted this interesting yarn, but Charlie was entirely unperturbed.

"That ain't nothin'," he said. "I know an ice-cold spring up that way, that comes down over a long, smooth, very steep slope so fast that when it reaches the bottom it's boiling hot, so you could boil eggs in it, if you had the eggs."

"The age of miracles," scoffed the major. "Any more, Charlie?"

"Sartain. There's a brook where I caught a nice fish, pulled him out, turned around, without stirring from the spot, lowered him in a pool of hot water, right behind me, without taking him from the line, and cooked him."

"Tell that one to the marines," said Jones.

"Them marines ain't such fools. There's another place where there's a big boiling spring, water boiling hot, and underneath it a pool of cold water. I dropped my line, with a heavy sinker on it, down to the cold water, caught a trout, and cooked it while I was pulling him out."

"Where do you expect to go when you die, Charlie?" asked the girl.

"Injun's heaven—a happy hunting grounds, where the game comes right up and asks you to kill them. That reminds me 'bout another place. Seems, a long time ago, there was a mountain that was cursed by a big medicine man of the Crow nation. This feller was good, and when he got through cursin', everything on the mountain turned to stone, and has been like that ever since. It has stone trees, stone sagebrush, stone prairie chickens, stone antelopes, and stone bears, and all the flowers are crystal. The birds that was flying over it was caught with their wings spread and fell to the ground, like that, and even the sun and moon look like stones up there."

THE auditors could stand no more, and rallied Charlie so severely that he became indignant, rose, and looked down on them.

"Trouble with people," he declared, "is that what they ain't seen they don't believe can be. I'm tellin' that hell is located only a few hundred miles north from where we are this minute, and I could prove it, if we had time to go over there. This world is full of wonders, and we don't know half of it. You bet the Injuns won't go near that place—they ain't no fools."

"And you say that hell is not in the lower regions, but right here on the Yellowstone River."

"Yes siree, Bob."

"Charlie," laughed Jones, "you're a great scout, but your real talent is lying. I think probably you are the biggest liar that ever lived. Alongside of you, Ananias and Baron Munchausen were tyros."

"Those duffers ain't seen the Yellowstone," observed Charlie, who then stepped outside the light of the camp fire.

Now, poor old Charlie might have been guilty of exaggeration, but there was a basis of truth in his tall tales, as Casper Molton was to discover within a few years. For his glass-mountain story was based upon the Obsidian Cliff, the huge mass of volcanic glass familiar to present-day visitors to Yellowstone Park. People can and do cook trout in the boiling springs, and Specimen Ridge, a region of petrified objects in the northeast corner of the park, is a partial justi-

fication of his yarn about the mountain cursed by the Crow medicine man.

His elaborations were due in part to the unbelieving attitude of outsiders toward his truthful reports of his discoveries in the Yellowstone. A somewhat similar experience greeted a sixteenth-century English traveler, who was recounting wondrous tales to a tavern crowd in London. He told them of mountains of sugar, rivers of molasses, of soldiers springing from ground sown with the teeth of dragons, of islands that changed their location, and of a king who took off his head and carried it under his arm. The audience listened with open mouth; but when his invention flagged, and he resorted to truth and related of seeing fish that came out of the water and flew through the air, they fell upon him with shouts of anger, chased him out of the tavern, and threw stones at him until he had fled beyond range.

In 1866 many trappers and hunters had passed through the Yellowstone Park region, and all of them were greeted with disbelief when they told what they had seen.

About 1830, a trapper named Coulter discovered this wonderful country and returned to civilization to announce his discoveries. He was unable to convince a soul of his veracity, and in despair he returned to his wonderland and lived there until he died, alone.

Half a million people had crossed the Oregon Trail between 1840 and 1865, passing within a few hundred miles of Yellowstone Park, without being aware of its existence, so completely unknown was the country north of the trail. And these army officers were still in the dark and ready to scoff at the more-or-less truthful old explorer, whose indignation can easily be understood by the reader of the present day.

However, Charlie had built up a reputation for drawing the long bow when he had called Casper's attention to a huge boulder on the far side of a stream.

"Coming by here last year, I threw a stone across the creek," he declared. "It's wonderful the way things grow out here. That there rock was once my pebble."

CHAPTER XX.

TWO MEN AND A GIRL.

SINCE leaving Fort Laramie, Lucy Lattimer had conquered most of her prejudice against Yankees. If she had hated the blue uniforms, these troops now wore faded, dingy rags that could hardly be called blue. Only Major Foster, on the march, appeared spick and span, in beautifully tailored costumes; he had two dress uniforms and half a dozen service suits in his wagon. Frazzled in nerves from the constant bumping of her springless wagon, Lucy had accepted with gratitude the loan of one of the major's spare horses and began to accompany him on short gallops, which Casper watched with increasing uneasiness. He ventured to protest to the major against leaving the column.

"We are within plain sight of you, for we never ride more than a mile or two away. We can spot Indians far enough off to get back in safety, and the turtle's gait of the column gets on my nerves."

"Do you think it safe to take Miss Lattimer with you, even if you are willing to take risks yourself, sir?"

"I tell you there is no danger," declared the major testily. "Our experience so far has shown us that two hundred soldiers run no risks. That one brush with the redskins taught them a lesson."

"You could be potted from ambush by Indians hidden behind these little ridges, who could escape before the column could overtake them," said Casper firmly. "You are a soldier and in command, and you have a right to do as you please, but I most respectfully protest against that young woman accompanying you, sir."

"We'll leave it to Miss Lattimer," said the major. "That girl has lots of spirit, and you'll see what her answer will be." He called to Lucy, who was trotting her horse along the turf a few yards off the trail, and she cantered gayly toward the two officers, who were riding side by side.

"Miss Lattimer," said the major, "it seems our little rides do not meet with the approval of Lieutenant Molton. He

has Indians on his mind and credits them with power to spring right out of the earth. Of course, he has no right to interfere, but he takes advantage of my good nature, so I told him that you should decide for yourself."

"Do you really think there is danger, Lieutenant Molton?" she asked quizzically.

"I feel sure of it," he said quietly. "If I were in command, I would forbid you to stray a hundred yards from the column."

"Aren't you lucky that he isn't!" sneered Major Foster.

Lucy considered both men, saw Casper's earnest face and pleading eyes, and she did not miss the malice in the countenance of the major.

"I have reason to respect Lieutenant Molton's opinion," she said. "If he does not wish me to ride away from the troops, I feel that I must abide by his wishes."

"Nonsense!" blustered the major. "Don't pay any attention to him. I am in command here."

"But I am a civilian and not under your command, Major Foster. I thank you for your kindness to me, but, much as I enjoyed them, I must give up our rides."

With a smile which included both men, she turned her horse and rode back along the line, leaving the major scowling at Molton, who could not restrain an expression of satisfaction.

As persons who are the best of friends at the beginning of a long journey often come to the end of the trail hating one another, it was unlikely that Major Foster and Lieutenant Molton would grow to love each other, since friction had developed upon their first meeting, and the presence with the little army of a young and beautiful girl, in whom both proceeded to become interested, was not a pacific influence. Molton was getting more and more upon the nerves of the major, who resented his independence of spirit, his ill-concealed resentment for the loss of his command, and his youth, his good looks, and his influence with Miss Lattimer. If Molton had not been present, Foster flattered himself he would have made a conquest long since; instead, it looked as though the girl preferred the junior to the senior officer. She had already snubbed him severely for intruding upon a tête-à-tête at the home of Captain Phillips, and had now humiliated him a second time by her bland acceptance of the lieutenant's suggestion in the face of the wishes of the superior officer.

He read the smile on the face of Casper Molton, and if Foster had not been a gentleman he would have knocked it off Molton's face with his fist. Besides, it would have been a violation of army regulations to strike an officer, and it would cause him to lose the advantage he now held because of Casper's one infraction of army regulations in quitting the command without leave, back at Horse Creek. With a face that was fiery red and disfigured by a scowl, Major Foster rode back along the line, but he did not fall in beside Miss Lattimer; instead, he joined Lieutenant Jones and began to discuss extraneous matters.

CASPER had won that skirmish, but he had little satisfaction out of it, aside from Miss Lattimer's sweet submission. He realized fully that he had an active enemy in the major, whose failure to discuss the matter further meant that he was biding his time.

The day of reckoning at Fort Appleby would be a heavy one, and, so far as Casper could see, all that would save him from court-martial and discharge from the army would be the snuffing out of the vindictive major before the post was reached. Of course, it did not enter the mind of Lieutenant Molton to move toward the elimination of his enemy, but he was human enough to feel that, if the major, during one of his gallops, were dropped from his saddle by an Indian concealed in a thicket, it would demonstrate that fate was not always unkind.

However, the major lost the taste for long rides, unaccompanied; perhaps he acknowledged the wisdom of Casper's protests, since he certainly had no desire to perish before his allotted span. On the other hand, he stuck closer than glue to Miss Lattimer, was her squire

upon all occasions, sat by her camp fire, and kept Casper from getting a word with her, either during the march or during the hours before bedtime.

It was growing very hot now, and the men were suffering intensely, as they tramped along, and shoe leather was eaten up by the rough trail. The shoes furnished by army contractors were of poor quality. During the Civil War some of these rascals had sold the government shoes, the soles of which were nothing but cardboard. While that outrage was quickly punished, they still persisted in cheating the war department as much as they dared. All spare shoes had been allotted, and now some of the soldiers marched with bare feet upon the earth. Casper worried over the condition of the men and did all he could to alleviate their sufferings. He persuaded the major to permit some of the men to ride the spare mules and horses, succeeded in finding places for thirty or forty of them in the various wagons, and arranged a system of rotation in riding, which reduced the hours of marching of the whole column nearly two hours a day. The barefoot men wrapped pieces of buffalo hide around their feet when they were compelled to march, and, while they grumbled, they made the grade.

One morning a group of horsemen was seen approaching from the right of the trail. Fully a score of them Casper counted, and he immediately gave orders to load the rifles, and for the flankers on that side to draw in. But, as they came closer, he recognized the army blue, and a cheer went up from the column at the sight of cavalry in that wild country. With a shout, Major Foster rode out of the line and galloped to meet them, and then Casper saw Buffalo Charlie dashing wildly back along the trail toward the column.

THE advancing cavalry were half a mile off, and the major was within a few hundred yards of them when he suddenly pulled his horse around and started to gallop back toward the lines. The cavalry spurred their horses and rode after him, gaining rapidly. And a moment later Charlie, riding at full speed, fired at the advancing horsemen. It was enough for Casper, who ordered the troops to advance at the double quick toward the major, while he put spurs to his horse and dashed to the rescue. And now the cavalrymen were firing as they rode, and suddenly the major's horse dove on his nose, kicked, and lay still, while Foster was hurled fifteen feet ahead of his killed mount.

Charlie was galloping after Casper, and a volley from the advancing infantry halted the horsemen within a short distance of Major Foster, who was struggling on the ground. Casper had already recognized that the supposed soldiers were Indians, who had acquired full United States uniforms, even to the caps, but wore no shoes. While Casper was still a hundred feet distant, he saw two Indians ride up on either side of the major and stoop. Then he saw the officer's body rising in the air, as one savage seized his feet, the other his shoulders. Riding full tilt, Casper emptied his revolver at them, causing the Indian who had the major by the shoulder to drop off his horse, while the other let go his hold, hurled a tomahawk at the man on the ground, which missed, then darted off in the wake of the other savages, who were in full retreat. Casper swung off his horse and stooped over the major, disregarding a storm of bullets which were directed at him by the fleeing Indians, who turned completely round in their saddles and fired as they fled.

"Are you hurt, major?" he asked anxiously.

"No, but I ought to be. I rode right into their trap," growled the commanding officer. "Much obliged for dropping that fellow, Molton. I was a sure prisoner, and it serves me right."

By this time the scout had reached the pair, and the Indians were already out of gunshot. He jumped from his horse and assisted the major to mount it, then leaped behind Casper Molton and rode toward the infantry, whose battle line had halted a few hundred yards away.

"You damn fool," he hissed into Casper's ears. "Why didn't you let the Injuns get him? We don't want him."

"I noticed you riding to the rescue, just the same," retorted Molton.

"Oh, durn it, he's a white man, and them were Injuns."

"It's a new ruse, wearing our uniforms," said Casper. "Wonder where they got them?"

"Scalped a bunch of soldiers somewhere up the trail," hazarded Charlie. "They thought they could ride right into us and drop thirty or forty soldiers before we recognized them. The old major saved a lot of lives by riding out to meet them."

The troops raised a feeble cheer as Foster rode through the line and continued on to the wagons; but when Molton and Charlie passed, on the same horse, the outburst was deafening and caused the major to scowl, as he was receiving congratulations from Lucy Lattimer. The scowl deepened when she turned glowing eyes upon Casper, as he dismounted.

"That was very gallant, Lieutenant Molton!" she exclaimed. "For one horseman to charge a whole troop of Indians was daring, indeed."

Casper flushed with pleasure, but tried to dodge the compliment.

"The major was down," he said. "We had to save him, and the troops were behind me."

"On foot and a long way behind," she persisted. "You two gentlemen should be great friends after this."

"I am greatly obliged to you, Molton," said the major, rather embarrassed.

"Not at all, sir; you would have done the same for me."

"Oh, yes, certainly. I'm deucedly sorry to lose that horse. But whoever would have suspected Indians of impersonating U. S. cavalry?"

"There seems to be no form of cunning of which they are incapable."

"So it seems—so it seems."

CASPER saluted and rode forward, and in a moment the detachment was again in motion. Before he returned to his post, the scout was asked by Casper how he recognized the horsemen as Indians.

"You were half a mile farther from them than the rest of us, yet you came tearing back to warn us."

"I seen smoke signals off in the hills, and these fellers came from the same direction," he said. "I took one look at 'em and saw by the way they rode they was Injuns, uniform or no; you can tell Injuns by their seat on a horse. So I calculated they would slide into the column, shoot down a bunch of your men, and maybe run off the spare cattle. Never see them try a trick like that afore, but ye live and l'arn."

"I'm glad it happened like this, otherwise they might actually have got among us."

Charlie chuckled. "That darn-fool major! Say, I wish I seen his face when he rides out to shake hands with the cavalry and finds out they're a lot o' savages. Boy, he must ha' been plumb scared! Darn shame he got away. I'd kind of like to build a brushwood fire under him, myself."

"Get back to your post and don't speak disrespectfully of your commanding officer," laughed Molton. The old buffalo hunter's face cracked in a leer of mirth, then he trotted along in front, while Casper walked his horse along, in silent meditation.

Major Foster was riding at the right of the column, also deep in thought. Quite aware that he had been rash in quitting the column to meet the horsemen, he chafed at his discomfiture before the eyes of the whole outfit. He knew that the men were laughing at him and the figure he had cut, and he hated the thought that Lucy had seen him running away from the Indians, while Molton had been audacious enough to charge into them to his rescue. Of course, he would have been insane to tarry when he found himself assailed by a score of hostiles, and the savages were already in retreat when Casper made his ride; but a girl could not be expected to understand this, and she had seen the lieutenant in a heroic attitude, while the major was cutting a sorry figure. It was damnable luck. He had sallied forth for no other reason than to break the monotony of the dull march, not that he wished to pay any especial courtesy to the advanc-

ing squadron of cavalry, and he had assumed, as he was wont to do, that Molton was in command, except when he felt like taking it over.

As a matter of fact, Molton had no business to rush like a knight-errant away from his troops, and he ought to be reprimanded for it. It was most unsoldierly. Still, the major would probably have been carried off by the savages and might now be initiated into unpleasant ceremonies, if the lieutenant had held strictly to the letter of his duty. The major shivered at the thought of torture; secretly he was terrified of falling into the hands of Indians, and he woke up in the night, with his hair standing on end, and ready for the scalping knife. Really, his escape had been almost miraculous. He knew he ought to be very grateful to Molton for saving him, and he was. Hadn't he told him that he was obliged for the service? Confound it, though, why need it have been that oaf of a lieutenant who had thus put him under obligations? Now his hands were tied; it would look extremely queer if he preferred charges against a man who had saved his life.

Of course, Molton had not come to his rescue because of any personal friendliness; the fellow would have done the same for one of the galvanized soldiers, just as he, Walter Foster, would have done had the situation been reversed. Molton was just a good soldier; yes, he might as well admit that the confounded lieutenant was a good soldier, he demonstrated that on every occasion, and the man knew his business; but personally he was objectionable.

The major sighed; he supposed he would have to do the decent thing and tell Molton that he would overlook the offense at Horse River. If the occasion offered, Foster would come to Molton's rescue and even things up; then—well, let Molton look out for himself.

Of course, it is usually assumed that when one man saves the life of another, the saved is filled with love and gratitude and spends the rest of his existence trying to show his appreciation in every way; that's the way it is in the melodramas, but in life things are not always like that. If you hate a man, and he puts you under obligations, you resent it bitterly; and while you make the conventional acknowledgments, and you refrain from continued outward manifestations of dislike, your feelings are unchanged. The major justified his attitude on the grounds that Molton merely had done his duty as a soldier, and his frame of mind is not hard to understand when you consider it a little.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BATTLE OF JONES' KNOLL.

BEFORE psychologists began poking into people's brains and explaining what made the wheels go round, a hero was a hero, and a villain just a villain; but now we know that every man is able to justify what he does upon the grounds of personal expediency or necessity. No murderer who is not a lunatic slays because he gets personal pleasure out of murder; he does it for reasons which seem satisfactory to himself. To himself every man is a hero, and no man is a villain. Major Foster was not one of nature's noblemen, but neither was he a scoundrel, and his growing enmity to Casper Molton was founded upon what he considered excellent reasons. The fellow was an ex-enlisted man, and enlisted men never should have been given commissions; if they had won them in the war, they should have been discharged from the army with the peace. Molton was insolent and insulting when he had an opportunity; he didn't know his place; he curried favor with the men and made himself popular at the expense of his commanding officer; he had the effrontery to make up to Miss Lattimer, a well-bred girl of an entirely different social stratum, who happened to please the major. He ought to be cashiered for any number of reasons, and now, by a stroke of luck, he had put Foster into a position where he had to smirk and pretend to be friendly and abandon the scheme of chasing him out of the army. It was most disgusting.

Night overtook the column upon the banks of a small stream, with plenty of soft green grass and bushes and groves

of trees along its banks—a true oasis in the barren country, the sight of which had caused a thrill of pleasure to run through the ranks. Casper marched the outfit right to the river and prepared to ford it. Major Foster summoned him.

"Make camp here," he commanded. "We couldn't find a better place."

Casper demurred. "If you will pardon me, sir," he said, "I intend to cross the stream and camp on the summit of that rising ground, about a quarter of a mile beyond."

"For Heaven's sake, why?" demanded the major testily. "Here is plenty of water, soft green grass, and an ideal situation. Over there you will have to carry water a quarter of a mile."

"Ideal in peace time, sir, but there is rising ground on all sides, and because of the vegetation the Indians might creep up and be among us before we discovered them. We learned this afternoon how crafty they are; we know large bands are following us; much better carry water and camp where we can defend ourselves, and where we can detect them some distance off."

The major knew the man was right, but hated to admit it. He disliked to think that he had not considered the military stupidity of camping in that inviting place, and he had no desire to wake up and find Indians entering his tent. However, he made a virtue of his acquiescence.

"With proper cordons of sentries, this camp would be perfectly safe," he said. "However, after what happened this afternoon, I wish to extend to you every consideration. Therefore, move on to your knoll if you think it best."

"Thank you, sir," said Casper, who hastened away, and soon the outfit was climbing the rise on the other side of the stream. Camp was made in the usual way, but with extra precaution. Casks were filled with water and immediately taken up the grade; the wagons were circled, the stock, after being allowed to graze, was placed in a hastily improvised corral inside the circle. Part of the contents of the wagons was piled beneath for better protection, and double cordons of sentries were placed around the camp. As the Indians undoubtedly knew their location, there was no reason for concealing fires, and they feasted on the last of the buffalo meat.

CASPER fixed a nook for Lucy in the center of camp and piled around her little tent barrels of salt pork, several big bales of cotton cloth, and other stores which might stop bullets. He had armored her quarters so efficiently that the major could find no fault with the arrangements when he inspected them.

"I smell Injuns," Buffalo Charlie told Casper. "I think there is a big band somewhere around, and they'll attack just before dawn."

"How do you know all that—you haven't seen anything especial, have you?"

"When you don't see any signs of them, that means they're right on top of you. All afternoon I ain't seen a thing, so I know they're about. Besides, this is the best place between Laramie and Reno for them to tackle us; we're 'bout halfway, too far to get help if they get us into trouble. Mark my words, we get them to-night. I'm going outside, 'bout four o'clock, myself. Them sentries won't see an Injun till their scalp's gone."

Foster was rather chastened by his experience of the day and was quite willing to believe that there might be an attack, and, accordingly, the usual friction regarding night arrangements was absent.

All three officers went among the groups of men, explaining to them what they should do in case of an attempted surprise. Casper revealed the usual Indian plan of attack.

"They'll creep up the hill on their bellies and surround the camp," he said. "If they can, they will overpower the sentries without sound, and their object will be to reach the wagons before the alarm is given. You will fire from under the wagons; in no case venture outside. You must watch for the flash of an Indian's gun, because there will be no other way to locate him. Keep perfectly cool; we are such a large party that they have no chance of taking the

camp; but remember to have your bayonets loose in your belts, to use at close quarters, in case any of them manage to creep under the wagons. In the darkness there is no chance for organized fighting and volley firing; it's every man for himself, and only shoot when you see a target. You must watch for flaming arrows and put them out at once. If they can set any of the wagon tops on fire, they will light up the camp and can pick you off from the darkness. Hide behind the boxes and bales placed under the wagons. Don't expose yourself. Some Indians can see in the dark.

"Remember the officers will be moving from point to point, ready to bring up reënforcements, if they mass at any one spot. This may be a false alarm, but make up your minds that one of these nights we are sure to be attacked, and from now on sleep on your arms."

The successful brush with the savages east of Laramie had removed from the minds of the men some of their terror of Indians; nevertheless, they were still green at this sort of warfare and had no stomach for it. Doubtless there were cowards among them who might have run away, if there had been a place to run; but, dreadful as it was to lie in the dark, expecting a multitude of painted devils to swoop down upon them, it was more horrible to venture outside the protection of the camp, into a night world peopled with the savages. That every man would fight to the last under such circumstances was not to be questioned. Those who deserved most pity were the unfortunate sentries who were forced to leave the camp and lie outside on the hillside, a couple of hundred feet away, to listen for a foe whom they knew made no sound.

The practice of walking post was not to be thought of. An upright, walking sentry would be a mark for the savages, and in the state of mind of the men they were likely to fire at one another. Their instructions were to lie snug at their posts and fire at the first indication of a foe, then to leg it for the camp as quickly as possible. Casper arranged to change guards every hour, and told the sergeant of the guard to call loudly, as he approached each post, lest the hysterical soldier fire into the relief.

IT would seem that there could be no sleep there, with the expectation of attack; yet so weary were the soldiers after their long march and the labor of making their intrenched camp that most of them were soon fast asleep. Even Lucy Lattimer dozed while the major was talking to her, then pleaded with him to excuse her from further conversation, as she was so tired. Casper had to pinch himself to keep awake, for he also was weary.

The strain of expectancy was almost intolerable, and Casper was human enough to experience fear. Although he had served in the victorious army in the greatest war in history until the World War of 1914-18, Casper had never suffered from nerves as he did at this time. After all, he had been a member of a great army, facing another great army, and, because of the masses of men and the impossibility of maintaining organization, night attacks were rare.

But here was a tiny band, away out in a remote, almost unexplored country, beyond the possibility of help in an emergency, facing an uncounted foe. Their assailants might number five hundred or five thousand, he did not know—foes whom night would make daring, and who were physically superior to soldiers in hand-to-hand fighting in the dark. With the Indians rested the initiative, and their guns were probably as good as his own, and their arrows, in the close quarters made possible by a moonless night, were even more effective than rifles, for they could be discharged without the betraying flash that guns would make.

There were women in the camp; one of them the winsome girl with whom he knew himself to be deeply in love; of course, he would fight to the death to protect her; but would his death be sufficient? If she was captured—— He could not bring himself to think of her capture. What grisly tortures the savages reserved for women cannot be set down in print.

Casper no longer feared the defection of the galvanized soldiers, for decent

treatment had been appreciated by these unfortunate men, and they had sense enough to realize that they must beat off the Indians, or be treated exactly like their Yankee brothers in arms. In all probability they were better marksmen than the Northern soldiers and more likely to be effective in a night combat than the others.

Every now and then a coyote howled; perhaps it was not a coyote, but Indians signaling, for they could imitate the calls of all animals. The camp was deathly still. He strolled over to Lucy's tent, but the flap was closed, and outside it lay black Anthony, also fast asleep, with his gun lying across his breast. While Casper looked down on him, he began to snore.

About three thirty o'clock there came the sharp report of a rifle from one of the sentries to the east, and at once the camp awoke, and the soldiers scurried to the wagons assigned them for defense. A moment later came the sentries, crawling through the circle, shouting their names, so that they would not be fired upon.

Buffalo Charlie arrived from somewhere and reported to Major Foster, who had joined Casper and Lieutenant Jones.

"No Injuns," he said. "The darn fool got scared and fired off his gun."

"I'll scold him for that!" exclaimed the major. "Get your sentries out again, Mr. Molton."

"Wait!" exclaimed Charlie suddenly. He was listening intently.

A coyote had barked somewhere and was answered by a second bark on the other side of the camp.

"That's them, major," declared the scout. "Them calls means they've surrounded the camp."

The trumpet blared shrilly the call "To Arms!"

"They're coming, men!" shouted the major. "Don't waste a shot. Let them fire first, then blaze at the gun flashes."

THE camp was in total darkness. It formed a rough circle, about one hundred and fifty feet in diameter. So intensely black was the night that the three officers and the scout could not distinguish faces, although they stood within a foot or two of one another. They heard the scuffling and scurrying of the soldiers, the stamping of the animals, whom some instinct warned of danger, low, hysterical laughs, and the grumble of many tongues, but they could see nothing. There was actual danger of the circle being penetrated, for there was a slight space insufficiently barricaded between each wagon. A couple of machine guns would have made an attack such as this impossible, but the rapid-fire gun, like the repeating rifle, was still in its infancy and not to be given to small detachments fighting ten times their number of Indians.

It must be remembered that the troops were armed with breech-loading rifles, containing a single cartridge, which had to be ejected, and a fresh one inserted in the breech, before a second shot could be fired. In daylight this was the work of a few seconds; fumbling in the dark, it would take the men longer to reload.

Suddenly there was a blast of firing, like the popping of a bunch of cannon crackers, and for a second the outside of the wagon train was lit up. The Indians had crept within fifty feet of the wagon circle before firing, and they followed up the shots with a burst of shrieking that caused the skin of every soul within the corral to creep. The soldiers were replying—shooting at the gun flashes—and the battle was on.

The savages had dismounted for the attack and were lying flat on their stomachs upon the ground, and each Indian, after firing, changed his position instantly, so that hits were few. The soldiers continued to blaze away, and there came whinnies and bellows of pain from animals which had been wounded, and the mules brayed loudly. The officers separated and began to circle behind the wagons, watching sharply for breaks, as a few Indians inside might demoralize the garrison.

The savages continued their unearthly yelling. If the volume of noise furnished an indication of their numbers, there must be thousands of them. And then from the darkness came arrows with flaming shaft ends. The ammunition had

been piled in the center of the corral, and men assigned to carry supplies of cartridges to the fighters; but if any of the wagons caught fire, the light would enable the Indians to find easy targets. However, all the first discharge of burning arrows struck the wooden sides of the wagons and fell to the ground, disclosing crawling Indians who had crept to within a half dozen feet of the defenses, and several of whom were potted by the white marksmen.

Casper estimated by the gun flashes that there must be three or four hundred rifles among the attacking force, which meant that the enemy probably numbered more than a thousand, because less than half the plains Indians at this period owned rifles, the others wielding bows and arrows with almost equally deadly effect. And these arrows began to penetrate holes in the defense and find human marks, for cries of wounded now made the night more agonizing.

White troops attacking under such circumstances would have massed and forced their way through some of the openings between wagons, moving the wagons by sheer force of numbers, in which case the fighting would have been hand to hand in five minutes, and the stronger would have conquered. But, as usual, the Indian general seemed incompetent; probably he could not enforce his orders on his braves, if he had wished to take such a course. Once battle was joined, the Indian became an individual fighter, as did the old Greek heroes in the siege of Troy.

An emigrant woman, wakened from sound sleep by the sudden roar of guns, had burst into the most hideous shrieking, and her cries shrilled above the whoops of the savages and the shouts of the fighting men. Casper had grouped about fifty men in the center of the corral as a reserve to be rushed to any point where help was needed, and these lay, with their rifles ready, trembling.

THE major, Casper, and Jones were able to see the fray, despite the blackness of the night, because of the winking of the gunfire. The heavy charges of powder flashed so brightly that when a dozen rifles went off simultaneously the whole camp was illuminated for a second—long enough for the savages to spy their targets.

Occasionally daring warriors would rise to their feet and dash for the openings, clambering over boxes and barrels, to be clubbed over the head by muskets or jabbed with the long, three-cornered bayonets of the soldiers; but most of the savages were content to lie within a short distance of the wagons and aim at the gun flashes, as the whites were doing on their side.

At such close quarters, even this random firing was deadly enough. Men were falling with alarming frequency inside the corral, and gun barrels were getting too hot to use. Some of the mules broke loose and began to dash about the inclosure, leaving havoc in their wake, kicking over pans and kettles and getting entangled in tent ropes. One of them knocked down the major's tent, a catastrophe unnoticed in the uproar; but in the morning, when it was discovered that the animal's hoofs had crashed in the side of the celebrated tin bathtub, there was rejoicing among the enlisted men.

What Casper had feared now happened—the cover of one of the wagons caught fire and communicated itself to the contents, which began to burn briskly. He commandeered several men and began to throw water from pails upon the fire, but, aided by the light, a rain of arrows was falling in the corral, and Casper ordered the defenders to withdraw from the vicinity of the burning wagon. If the Indians burst through, there they would be outlined against the light and fall in swarms. However, this the astute redskins understood perfectly, and they did not charge, but confined themselves to picking off every person who showed himself. On the other hand, the light from the wagon revealed a nest of Indians within thirty feet of it, and, before they were able to get away, a dozen or more of them received leaden tribute.

Rushing across the inclosure, Casper stumbled against a woman whom he had

no trouble recognizing in the dim light as Lucy Lattimer.

"What are you doing here?" he snarled. "Go back."

"I won't. I can shoot. I want to help."

Without a word he picked her up in his arms and carried her to the tent. Anthony crouched outside of it, his gun in his hand, but much too terrified to be of any value in the defense. Casper climbed over the protective barrier, plunged into the dark tent, and laid her on the ground.

"How dare you! Let me go. I won't stay here."

"You must. You'll be killed. I forbid you to come out again."

"You fool! I must. I'll go mad in here. I won't be captured by Indians. I'll die first."

"Lucy, darling," he implored, "for my sake, please stay here where you are safe."

"How dare you call me 'darling?' I hate you, you Yankee brute!" screamed the girl, who was now beside herself. "Let me out of here!"

Without answer, he dashed out and grasped the arm of a soldier who was passing.

"You stay here and defend this barricade," he commanded. "Don't let that woman out of the tent under any circumstances."

The situation was unchanged during his moment's absence, save that the light from the burning wagon was growing dim. But he saw a gray streak in the eastern sky that gave him heart, for in an hour it would be dawn, and as soon as there was light the advantage would be all on his side. Well, time would soon tell.

The savages saw the coming dawn, also, and drew off for a few moments. Firing ceased, and the lull lasted some minutes, which gave the defenders time to cool their gun barrels, take count of stock, and get ready for a new attack. It was too dark to learn how the garrison had suffered, but Casper stumbled over several bodies, as he poked his way about, and realized that the toll would be heavy.

THE lull having lasted several minutes, Major Foster, who had jointed Casper, ventured to hope that the Indians had withdrawn, when there came a tremendous shrilling from one quarter, as though all the red men had massed like a college-cheering section. It was enough for Casper, who now called forward his reserves.

"It's a charge," he told Foster. "I think they intend to break through where that wagon was destroyed."

He placed fifty men in a line across the circle back of the fired wagon and reënforced those fighting under the wagons on either side. And in a moment the charge came. The savages had done what they rarely do, massed in a mob, and they came into the dim light beyond the burning wagon, shrieking and yelling, the front rank discharging their guns. The defenders opened upon them, and some fell, but the rest came on. Despite the fire, they came squirming and wriggling through the line, sprawling over boxes and bales, picking themselves up and surging on. They were naked savages; their eyes gleamed wickedly, and they never ceased their horrifying yells. From the rear, firing reopened—evidently a feint to keep the defenders at their posts at that point; but the mass was now within the circle, and Major Foster gave the word to the line of men lying on the ground.

"Fix bayonets!" he shouted. A few seconds of fumbling, while the savages were almost upon them and tomahawks came hurtling into the line of men in blue.

"Charge!" shouted the major. The disciplined soldiers rose as one man, and a line of gleaming bayonets swept down upon the mass of wild men. There is nothing more alarming than bayonets at close quarters. Few disciplined troops can stand against them. What chance have savages? With shrieks of terror, the front line turned and tried to claw its way through; for a moment, the mass behind resisted, then also turned tail.

It was the first time that this horde of wagon-train destroyers had ever faced a row of bayonets at close quarters, and they liked it no more than their ances-

tors, eighty years before, had relished the bayonets of "Mad Anthony" Wayne's Revolutionary veterans. The steel penetrated naked backs. It was a thin, wavering line, but it was sufficient; for, in two minutes, there was not a savage in the inclosure, save a score who lay writhing upon the ground.

"Charge!" exclaimed the major, waving his sword and rushing ahead.

Casper seized him by the arm.

"Not outside the circle," he pleaded. "It's suicide, major."

"Don't you interfere with me," cried the frenzied officer. "Charge!"

The men obeyed orders, and Casper rushed along with the major. He could not do otherwise. The soldiers clambered over the obstructions and were in outer darkness; no foe was visible. Then there came a crash, a blaze, and a dozen men fell. This brought the major to his senses. "To the rear, march!" he roared and was glad to hasten back to shelter with his men, a half dozen of whom he had killed by his recklessness.

And then the battle simmered for a while, as the eastern sky grew lighter. The Indians fired steadily, and the defenders returned the fire, but the charge had turned the tide, and daylight would settle the struggle. The guns of the Indians spoke, but from a distance; they were withdrawing down the hill before the light of day. When it was broad daylight, the defenders could see them mounting their horses, a quarter of a mile away. Many of the Indians carried the bodies of dead and wounded comrades and were lifting them upon the horses. In another quarter of an hour the attacking party had vanished.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LAST STRAW.

CASPER was taking count of stock when he met Lucy Lattimer, who confronted him. As he attempted to address her, fire blazed in her eyes, and her little foot stamped on the ground.

"Don't you speak to me, sir!" she exclaimed. "I'll never forgive you for the rudeness and the humiliation you put upon me this night."

"But it was for your good," Casper stammered.

"You dared to make love to me, sir. At such a time! You dared! You, a clod of earth!"

She turned and almost ran back toward her tent. With a gesture of despair, he turned to his duty and faced a sergeant who came to report the death of Lieutenant Jones. The youngster had gone down during the first inrush of savages, fighting desperately at a wagon opening, and three dead Indians lay upon his body.

The toll of the battle was appalling, for twenty-three men were dead and forty were wounded, for whom there was no doctor in the detachment. The emigrant women were doing their best for those who were suffering with bullet and arrow wounds. Out of a little less than two hundred men, the casualties amounted to nearly one third.

Inside the inclosure were the bodies of forty-two dead Indians, and a dozen more lay close to the wagon circle outside. In all probability, as many other savages had been killed, and a couple of hundred wounded; but their custom of carrying off both dead and wounded made it impossible to reckon their loss.

There were a dozen dead mules and horses, and half a dozen others were so severely wounded that it was necessary to shoot them. This presented a problem that required immediate solution. Casper had some slight knowledge of surgery, and Major Foster knew as much, and both were busy for a couple of hours bandaging the wounded, aided by Lucy Lattimer, who proved to be deft and tender in such ministrations. She did not address a word to Casper, but was very affable with Foster.

If the night had been hellish for the officers and soldiers who fought the fight, the excitement of battle had enabled them to bear it; and neither Casper nor the major was able to realize the agony of Lucy Lattimer, who lay in a trembling, shivering heap in a dark little tent, while all around her the guns roared and the unearthly yelling of the savages speared her soul. For a time she prayed; then she could not pray; she had waited for

death from a tomahawk or an arrow, until she heard something which transformed her and sent her dashing from the tent like an Amazon.

Over in one corner of the inclosure a couple of dozen of galvanized soldiers had replied to the war whoop of the savages with that thrilling "Yip!" which she knew so well, the battle cry of the South—the rebel yell.

Casper had heard it, recognized it, smiled grimly, and went on with his duty; but to Lucy it was a summons to go out and stand shoulder to shoulder with the men and fight to the end. Filled with this high resolve, she had darted into the darkness, encountered Casper, who had raged at her, ignored her courageous appeal, grabbed her and thrust her back into the dark cavern from which she had emerged, then affronted her by putting a soldier to guard her. Her rage was so great that it enabled her to endure the pandemonium of the Indian charge; she sobbed with fury and breathed threats of vengeance against the miserable Yankee. His failure to admire her wish to participate in the battle wounded her pride, and his tender "darling" added insult to injury. So she went about her duty of caring for the wounded, with smoldering eyes and set lips, her nerves still raw at the edges, telling herself that she despised and loathed the insolent Kansan. And, being a woman, she smiled on Major Foster.

She had been working half an hour, bandaging hideous wounds which made her heartsick, when Anthony, his face betraying some new catastrophe, touched her right arm.

"Miss Lucy," he mumbled, "we's done for now."

"Go way, Anthony. I'm busy."

"Miss Lucy, dem Injuns done burn up our wagon; ain't nothin' left but the wheels."

THE girl turned pale, bit her lip, and continued to bandage the shoulder of a bearded Yankee soldier, who gazed at her in dumb gratitude. She knew that one of the wagons had been destroyed by a flaming arrow, but that it should be her wagon, out of the twenty-seven in the outfit, seemed too much for Providence to put upon one orphan girl. In that wagon was stored everything she owned in the world, her scanty wardrobe, her poor treasures, the supplies and provisions necessary for the journey, the few relics of her father, and her tiny supply of money. All was gone.

She finished her bandage, touched the patient commiseratingly with her soft little hand upon his pain-written countenance, then followed Anthony to the wagon. As he had stated, it was destroyed. A few planks of the wagon box, the four wheels, the iron work, and charred remnants of boxes and barrels alone remained. There would be nothing to salvage.

She sank upon a box, hid her face in her hands, and tried to consider the situation. While she had the wagon she was, in a sense, independent; though she traveled with the detachment, she subsisted upon her own provisions, she was drawn by her own mules and rode in her own chariot. Now she was destitute, her existence dependent upon the charity of the soldiers, her means of reaching Virginia City and her relative vanished, and her future was without hope. Some one touched her on the shoulder, her strained white face lifted, and she saw Major Foster, hat in hand, standing before her.

"Miss Lattimer," he said, "I am grieved beyond measure at your misfortune. I would prefer to have lost all our wagons than to have yours destroyed, but it was the fortune of war. I know what you are thinking, how you are regarding your future, but it rests with you to restore it."

"How do you mean?" she said faintly.

"You and I are the same kind of people, though we hail from different sections. We have the same sort of outlook and ideals; we are members of good families; neither of us has anything in common with these people about us, and we understand each other. I have been in love with you from the first moment I saw you. I intended to speak at Fort Appleby, but this catastrophe makes it proper for me to speak now. You are helpless and hopeless; you hate to eat

the bread of charity, and you don't know where to turn. I offer you a refuge. Be my wife."

Lucy rose to her feet, touched by the man's apparent generosity, and by the earnestness of his speech, and in her situation she was tempted.

"Aren't you taking advantage of my situation, major?" she asked. "I don't know that you love me really, and I am sure I don't love you as a wife should. I haven't considered you as a husband."

"Perhaps you love Molton," he said harshly.

"No; I hate him," she said, and at the moment she believed her own statement.

"As the fiancée of the commander of this detachment, you have a right here, and you are beholden to no one; your status is assured. I must not be considered as an enemy of your country; though I was in the army, I was never sent against the South. I love you sincerely. I'll make you a good husband. Consider, when we reach Fort Appleby, you must remain there because you can't go on; yet what can you do? How can you live? Your pride will prevent you from accepting what you cannot pay for, but, as Mrs. Foster, you are the real boss of the fort; you are the ruler of its commander and his garrison; you have your own house, and your welfare is the object of all within the walls."

"It seems I have no choice," said the girl, with a wan smile. "I respect you, Major Foster, but I don't think I love you."

"I am satisfied. I know Southern women. Once you are my wife, you will learn to love me. God knows I will be good to you. Will you do me the honor?"

His voice broke in his eagerness, and his hand was extended.

Lucy took it. "I thank you, sir. I shall try to be worthy of the honor you do a friendless, penniless orphan in asking her to marry you."

"The honor is mine, madam," he said.

IF the language of these people sounds stilted to us, remember those were formal days, and even marriage did not dispense with formality. Many husbands and wives never called each other by their first names, but addressed each other as Mr. and Mrs., through long married lives.

The eyes of scores of soldiers were on them, and the major did not attempt to take her in his arms and kiss her, for which she was secretly grateful. He bent from the waist and kissed her hand.

"Now I must arrange to make you comfortable," he said, as he left her.

Lucy returned to her seat on the box, bewildered by the suddenness of it all. A moment before she had been without resource, alone in the wilderness, dependent upon the kindness of men who had recently been her enemies. Now her future was assured; she was to be the wife of an important army officer, assured of such comforts as the wilderness could give, with a strong, confident man to guard and protect her; she could lay her burdens upon her husband's shoulder. And yet she was not happy; instead, she felt a sinking of the heart, and her eyes involuntarily sought Casper Molton, who was busy some distance away, bringing order out of chaos.

Major Foster had sensed the psychological moment, without ever having heard the expression. His proposal had opened a door when all doors seemed shut against her, and he had offered her refuge when she was numb with despair. He was a shelter from the storm of adversity which beat about her. The night before she would have refused him scornfully, to-morrow her courage might have returned, and she would have declined his generous offer; but to-day she was conquered—the prey of the first comer. Back in Julesburg she had risen above the helpless attitude of women of her time and boldly set forth to seek her fortune without masculine support; her courage had been oozing slowly, and her prejudices had yielded to necessity. She had weakened under the strain until this last stroke of adversity had caused her collapse, and she had consented to marry a Union officer for food and clothes and a place to sleep. She was not even sure she had liked the major, but she had to have shelter or die.

Casper Molton? She told herself that

he was impossible, a common sort of man, sprung from common people. He was charming, perhaps, and brave and admirable, but not her sort. Yet, were conditions equal, she would have preferred him to the major. Most likely he would be willing to marry her, but she had told him last night that she hated him, and he would not dare propose to her; certainly she could not appeal to him. At this moment she was penniless, helpless, without means of sustenance or transport, dependent upon army stores for her next meal, without a change of linen, and with no means of procuring it, save through the generosity of army women at the next post. It was no time for sentiment or regret; she had no means of knowing that Casper wanted her now, and she had to accept the first offer, and the major had made it.

Yet her eyes still followed the lieutenant, and they were wistful.

Major Foster, on his side, was filled with satisfaction, for the appeal of the girl had become irresistible. Though he treasured his liberty and had planned to marry a woman of wealth, who could help him in his career, he had been thrown into the company of the Southern beauty for weeks under circumstances which made for intimacy. If, in the beginning, he had hoped merely for distraction from Lucy Lattimer, he had soon come to realize that Molton had fallen deeply in love with the girl, and that she seemed to favor him. To most men an object is doubly valuable when others covet it, and a rival enhanced Lucy's worthiness in his eyes. Besides, he hated Molton with the hatred of a selfish man toward one whom he has envied, and he knew that it would grievously hurt the lieutenant to learn that the girl preferred Walter Foster. Thus he had the double satisfaction of winning a delectable woman and beating a powerful competitor.

HE had not intended to ask her to marry him, had not made up his mind that he wanted to take a wife, but the news of the destruction of the wagon containing all her resources convinced him that it was now or never. Being a clever man, he understood how appalling the situation would appear to her; that she would accept him as a drowning man clutches at a straw. Foster wanted her for his wife. If he got her, he was not the type who would suffer because she did not reciprocate his feeling. If she came to love him devotedly, well and good; in any event, she would belong to him, and he knew her sort—she would be a loyal and faithful, if not a loving, wife. His vanity was such that he was reasonably sure she would learn to love him when she knew him better. In any event, she had accepted him, and he looked forward pleasurably to breaking the news to Molton.

As usual, he had left all the details for the reorganization of the outfit—the care of the wounded, the burial of the dead, and the reloading of the wagons—to Casper, who was so busy that he had not yet learned that it was Lucy's wagon which had been destroyed by fire. Minus the able services of Jones, Casper was almost frantic because there was so much to be done, and the noncoms were without initiative. He had set a score of men to digging a great trench, in which all the dead would be buried, on the field where they had fallen. He had driven away, with bitter words and a loaded revolver, two or three of the emigrants, whom he had discovered scalping the dead Indians. He would have to abandon three or four wagons for lack of draft animals, and two or three others must be emptied of their stores, for the conveyance of the wounded men.

A squad had been sent to cut grass which would line the bottoms of the wagons and absorb to some extent the wicked jolting of the big carts, which would cause intense suffering to the injured. A pile was being made of the supplies which must be left behind, and these would be burned to prevent their falling into the hands of the savages.

It took many hours to perform these duties, but at length they were accomplished, and the dead laid in the big grave ready for the final ceremony. He sought the major to ask him to conduct the burial service, and then, for the first time, he approached Lucy Lattimer, who

watched him come near, with a face of stone.

"Miss Lattimer," he said, "I wish to apologize for my rudeness of last night, which was due entirely to my anxiety for your safety. My impertinence in venturing to speak to you as I think of you was due to the excitement of the moment. I wish to express my deep sorrow for the loss of your wagon and supplies and to offer you any assistance in my power."

"Thank you, sir," she said, impressed by his earnestness and his manliness. Her rancor—what had been left by morning—had melted since she had cut herself off from him forever by her acceptance of the major. "I was distraught, driven frantic by the noise of the battle, and I said harsh things for which I am sorry."

"Please believe I admired and appreciated your courage," he continued. "Only there was little that you could have done, and your life was the most important thing in the camp. I hope you won't feel distressed over the loss of your supplies. We still have plenty, and you will be a most welcome guest at our mess."

"I am obliged, sir," she said with a slight smile. "However, Major Foster has already come to my rescue."

"He would, naturally. I was speaking for him as well as myself," he said a trifle stiffly. "I must go now. We are about to bury our dead."

"I will pray for them, Mr. Molton. They died so that we might live."

"I am sure your prayers will be heard," he said, with a bow, then turned and hastened toward the major, who nodded. Whereupon Casper gave the order to draw up the troops before the big trench in which the dead soldiers lay, with no other covering than their uniforms, but with a spare flag spread out across the topmost layer of bodies.

The major had found time to put on his full-dress uniform, with its gold shoulder knots, saber and sash, and was a splendid-looking figure, as he advanced and took his place before the grave. Lucy and the emigrant women drew near, then knelt. In a ringing voice, Major Foster paid a tribute to the fallen, repeated a short prayer from the book, which was echoed by the soldiers and the women. A squad stepped forward and fired a salute over the grave; then the grave diggers began to throw the earth upon the bodies.

Many of the soldiers stood with tears coursing down their dirty, bearded faces. Their best friends lay among the slain. The women sobbed loudly, the earth fell silently upon the cold forms, and then the bugler blew taps which was reëchoed mournfully from the hills.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BITTER REFLECTIONS.

THE sorrow of the soldiers was mingled with a tinge of self-pity, for most of them believed that they would share the fate of their dead companions. Nearly a third of their total force had been killed or wounded in the fray, a percentage of loss as high as in the most bloody battles of the Civil War, and, as they penetrated into the Indian country, they expected the fighting to be even more intense; two or three more such attacks, and no troops would reach Fort Appleby. In the East, after a great battle, the survivors rested and awaited certain reënforcements; but for these men there was no retreat possible; they must advance; there was no way to refill gaps in the ranks, while the number of the redskins was legion. To them their loss must be insignificant.

Late in the afternoon, the convoy was ready to continue, and, despite the fact that the men were worn out by a sleepless night, a furious battle, and the hard labor of reorganization, Casper told Major Foster that he thought they would benefit by moving onward for a few miles to get away from the melancholy associations of the knoll which they named after the dead second lieutenant. The major nodded agreement; he felt almost kindly toward Casper at the moment, because of his winning of Lucy Lattimer, and he was biding his time to inform his rival of his defeat.

So the battered detachment moved on its way at a slow pace, and gradually

the bloody knoll faded into the background, while they crossed new country over an illy defined trail.

Lucy rode in the major's wagon, with Anthony beside her, and the major, who had taken a fresh horse, rode as close to her as he could manage, devouring her with his eyes and occasionally receiving from her a dutiful, but rather strained, smile.

They made camp in an open space, about six miles from the knoll, taking the same precautions to intrench it which had saved them the previous night, although Casper believed, and so did Buffalo Charlie, that they need not fear another attack.

It is quite likely that a second assault as determined as that which they had repulsed might have been successful, and the detachment as completely wiped out as Custer's larger force was exterminated at Little Big Horn, some ten years later; but the history of Indian warfare contains no record of such persistence. It was not in their character.

Not even Red Cloud, one of the greatest of their generals, understood how to follow up an advantage, nor were there many white generals who could return to the attack after a decisive defeat. General Grant won the Civil War by his refusal to acknowledge a beating, and he wore down the Confederates after they had driven off with sledge-hammer blows what was then considered a defeated army; but the chief who had commanded the assault upon the knoll was not General Grant. He had lost several hundred warriors, his force was reduced by twenty-five per cent, and, had he wished, he could not have driven his braves against the soldiers so soon again. The Indians had ceremonies to perform; they wanted to carry home the dead and wounded to their villages and indulge in the usual lamentations, and it would be weeks before they would have courage to set out again on the warpath.

So no alarm disturbed the slumber of the camp that night, nor upon the nights which succeeded, until they reached Fort Reno. Only two persons lay awake in the camp of Major Foster, besides the sentries who watched with quaking hearts for an enemy who did not show himself —Lieutenant Casper Molton and Lucy Lattimer.

The major had informed Casper of his engagement, as they waited before their camp fire for Lucy to join them at supper, and blandly asked for congratulations. Lucy had arrived while Casper was struggling with his emotions, and a glance at her face assured him that Foster had not lied. So, being a brave soldier, he had forced a smile, congratulated them both in the best terms he could contrive, ate hastily food which choked him, retired as quickly as possible, and lay down in his blanket, but not to sleep.

When a man is in love, he possesses no philosophy. Thus Casper had no armor to ward off the shock of Lucy's engagement to Major Foster. So long as a girl is free, a man may suffer from her coldness and chafe against her indifference, but he never loses hope that he may persuade her to change her attitude by the warmth of his affection. When she has engaged herself to another man, however, she has demonstrated conclusively how hopeless is the first man's suit. While Casper had not broken through her reserve to the extent of telling her how he felt about her, he was certain that she understood. Now, by her choice of the major, she proved how little of his affection she had returned. On two occasions he had saved her life, which she had admitted; once she had favored him against the major, the occasion of the latter's intrusion into the parlor of Captain Phillips at Laramie; her eyes had often been kind; and her gratitude for his services had been warmly expressed. Why had he not been daring and risked a declaration?

Unacquainted with the ways of women, he had always been overcome with timidity in her presence, and he had supposed that her dislike of the Northern uniform would cause her to repulse him if he spoke prematurely. Yet the major wore the blue, and her scorn of that uniform had been overcome in his case. At times she had seemed to resent and dislike the major; now she fell into his arms.

AND then the solution presented itself to him. Foster had taken advantage of her distress upon the discovery of the loss of her wagon, and he had pressed his suit upon her when she was in no condition to resist; he had, perhaps, told her of the dreadful things that might happen to her if she did not accept him; he had frightened her into taking him—a most unfair and unchivalrous thing to do. Lucy should have known that she would never suffer while Casper lived, that he would stand between her and distress and ask no price for his services. Of course, she had railed at him the night before—had called him a common person, a "clod." But those terms had no especial significance for him beyond an expression of anger; so unsophisticated was Casper Molton that he did not know there were distinctions of birth in the minds of some people; or, if he knew it, he did not suppose Lucy to be so foolish. It was a puzzle to him, and he got no consolation from trying to solve it. The dreadful fact was that she had accepted Major Foster as her husband and cut off Casper Molton from her forever.

His dislike and contempt for the major, based upon his view of the man's character, was tremendously augmented by his lack of chivalry in winning the girl by unfair means. As Lucy's accepted suitor, he was out of reach of any retribution which might occur to Casper; nevertheless, Casper did not believe that the girl could be happy as Foster's wife. The selfishness and meanness of the man were too obvious. He admitted that Foster was brave enough, and he acknowledged the stroke of genius which had caused the major to smash the mass attack of the Indians by a bayonet charge. Casper had not thought of feeding the savages cold steel; he had drawn up his reserves of fifty men with the intention of firing at the advancing redskins, not of charging them. Bayonet charges were practically unknown in Indian warfare, for rarely did the Indians get to close quarters with disciplined troops.

Nevertheless, the man had spoiled his strategy by attempting to carry the pursuit into outer darkness and had caused the unnecessary killing and wounding of a dozen men by persisting in his plan, despite the lieutenant's protest. Casper considered Major Foster an incompetent officer.

While he was wrestling with his despair, Lucy was awake and unhappy. Her courage was already on the rebound, and she regretted that she had not pleaded for time when the major had proposed to her. True, her condition was not improved; she was still a dependent upon persons from whom she had no right to make claims, and she was in urgent need of the help of a man, but there was a look in the eyes of the major which frightened her, and she had seen the anguish written on the face of Casper Molton when the news had been broken to him.

Casper loved her, and he would have taken care of her somehow. If he was without family and traditions, he was a brave and capable soldier; he had saved her from both Indians and buffaloes; he evidently worshiped her and would always have been kind to her. If only he had come to her as the major had done! Yet she realized now that Casper was too fine to propose to a woman in such an emergency; he would take no advantage. The major had carried her off her feet, and she had given her word, and that settled it. The Lattimers kept their word.

THREE of the wounded died during the night, and there was another burial party ere the detachment was able to move on in the morning. Lucy had become accustomed to death and suffering. So adaptable is the human mind that what seems unendurable, when it cannot be avoided, becomes endurable; but the burial parties moved her to tears always. She visited all the wounded, consoled them as best she could, and tried to make them comfortable, as they lay, side by side, in the wagons. Then she returned to the major's conveyance and took her customary seat. Her own mules were now drawing an army wagon; as all animals were in harness, there were no longer any spares.

About ten o'clock a courier was seen approaching from Reno on his way to Laramie. He waved his hat and rode delightedly into the column, an unexpected sight upon a lonely journey. The wires to the Bozeman Trail forts were always down nowadays, and communications were maintained by couriers, cavalrymen or scouts, who took the frightful risk for a few dollars of extra pay. Many couriers were slain by raiders, as they galloped through hostile country or slept unguarded in a thicket off the trail; yet men were found to take their places, and communication was more or less maintained.

Major Foster ordered the courier to wait until he could write a report of the battle, to be relayed on to General Stone; and Casper, questioning the soldier, learned to his relief that there was a doctor in Fort Reno. Often there was no medical officer in these remote posts. The courier had seen smoke signals and flashes in the sky, which meant that the Indians were communicating by means of mirrors; but no redskins had approached to molest him. The courier heard the story of the engagement with amazement.

"They'll be tackling the forts next," he declared. "First time they had the nerve to interfere with two hundred soldiers. Must have been a great tussle."

The major put an end to his stay by approaching with an envelope which the courier put into his saddlebag, then mounted, slapped his horse upon the rump, and galloped eastward, followed by wistful glances from many men who would have preferred to travel in that direction, also.

"In my report," said the major to Lieutenant Molton, "I described the circumstances under which I took over command of the column, and I mentioned your excellent behavior in the battle. You will probably be glad to know that I have forgotten your various acts of insubordination and your absence without leave at Horse Creek."

"Thank you, sir," said Casper without much feeling. Worried as he had been over the prospect of facing a general court, the loss of Lucy had made everything else seem of no importance, and he felt no gratitude. Well might the man forgive a breach of discipline which resulted in bringing to him a bride.

During the next four or five days nothing occurred to relieve the weary tedium of the journey—not an Indian sign, nor a caravan overtaken or passed. They drew close to Fort Reno with the expectation of no further trouble.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FORT RENO.

EXACTLY seventeen days after leaving Laramie they came in sight of the crude fortress which was then a post which had been in existence only a few months, replacing a structure put up a year before by General Connor on the Powder River, during the course of his powerful, but not too successful, invasion of Indian country.

It lay upon a plain not far from the river, upon a site which commanded the landscape. As the Powder River was wide and fairly deep, there was much timber growing upon its banks, and the troops who constructed the post had little trouble in procuring an ample supply of logs. They had built it upon the plan of the old forts of Revolutionary days in Kentucky—an outer wall a couple of hundred feet square, against which were constructed various cabins of logs, from which they had not troubled to hew the bark. At each corner of the stockade was a blockhouse. There were great gates of ponderous timbers, and in the center of the stockade was an adobe house for the commanding officer.

All the buildings were covered with earth roofs, the ordinary method of protection in the Far West, where shingles, tiles, and slates were unprocurable. In just such a cabin and under such a roof had Casper Molton been born.

The method of constructing roofs was interesting, if primitive. A row of trimmed branches of trees were set from the ridgepole of the cabin to the top of the side wall, fitted as closely together as possible. Over the poles were laid a thickness or two of gunny sack, and upon top of the cloths was piled a foot or so

of earth. While the earth was moist, it turned off the rain, but in dry weather the entire roof was apt to blow off in the form of dust and must be entirely replaced.

However, this primitive fortification, after more than a fortnight without the glimpse of a human habitation, was a blessed sight to the footsore military pilgrims, who set up a cheer and quickened their steps without orders, while their appearance was equally welcome to the marooned infantry and cavalry inside the stockade. Guns were discharged, bugles played, and the gates swung open invitingly. Inside were comfortable quarters, good food, medical attendance for the wounded, and, to Lucy's satisfaction, several women, wives of officers, who came forward to welcome her. As the major's fiancée, she was almost an army woman, and she was quick to sense a subtle difference in her reception from that at Fort Laramie, which, kindly as it was, was extended to an outsider, not an associate.

There was a colonel in command of this fort, and his wife and daughter—a girl about Lucy's age—were living in the mud palace in the center of the inclosure. Major Foster introduced Lucy impressively as his future bride, and officers and their ladies clustered round her. Of course she must be the guest of Mrs. Colonel Gunning. How terrible that she had lost her wardrobe! Well, they had very little themselves, away out here, but she was welcome to a share of their linen and outer garments.

She went with them gladly. Already she was benefiting by her new position, and it was no injury to her pride to accept their hospitality. Casper arranged for immediate attention to his wounded men, who were lifted, groaning, from their wagons and carried tenderly to bunks in the hospital. Then Casper arranged for quarters for his men. Hardly had he completed this work when there occurred an incident which brought home to all the exposed position of the post.

About two hundred yards north of the fort there was a long, deep ravine, a cut in the prairie which was invisible until one came very close to it, and where it passed the fort there was a gully leading out of it to the surface of the plain. Out of this gully came riding, without the slightest warning, a score of naked savages, who appeared to have risen out of the earth, as, in fact, they had. A shot from a sentry alarmed the fort, but the red men were already close to the walls, jeering, shouting curses in English, and discharging their guns. Before the soldiers had time to mount the walls, they had vanished back into the ravine, where they were safe from rifle fire, picking up with them the unfortunate sentry whom they had surprised. It was useless to pursue them, for they would be a mile away before a troop of cavalry could lead out their horses and mount.

AN officer told Casper that a few days before, a dozen Indians swooped out of the ravine upon a soldier named Blair, who had gone out to collect the skin of a wolf which he had shot from the wall, and tomahawked and scalped the man before aid could reach him. Yet in those easy-going days it did not occur to the commanding officer to fill up the gully and put a stop to this form of murderous raiding.

There were three troops of cavalry and two companies of infantry in Reno just now, about three hundred men in all, and half a score of officers; and, in addition, two wagon trains which were being forcibly restrained from proceeding up the Bozeman Trail without an escort of soldiers. Such was the gold insanity that the emigrants chafed because they were not allowed to venture north upon a road which was teeming with hostile savages, who had sworn to exterminate every white who ventured up the trail. These men and women rejoiced when they learned that the new troops were bound for Appleby, seventy-five miles farther north, for they would be permitted to accompany the soldiers.

Colonel Gunning, at dinner with Major Foster and Lieutenant Molton, was filled with gloom regarding the future of the trail forts to the north and west, and none too confident of his abil-

ity to hold Reno against a determined attack.

"We are here in the heart of the Indian country," he said, "with three or four scantily garrisoned posts. Unable to aid one another, we are being reduced in numbers by attrition until soon we won't be a mouthful for the savages. My scouts inform me that at least twenty thousand Indians are allied to Red Cloud, and all that saves us is that they have not yet secured artillery."

"Even if they captured cannon," said Major Foster, "they wouldn't know how to use them."

Colonel Gunning, who was a red-faced, domineering sort of man, with an iron-gray beard, retorted sharply:

"That's all you know about it. There are white renegades among them, quite a number of runaway soldiers, former Indian police, and French-Canadian breeds. Let a few howitzers fall into their hands, and they would soon be battering down our walls. If they capture a single one of our posts, massacre the garrison, and carry off their cannon, all the forts will fall. Personally, I do not expect to be alive in six months, but I'll shoot myself and my family before the Indians get us."

Major Foster looked impressed, for it seemed that this officer was so situated as to know what he was talking about. Casper's lip curled contemptuously; with such commanding officers, how could the government expect to accomplish anything?

"Appleby is the smallest and weakest of the forts, I understand," said the major.

"Less than a hundred men there, but the stockade is more substantial than our own here. Captain Gibson has sent me three couriers, asking for reënforcements, within three weeks."

"How many men did you send him?" asked Casper.

The colonel seemed astonished at the question. "None," he growled. "I require five companies more to make this place tenable. If I sent fifty men to his aid, they would be gobbled up before they got twenty miles, and I need every man in this fort right where he is. In fact, if it wasn't for your orders, major, I do not think I would permit you to go forward."

"Do you mean, if you got word that the fort of Appleby was in an extremity, you wouldn't start to its aid with half your garrison?" asked Casper, who wanted to plumb the depths of the poltroonery of this old fossil.

"I tell you that these forts have to stand on their own," declared the colonel, a little abashed by the question. "Fortunately no such situation has arisen, and when you get there with your men, Appleby will have as strong a garrison as Reno. Would you come to my assistance, major, from Appleby if you heard that I was invested?"

"I would make an effort," declared Foster. "It would depend upon my own situation and the strength of the enemy, but it seems to me that a hundred men could cut their way through."

"And while you were coming to my rescue, they would rush your stockade, massacre the remnant of your garrison, and capture your women and children. Let me tell you that the only chance for any of us is to stay inside our walls. My infantry are armed with muzzle-loading guns, major. The war department has promised to send us breech-loaders as soon as possible, but half the savages who are lurking about have modern breechloaders issued to them by the Indian department; our own government gives them modern weapons, while it refuses them to its own soldiers."

THIS statement by Colonel Gunning sounds incredible, but was quite true, and demonstrated the lack of coöperation between the war and Indian departments. In an effort to placate the savages, the Indian department had been supplying them with breechloaders, with which to kill game, while the slow-moving war department had not yet equipped the whole army with such weapons. Casper acknowledged that the selfishness of the colonel was based on common sense; bad enough to face savages with superior weapons, but, when the enemy outnumbered him ten to one and was better armed, he was wise to hide be-

hind his walls. And Casper knew that his own command, if General Stone had not taken the precaution to supply it with breechloaders, would have been completely wiped out in the engagement of Jones' Knoll.

"If the major has no objections, we have about fifty breechloaders in our train—guns which were taken from our own dead and the Indians. These we might leave with you, colonel," he proposed.

Foster shot him an angry glance. "Your orders, lieutenant, prevent doing any such thing; our supplies are intended for Appleby, and the extra guns are needed to equip the soldiers now in that fort, who are undoubtedly armed like Colonel Gunning's command."

Colonel Gunning's red face grew purple. "You need fresh horses and mules; your men are receiving medical supplies from our scanty store, and you are enjoying our hospitality, major. Surely you can spare at least half these weapons. It may be the salvation of the post."

"I do not see how it is possible."

"How many breechloaders did you pick up from the Indians?" asked the colonel of Lieutenant Molton.

"I think about twenty-five."

"Those are not covered by your instructions from General Stone. I must requisition them. Major, remember I am your superior officer."

"In that case," grumbled the major, "I suppose you have the right. Well, take them." The look he shot at Casper boded ill for the officer who had, in the goodness of his heart, betrayed the existence of the extra guns. Casper could not feel a sense of guilt; as the colonel had said, these modern guns might be the means of preserving Reno.

Colonel Gunning had been a gallant officer in the Civil War, but he was a type that never should have been assigned to Indian warfare, and his nerves were worn to a frazzle by the unexpectedness of their methods. In the army they related that he was obsessed with the notion that a redskin might slip behind him unnoticed and remove his scalp, upon which the iron-gray hair grew luxuriantly, and he always carried his six-shooter cocked. In fact, he feared, like many another warrior in the Far West, scalping much more than losing his life. He was soon relieved of command and ordered East, traveling with a small escort. Just as he reached the outskirts of civilization, the perpetually cocked six-gun went off, and the bullet passed through his thigh, so that he suffered agonies before a physician was reached who could attend his wound. His caution, however, was greatly needed under the circumstances. A rash officer could easily have brought about the destruction of his fort.

When they finished dinner, Foster reprimanded Molton severely for the loss of the extra rifles.

"We've got to look after ourselves," he told the lieutenant, "and you can bet that old fox won't stir a step to help us if we get into trouble. I have not only the safety of Appleby to consider, but a young and beautiful girl who has placed herself under my protection. Therefore, I shall hold all the cards I can draw. If I have overlooked your offenses in the past, keep your slate clean from now on."

"I understand, sir," said Molton, flushing. "It was indiscreet of me, I admit, but it seemed so unnecessary that his infantry be forced to depend upon their old guns, when we had so many extra breechloaders."

"He has howitzers and a couple of troops of cavalry. If he had nerve, he could sweep all over the West with that force, instead of staying cooped up in this fort."

"You still think so after our experience?"

"Infantry against cavalry—useless! But give me a battery of field guns and four or five hundred disciplined cavalry, and I guarantee to chase any force old Red Cloud can bring against us."

Molton did not reply, but he felt that Fort Reno would stand much longer than Appleby, unless the major changed his attitude, and he shuddered for the future of Lucy Lattimer under such protection.

They rested three days in Fort Reno, at the end of which time a dozen of

the slightly wounded were able to rejoin the command; the remainder the major decided to leave in Reno, greatly to Colonel Gunning's satisfaction; for when the wounded men recovered they would strengthen his garrison.

It may be admitted here that Fort Appleby did not exist under that name, though the incidents which occur there in this story are paralleled by the experiences of Fort Phil Kearney, C. F. Smith, and other posts on this trail. And there were too many officers like Major Foster and Colonel Gunning, as the records of the war department and the reminiscences of the old-time frontiersmen testify. The blame rests with the government which selected its frontier commanders with so little regard for their fitness and continued to do so for many years afterward.

The Custer massacre, most lamentable episode of all border warfare, was due to the timidity of the officer who commanded half the force of that famous general, and who remained inactive during the battle of Little Big Horn and actually within sound of the guns.

CHAPTER XXV.

FORT APPLEBY.

ALTHOUGH the last lap of the journey led through the most dangerous section of the entire trail, it was almost without incident, for the command moved with extreme caution, averaging no more than ten miles a day, camped with elaborate precautions, suffered from nerves worn to a string, saw innumerable Indian signs, and heard from couriers of catastrophes ahead and behind them.

When they were two days from Appleby, a courier brought word that the fort was in a state of siege, and five thousand Indians were camped in the hills around it, and this called for a discussion between Foster and Molton. Their orders were imperative to relieve the fort. To retreat would draw the entire red army upon them, as nothing heartens savages so much as the backs of a foe. The major lost a little of the bravado which he had displayed at Reno, in the face of this news, but his courage did not fail, and Casper, with the general's letter in his pocket, proposed to get through against all opposition. They decided to push on by forced marches, to try to come into sight of the fort in daylight and advance boldly toward it, counting upon the garrison to make a sortie, if they got into difficulty. That day they made fifteen miles over rough country and started at dawn the following morning for the fort, still fifteen miles distant. No attack occurred that night, nor did they see Indians all day. This fact seemed to Casper a bad omen. Suppose the Indians had rushed the fort, were in possession of it, and lay there in ambush for the detachment, of whose coming they were undoubtedly fully informed!

With great anxiety they climbed the last ridge, beyond which they might expect to see the fort. Buffalo Charlie was in front, and topped the rise half a mile ahead of the column. They saw him halt, wave his hat in the air, and come galloping back. It was then two o'clock in the afternoon. Foster, Molton, and Lucy, for whom her fiancé had found a horse, rode forward a short distance to meet him.

"She's thar!" exclaimed the scout. "The ole flag is flyin', and thar ain't hair or hide of an Injun."

"Do you think they may be in ambush ahead?" asked Casper.

"It's pretty open country from now on—not much room to hide many of the varmints. I got kind of a hunch that they're gone. I always go by hunches with Injuns."

"When we get to the top of the rise, lieutenant, take a signal flag and see what the fort says," ordered Foster. "We'll halt until we know that all's well with them."

Casper galloped forward, followed by a sergeant with signals, fired a gun to attract attention, and waited. It was too far for the report to be heard at the fort, but the puff of smoke was seen, and an answering puff of smoke informed him that field glasses were now trained upon him.

With the flag he spelled out: "Relief detachment. Are you well?"

He saw a flagman mount the platform of a blockhouse and wigwag: "Welcome. Indians gone."

Fort Appleby, as they saw it when they descended into the plain, was a similar structure to Fort Reno—a log stockade with a blockhouse at each corner.

As the column wound down from the hills, there were evidences of rejoicing in the fort. The blockhouse watchtowers became crowded, a cannon began to roar, and through the clear, dry air penetrated the golden notes of a bugle. On the walls they made out several women, who were waving kerchiefs of white, and soon they heard the drums beating.

THE major ordered his own bugler to answer the calls from the fort, and so eager were the men to reach their destination that they quick-stepped without orders. They had accomplished an epoch-making march, though it has remained unsung. In distance, it was almost as long as the celebrated retreat of Xenophon across Asia Minor.

There was this distinction between the retreat of the Ten Thousand and the advance of the two hundred, however: The Greeks were the finest troops in the ancient world, whose armor and weapons were superior to the Persians, and whose fighting qualities were incomparable, and they passed through many countries whose inhabitants were not hostile. Casper's command, which Major Foster had stolen, was on foot in a horse country; his men had beaten off ten times their number of more ferocious fighters than the ancient Persians ever proved themselves to be, and they had traveled through a wilderness instead of a country dotted with rich and populous cities. The Greeks had heavy armor to ward off arrows; the Americans had none; while the savages were usually well equipped with rifles as well as bows and arrows. Besides, the Greeks were fleeing toward their homes, while the Americans were pushing into the heart of the country of their enemies, bound for a fort which they had half expected to find in ashes upon their arrival.

Captain Gibson's men were drawn up on the parade ground inside the stockade, as the reënforcements marched in. Casper's trained eye ran down the ranks and noted that there were not more than ninety men, but they were well fed, well uniformed and well armed. Half a dozen women were grouped at one side of the parade ground, and their joy at the relief was pathetic.

Major Foster also drew up his men in line for inspection, then dismounted and shook hands with the officer he had come to relieve. Molton saw that Gibson appeared to have only one commissioned officer in his company. Even in this advanced post the shortage continued.

The escort wagons rumbled through the gates and were parked at one side of the parade ground; then the troops were dismissed, and, arm in arm, Foster and Gibson went forward to join the ladies, who had already fallen upon Lucy with expressions of friendliness, which she received with smiling appreciation.

Until now Casper had never yielded his letter of instructions to the commander of Appleby, and Foster had not demanded it. He presented it now to the major, who received it with a satirical smile and thrust it unopened into his breast pocket. Gibson led them into the office of the commanding officer and offered hospitality in the form of a black bottle.

"You don't know how delighted I am to see you fellows," he declared, with a sigh of relief, as they touched glasses. "We have had the devil of a time here, and it began to look as though we couldn't hold out much longer."

"The walls do not look as though you had been attacked," said Foster.

"Oh, they never attempted to storm the fort, but they kept us from venturing out, and when we did have to send out parties to cut wood for our fires, they made it hot for them. In the last four weeks I lost forty-five men in attacks on forage and wood parties."

"With your force, we now have about two hundred and fifty men," said the major easily. "That will be plenty. I don't suppose there is a chaplain in the post."

Captain Gibson, who was a dark, quizzical individual, with a small black mustache, looked astonished at the question.

"What the deuce do you want of a chaplain?" he demanded. "We haven't even got a doctor at present."

"My fiancée is with us, and I hoped to get married at once."

"Congratulations!" exclaimed the captain. "I wondered what a beautiful girl like that was doing with the force. She certainly is not an emigrant. But what courage she had to accompany you on such a trip!"

"Ahem," said the major, slightly embarrassed. "She joined us en route, on her way to Virginia City. I persuaded her to join the army."

"A welcome addition, sir. Double congratulations."

Casper heard this conversation, naturally without pleasure, but he could not refuse the toast which Captain Gibson proposed to the soon-to-be-happy couple; however, he took some consolation from the news that there was nobody to perform the marriage. Until Lucy was Mrs. Foster, he had a right to hope.

NOW he made an excuse to leave the others and wandered disconsolately about the post. He had not exchanged a word alone with Lucy since leaving Reno; the girl seemed to avoid him, and the major was always about; besides, what could they have to talk about?

This fort, First Lieutenant Forbish of the garrison informed him, had been constructed, with the aid of a couple of portable sawmills, entirely of timber from the foothills, four or five miles west, where grew trees that towered from one hundred and fifty to two hundred feet skyward; in many cases it was ninety feet to the lowest branch. The stockade was constructed of logs sixteen inches in diameter and eleven feet long, of which three feet was tamped in gravel. The top of each post was sharpened to a point, and loopholes were cut every few feet, widening toward the outer side, so that a rifle could be aimed in any direction. Platforms were built under the loopholes, which were so high that Indians standing outside could not reach them; and there was room for two men on each platform, so that a continuous fire could be kept up through the loopholes. The logs were of such hard wood that it was almost impossible for them to be set on fire by the savages.

Adequately garrisoned, it seemed to Casper that Appleby was invulnerable to attack from a foe which lacked artillery. Unlike Reno, the buildings inside the fort were separate cabins, not set against the sides of the stockade, and these were substantial structures of logs.

"No wonder they haven't tried to storm this post," he said to the lieutenant. "We'll never lose a man if we stay inside."

"Unfortunately we cannot do that. We have to graze our horses and cattle, and we must send down to the stream for wood. We are supposed to sally out to aid wagon trains in trouble, and when they get us in the open they pick us off. For six weeks we have been harassed by Indians, and they managed to stampede much of our stock. We lost a dozen men who rode out to recover the animals in a stampede a couple of weeks ago, and most of the herd was successfully run off. We have got to cut a lot of hay for the winter."

"I thought this was an infantry outfit. You wear infantry uniforms."

The lieutenant laughed. "We are, but we are not. Captain Gibson bought a lot of horses from friendly Crow Indians, and we captured a herd of hostile Indian ponies in a raid when we were building the fort. He decided to mount the infantry. It's yellow legs, without sabers. A queer-looking outfit, but the men have learned to ride. It's the only way we can venture outside the walls; the Indians would make short work of small parties of foot soldiers."

"Mounted infantry," said Casper thoughtfully. "Do you know, I think that is the solution of Indian warfare? We have been sending cavalry, armed with revolvers and sabers, against Indians armed with rifles. If the government would mount a few thousand infantry, or issue rifles to the cavalry, I have a notion the savages could be quickly conquered."

Other minds than his, by the way, had come to the same conclusion, and in a few years the cavalry regiments were all armed with carbines, with which they drove the Indians before them. Many years later, Rudyard Kipling, on a visit to the West, made the comment that the United States cavalry were not cavalry at all, but infantry which rode rapidly from place to place, dismounted and fought on foot, to clinch victory by remounting and charging like cavalry.

IT must be remembered that our frontier had rolled westward with great rapidity, and that the Civil War had occupied the attention of the government almost exclusively for four years. The earlier Indian wars had been fought against forest Indians, who hid behind trees, and who did not know how to ride horses. The red men of the plains had behaved themselves pretty well in the '50s, and it was not until now that we were confronting great Indian armies of horsemen, armed with rifles as modern as our own. The war department learned slowly, but in the end waged war effectively.

When Generals Sherman and Sheridan, the great strategists of the Civil War, turned their attention to the Western plains, the savages began to be dealt with in competent fashion; but that time was not yet.

In remote Wyoming, Captain Gibson, cut off from the world, with a useless telegraph instrument in his office, months without word from his superiors, had grappled with this problem and solved it; and not only Casper, but Major Foster, was quick to see the merit of his innovation.

Captain Gibson had another innovation which interested the new arrivals very much—a Henry rifle which contained a magazine and discharged sixteen shots in rapid succession. Although Foster and Molton had heard of this remarkable invention, they had never seen one, and they were astonished to learn that he had captured it a few weeks before from an Indian chief. It does not seem credible that Indians should have owned repeating rifles before the United States army was equipped with them; nevertheless, it is true enough. When you read history you will learn that our celebrated government sent soldiers to Cuba in 1898, with old Springfield black-powder rifles to use against Spaniards equipped with Mauser smokeless-powder guns; and that in the World War we actually sent over several regiments armed with Krags, from the later days of the Spanish war. So it does not seem so strange that there were repeating rifles among the Indians, when our troops, in some cases, were still armed with muzzle-loaders. However, there were very few Henry shooters among the Indians, and these were in the possession of chiefs who purchased them for fifty times their value in furs from Canadian traders.

This rifle was to serve Captain Gibson well under extraordinary circumstances a little later.

The first thing that happened to Captain Gibson was to be ranked out of his cabin by Major Foster, whereupon the captain decided to share quarters with Casper Molton, from whom he soon learned the tale of Lucy Lattimer.

"My advice to you," he declared, "is to go after the girl. She can't love that coxcomb. I welcomed him with open arms, and he treats me with as little consideration as though I were a subaltern, instead of the former commanding officer. How on earth did you get along with him on the road, and how did it happen that you had General Stone's orders, instead of him?"

Casper told him the story of the way Foster had insinuated himself into the command, disregarding the spirit of the general's instructions, to which the captain listened with indignation.

"Talk about the Arab and the camel!" he exclaimed. "But there was nothing you could do under the circumstances. I would have protested, but yielded, just as you did. On top of that, he ran off with your girl."

"She wasn't my girl," protested Casper.

"Don't be a fool, boy. You dragged her back to the detachment; then you saved her life, when he neglected her to

shoot buffaloes. Of course she thinks more of you than she does of him; he happened to ask her to marry him, and you didn't, so the little one had no choice. You can cut him out yet."

"If I thought there was a chance——" sighed Casper. "But she chose him of her own free will, when she knew I loved her. She told me she hated me."

"Splendid!" exclaimed the captain, his eyes dancing. "A woman never troubles to hate a man unless she loves him, so I consider that most encouraging. Old Foster looks like a first-class martinet, and you and I must form an offensive and defensive alliance against him. Let's get the girl away from him. By Jove, if you quit, I'll enter the lists! She's a real Southern blond beauty, and I love blondes; probably she only agreed to marry him to salve her pride against eating army rations, without any right to them. You or I would serve her just as well, and, though you have a long start on me, I go fast when I get under way."

"You stay out of this," commanded Casper, with a smile. "I won't give up. I thought a girl like that wouldn't get engaged to a man unless she loved him, and if she loved him there was no chance for me; but God knows I love her, and I am sure I would be a kinder husband than Foster."

"Just make her see it that way. He can't marry her for months, and anything can happen in the meantime; and if she jilts him, it won't be the first time a pretty girl has thrown a man over. You go right up to her and let her see how you stand. Don't wait. Look! She's standing on the parade ground, talking to Mrs. Forbish."

Casper, fired by the enthusiasm of his new friend, seized his hat and dashed from the room, while Gibson, with a laugh in his eye, stood by the window to see what would happen.

At first it seemed plain sailing to Casper. He would say: "Miss Lattimer, you don't have to marry Major Foster. I love you madly. I will adore you all my life. For Heaven's sake, consider: You were practically forced by circumstances to accept him, and you can withdraw without any trouble."

But, as he hurried across the parade ground, the force of these remarks strangely waned. Suppose she loved the major all the time; suppose she really hated Casper, as she had told him; suppose she was perfectely contented to become the wife of the commander of the post. Then she would consider what he had to say as insulting. Darn it, he couldn't accost her abruptly with a declaration of love! It is dishonorable to make love to engaged girls.

CHAPTER XXVI.

REPULSED.

BY the time Lieutenant Molton reached the two women, he who had charged Confederate trenches, undaunted, and beaten off the Indian attack, without a quiver of fear, was as timid as a schoolboy who didn't know his lesson. He lifted his hat, and Mrs. Forbish nodded pleasantly and then turned away. Lucy regarded him with an unsmiling, rather inscrutable expression.

"I hope you have been comfortably located, Miss Lattimer," he stammered.

"Yes, thank you, Lieutenant Molton. The major has moved Lieutenant Forbish to a larger cabin, and I am to live with them."

"It's great to have finished our journey," he said, hoping to hold her, for she also was turning away.

"It is not the end of the journey that I expected," she said, with a rather sad smile.

"I know you wanted to go to Virginia City, but now——"

"Yes, now——"

"Miss Lattimer," he blurted, "you don't have to do this——"

"Do what, Lieutenant Molton?" she asked, with dangerous sweetness.

"That day after the attack, I was frantic. Jones was dead, the wounded lay about, and I did not learn your wagon was burned——"

"Major Foster was also busy, but he made the discovery at once."

"It almost killed me when he told me you were engaged!" exclaimed Casper. There—it was out!

"But what affair might it have been

of yours?" she asked, although she knew well enough; but, being hurt herself, she wished to inflict injury.

Casper drew himself up and looked down on her with pained eyes.

"When a man loves a woman, he would give his life for her. It kills him to think she engages herself to a man, just because a few boxes and barrels burn."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Lucy. That he spoke the absolute truth did not assuage her anger; her pride made her furious. "It seems to me that the affianced bride of your commanding officer ought to be protected against insult, even if your lack of breeding permits you to insult me."

"Oh!" he groaned. "You misunderstand me. I mean no insult."

"Once before, I think, I requested you not to speak to me. I repeat the request. Will you force me to repeat this conversation to Major Foster?"

There was a pain in his heart, like the prick of a knife blade; his shoulders sagged, and his tongue moistened his dry lips.

"I won't offend again, Miss Lattimer."

Lucy had moved off several paces, but the distress of the young man was too much for her kind heart.

"I withdraw what I said about your breeding, Lieutenant Molton," she said. "It was ungenerous of me. You angered me."

"Thank you, Miss Lattimer. You said enough more to finish me."

CASPER bowed and moved toward his quarters, and Lucy stole a look over her shoulder, but he did not turn his head. "Poor boy!" she crooned. "Only, he shouldn't have said that about the boxes and barrels—even if it was true."

Nevertheless, her heart was lighter with the declaration that Casper had made. In the safety of the fort she was recovering her courage and her high spirit; she had passed through the gates in dread, lest there be a clergyman within to marry her to the major. Of course, she had given her word, and she would go through with it, but she was grateful for the respite. She knew perfectly well that she would be unhappy as Major Foster's wife, and that her impulse in accepting him was a stupid one, founded upon craven fear. Being a Lattimer, she would pay for her false decision; her word was inviolable.

She was paying already, for the major, if he could not marry her, could demand all her time when he was free from duty. He talked to her by the hour about himself, his family, his achievements, his aspirations, and their future together.

An engaged girl cannot refuse caresses to her fiancé, but she avoided them when possible. He held her hand, and she noticed that his hand was wet. He was one of those unfortunate individuals with moist palms. When he insisted upon kissing her at the end of the evening she protested that his mustache chafed her upper lip, and she pleaded that she could not permit such liberties until they were married. But the major was strong, and what he wanted he took.

The Indian army being withdrawn, probably summoned for some huge foray against another post, Phil Kearney or C. F. Smith, for a few days they had a taste of peace.

Buffalo Charlie was frankly bored by the monotony of post life, and after a week of it he declared his intention of riding back to Julesburg. He could not be restrained, because he was a civilian who had been hired only to guide Molton's detachment to Appleby. Eventually he set out, carrying a mail bag across his saddle horn and dispatches for General Stone in his breast pocket. Before his departure he called on Lucy Lattimer.

"Jest come to say good-by, miss," he told her. "I'm an old man, but I like a purty face, and I like a gal with spunk."

"Thank you, Charlie," she said, dimpling with pleasure.

"Funny to me a girl with spunk would ha' taken up with that horned toad, Foster, when there was a fine, strapping young feller like Molton crazy 'bout ye."

"Charlie," she said with much dignity, "you forget yourself. You must not talk to me like that."

"You ain't got no pappy, and somebody ought to talk to ye. The major don't care for nothing but himself. You

hadn't ought ter get scairt 'cause your wagon burned. Every man in the outfit would ha' shared with ye."

"If Lieutenant Molton sent you to tell me this, tell him that I consider it a dishonorable action," she declared, her head high, her face very white. "I am engaged to Major Foster."

"Course the lieutenant didn't send me. I come myself. Casper is a boy that can speak for himself."

"Then why didn't he?" she exclaimed, stamping her little foot. Then she realized what she had said, and the tears started to her eyes as she turned to run out of the room.

"Ain't goin' to say good-by to old Charlie?" whined the scout, with a contortion of his grotesque mask of a face.

Lucy was wiping her eyes. "Good-by and God bless you. You meant well," she said, extending her hand. "It's too late, Charlie."

"If I meet a parson comin', I'll scalp him," he informed her, with an awful grin. "It ain't never too late. Maybe an Injun'll get this major yet."

"You should not say such things. Good-by, Charlie."

HE shook her little hand once more and slouched away, but he had another errand to do before he left the fort—a visit to Casper Molton. He found Casper alone in his cabin, busy with a ration blank.

"Just been over to tell that young woman what's what," began the scout.

"For which, damn your impudence. What did you tell her?"

"That she ought to tuk you 'stead o' Madam Foster."

"That did a hell of a lot of good."

"She axed me if you sent me. I said you could speak for yourself. What do you s'pose she said?"

"How do I know? I was sufficiently in her black books before you thrust in your fool nose."

Unperturbed, the scout continued: "She said, 'Then why didn't he?' "

"What?" exclaimed Casper, his face transformed. "Say that again."

"She said why didn't you speak for yourself?"

"It's too late now," groaned the lieutenant.

"That's what she said. But when a woman says it's too late now 'bout a man, boy, it ain't. You watch your chance when you go out on a scout with the major; when nobody's lookin', shoot him in the back."

"Why, you damned old savage!" exclaimed Molton.

"No, I don't s'pose you would. You're civilized. Savages got sense."

The whole outfit which he had guided on the march turned out to see the old man ride away. After their experience, it seemed frightful to the soldiers to have him essay the journey all alone, with no weapon but the muzzle-loader to which he clung.

"Been riding these plains alone for thurty years. Can't no Injuns find me 'less I want them to, and I most always don't want 'em to." These were his last words. Six weeks later he sat in the office of General Stone in Fort Kearney and told him the whole story of Foster's joining the escort, not forgetting to expand on the admirable conduct of First Lieutenant Casper Molton. Charlie was fond of his friends and poison to those he didn't admire.

Major Foster was delighted with Gibson's mounted infantry, and took it upon himself to drill them and train them in cavalry maneuvers. He rode boldly out of the fort at their head, taught them to gallop in line and to wheel and charge like veterans. But he deplored their seat. Few of them could ride like cavalrymen, partly because they had makeshift saddles and partly because they were infantry by long training and disposition. However, he was proud to display his mounted force to Lucy, who indulged him by climbing the stairs to one of the blockhouses and watching them, as they cavorted upon the plain.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MASSACRE.

THE concentration of Indians around the fort had prevented the dispatch of wood parties for weeks, and the wood supply was low. A huge store was de-

sirable, in order to carry the garrison through the cold fall and winter months, soon to approach. The hills to the west were heavily timbered, and, upon Captain Gibson's calling attention to the need of firewood, Major Foster decided to send out an expedition to cut a large supply. A dozen big quartermaster wagons were to be filled, and about fifty men were detailed to accompany the wagons, with Casper Molton in charge. There were no evidences of Indians in any number in the vicinity, but it was a dangerous mission, and every precaution was to be taken.

Casper rode away at the head of his men, conscious that Lucy Lattimer was standing in the door of her cabin, waving good-by. Despite the excellent advice of Buffalo Charlie, he had no opportunity to plead his cause further with the young woman; she had been especially cool to him for several days after the departure of Charlie, and her words, "too late," were echoing in his heart.

The wood party moved slowly across the plain and began to ascend the foothills, three or four miles away, following a faint trail left by other wood parties in the past.

Casper divided his party into two sections, half to fell trees and saw logs, half to mount guard. Every hour the parties changed occupations.

They worked for two days, camped on the ground, and procured a huge supply of logs, which were rolled on the wagons. Late in the morning of the third day a rifle spoke, and one of the soldiers grunted, spun around, and fell, face down. Instantly the detachment sprang to arms. It was evident that the Indians had crept close upon them and had taken cover all around them.

The ground was dotted with stumps and bushes, while the Indians were concealed in the forest; it was a certainty that every member of the wood party, in the scanty cover afforded them, would be picked off, if they tried to fight it out there. Casper determined to make a dash for it. He told the teamsters to be ready to swing out their wagons at the bugle, and warned his men. Suddenly the big quartermaster wagons began to rattle and roar on the way down the hillside, while the soldiers on foot, crouching and taking cover where they could, followed. A heavy rain of arrows and bullets poured in on them, but in five minutes they were out of the woods, ready to make a stand on the plain. Quickly the wagons were circled, and the soldiers slipped beneath them, shooting through the wheels and resting their heavy rifles upon the spokes. And the savages remounted their horses—they had dismounted for the ambuscade—and followed, circling and firing in regular Indian style. Casper estimated there were a couple of hundred Indians attacking, and he saw with a sinking heart that half a score of his men had fallen in the surprise attack in the woods.

From the beginning of the fray, the firing had been heard from the fort, and the garrison, crowding the walls, cheered when they saw the wagons emerge into the open. Then came the Indian attack upon the wagons, and the opportunity which Major Foster had been champing for since he got his cavalry.

"Boots and saddles!" the trumpet was sounding. The mounted infantry were ahorse and deployed through the gate, the major tarrying for a word from Lucy. It was the wrong word.

"You'll save him?" she whispered, her face as white as death.

"I'll do my duty," declared the major grimly. Without a good-by kiss, he dashed through the gate, which Captain Gibson prudently closed behind him. The major drew his saber and waved it, a gallant figure, thought all the women, including Lucy, who was already on the wall.

She saw the mounted men swing across the plain, riding hard. After an eternity she saw them move into charge formation, eighty gallant soldiers in a single line, racing furiously. She saw the puffs of smoke coming from the wagons, and every now and then a savage would fall off his horse. From that distance they looked like ants mounted on beetles. And now the savages saw the troopers, for they began to draw off from the wood party and fire upon the advancing cavalry.

As they charged, the horsemen were returning the fire, but probably missing, for the army had not yet learned to discharge rifles from the backs of galloping horses. Major Foster was having his charge and enjoying it. The cavalry swept by the wood party, but did not stop. The Indians were retreating over the summit of a treeless ridge to the right. Casper was already setting his train in motion back toward the fort, and shouted to the major to go no farther; but that officer was in his element. He had always declared that he could scatter any band of Indians with a troop of cavalry, and here was his chance to prove it.

"Charge!" he yelled. "Don't let one escape."

ON swept the horsemen, hoofs thundering on the hillside, but a chance shot from a fleeing red man struck the horse of Foster in the breast; the animal stumbled and pitched forward, and the major went to the ground, rolling over and over, while his men divided to avoid riding him down. The major was down, but the order was given. Lieuteuant Forbish repeated, "Charge!" and the gallant band stood out on the sky line, then disappeared below it. They never came back. Not a single man of that splendid troop was ever seen alive again.

Casper, who had seen the major fall, ordered his sergeant to conduct the train with all speed for the fort; then he rode furiously to the spot where the major was struggling to his feet.

In four or five minutes Casper drew up his horse close to the officer on the ground. Curiously enough, he was always riding to the aid of his unhorsed enemy. This scene was not unlike that one east of Reno, except upon this occasion there was no danger. The tide of battle had rolled beyond the ridge.

"Are you hurt, major?" Casper asked, as he dismounted.

"Shaken up, and I think my ankle is injured; but, of all the damned luck, to be dropped out of that charge. I hope Forbish gives 'em hell."

"Get on my horse. I'll help you, and I'll run along beside you," said Casper, who aided the groaning officer to clamber on the back of the well-trained horse.

"I suppose we better get to the fort. Forbish will clean them up. We're no good to him. Drat that ankle!"

The progress back to the fort was slow. No other cavalryman had fallen or needed attention, and eventually they passed through the gates. Captain Gibson met them with a pale face.

"Congratulations on your escape, major," he said. "Where are the cavalry, do you suppose?"

"It's time they were coming back," said the major. "I told him to pursue them, but not to China."

There was a shout from one of the blockhouses, and Gibson emitted a sigh of relief. "Here they come," he said. "I was getting worried." He looked out through the still-opened gate and shaded his hands to gaze at the horsemen who were outlined on the crest of the ridge.

"God in heaven!" he exclaimed. "They are Indians!"

The major forgot his foot, Casper grew as pale as death, and both joined Gibson at the gate.

They were Indians, and now the ridge was crawling with them. War bonnets bobbed over the crest. Then over the crest they came in hundreds, thousands, a never-ending stream, and now they rode the slope in a mass of moving color. Indians—countless Indians—a mighty army and moving fast for the fort.

"Shut that gate!" commanded the major. "Load the howitzers! Sound the call! This is to the death."

There was commotion inside the fort; men shouting, women screaming. The young wife of Lieutenant Forbish fainted in the arms of Lucy Lattimer, who, pale but calm, ministered to her as well as she could. Casper rushed about his work—efficient and outwardly calm, but inwardly raging.

THERE had been a massacre. The cavalrymen had ridden over the ridge, drawn by the flying two hundred, into a great Indian army, and they had been slaughtered to a man.

They had no business to go over the ridge; they had rescued the wood party and should have escorted it back. Instead, they went wild and rode to death. No; they had not gone wild. They had been ordered to pursue by the pompous fool who was the only survivor, and they had obeyed orders. By a dispensation of fate, and for what purpose only fate knew, their real murderer, the vain, arrogant Walter Foster had been saved because of the killing of his horse. And now, in what a strait his folly had left the fort! Eighty horsemen and a score of the wood party had been killed. The garrison was reduced to less than a hundred and fifty men, and there were at least five thousand Indians pouring down from the hills. By one rash act the major had destroyed almost as many men as had marched across six hundred miles to reënforce Fort Appleby.

However, there was no time for anything but defense. The loopholes were manned, a rifle stuck out through every hole, and cannons were loaded, ready to demolish the howling fiends.

The multitude of Indians drove full tilt toward the fort, as though it were their intention to leap their horses over the wall, or smash it in by sheer weight and momentum. However, they checked their charge when the rifles began to speak, and, having learned the devastating effect of a shell from a howitzer exploding in a mass, they turned to the right, within four or five hundred yards of the stockade, and resolved themselves into a sort of triumphal procession to celebrate their victory.

If the troops and residents of the fort had not been sick with horror at the blotting out of a third of their number, they might have admired this picturesque cavalcade; but if they could have forgotten the massacre which had just taken place, the savages would not permit them. For they brandished bleeding scalps and articles of uniform; they taunted in queer English; they exulted, gloated, and made fiendish threats. The soldiers fired furiously, but the range was too long, and the Indian army was moving too rapidly for execution to be done.

Some of the Indians were naked, save for a breechclout; others wore buckskin trimmed with feathers and tall war bonnets, and quite a number were arrayed in the blue uniform of the United States army, like the band which had first encountered Casper's marching column. A small group did not join the procession, which was revolving rapidly, with the fort as a hub, but sat their horses upon a little knoll, like a general and his staff. Through his glasses Casper made out a tall, dignified Indian, arrayed in a new suit of yellow buckskin trimmed with red and wearing a bonnet with very tall feathers, and so long that the tail feathers fell almost to the ground, as he sat his horse and gazed proudly upon the milling array below him. He seemed to be the commander. Afterward, Casper learned that this chief was Red Cloud himself, and Foster's mad charge was against the main army of the leader.

The troops waited with eagerness for the attack. Such was their wrath, because of the slaughter of their comrades, that they earnestly desired it, so that they could kill and kill and kill. But Red Cloud had no intention of attacking a stockade composed of hardwood logs sixteen inches thick and higher than a brave on horseback. Being well aware of the remoteness and complete isolation of the post, he preferred to besiege it, to pick off the garrison, one by one, until, by a process of attrition, he had so weakened it that the walls could not longer be adequately manned.

After an hour of fiendish exultation, one of his staff rode forward with a signal flag, and swung it back and forth. Whereupon the head of the column turned and rode toward the western hills. Much ammunition had been wasted from the fort, but only four or five Indians had been killed or wounded. These were carried off by the departing army.

They rode without order, a wide-spreading, mounted mob, over the top of the fatal ridge, and the sun was ahead of them in the western sky and silhouetted the horsemen, as they moved over the crest, giving the effect, with their tall, feathered war bonnets, of strange, black saplings shaken by a breeze.

Behind them they left despair.

CASPER knew well the fate of the besieged fortress; unrelieved, in the end it would fall. He knew the disposition of the commanders of the nearest posts. To weaken their own forces, in their almost equally exposed situation, would be perilous, and General Stone, six hundred miles to the east, assumed that Appleby was amply supplied with men. The Indians would always be lurking near; they would pounce on groups in the hayfields; they would be waiting to capture men out exercising the horses. At night they would creep under the walls, climb upon one another's shoulders, and fire through the loopholes, picking off a man here and there until they were driven away. To venture a rod beyond the walls would be to court death, and it was impossible, always, to keep two hundred men cooped up in a few acres of ground, half of which was covered by cabins. The day would come when the garrison would be reduced to a few score, and then Red Cloud would strike, and strike with all his strength, beyond doubt.

Casper knew that the news of Red Cloud's victory, sent by smoke signals and by mirrors flashing from hill to hill, would be known in every Indian village in the Northwest in a few days, and there would come flocking to his standard other thousands, eager to share in his glory and get a division of scalps and plunder. And in the meantime, as white men, Americans, and soldiers, it was their business to recover the bodies of the massacred cavalry and give them Christian burial.

To be concluded in the next issue of THE POPULAR, *on the news stands July 20th.*

MEDICINE LODGE

SOME months ago a bill was introduced into Congress to authorize an appropriation for an Indian memorial at Medicine Lodge, Kansas. This Barber County town, one of the counties on the Oklahoma border, has a number of claims to fame. Here, in the '60s, the Indian and the pioneer came to trade, for the trail into the Texas Panhandle followed the course of Medicine River, and Medicine Lodge is situated on this river. And here was enacted one of the most famous of Indian treaties.

When the Santa Fe Trail was alive with freight trains and pioneers making their way westward from the Missouri Valley, in search of homes, the Indians on our Western plains made a concerted action to defend their lands and hold off the white invasion. A period of warfare followed, and the Indians made the pioneer settlements hazardous oases in a country sufficiently exposed to primitive dangers, without the additional risk of war. These Indian uprisings and depredations assumed such threatening proportions that the government finally called for a conference. To this conference came the principal tribes of the Western plains, the Apache, Arapahoe, Cheyenne, Comanche and Kiowa, and they pitched their tepees on the spot where now stands Medicine Lodge.

As an inducement to the red men to desist from their attacks, the government offered to transport the Indians to reservations for their exclusive use and occupation. It also stipulated to furnish the Indians the means of education and civilization, and to furnish them with the means of livelihood until they were able to provide for themselves. One of the heroes of the conference was a young Kiowa boy, sixteen years of age, I-se-o, whose eloquent plea for a peaceful settlement of the disputes between the Indians and the whites, turned opinion in favor of the treaty. Later he traveled for days to keep the Indians faithful to their agreement.

In 1868 Congress ratified the treaty of Medicine Lodge, which proved to be the most effective agent in healing the bitter feeling between the red men and the whites. The iron rails now pushed their way rapidly into the West, and in their wake the pioneer and homesteader felt secure. In less than twenty years the Indian wars in the West passed into history.

The Hole in the Frying Pan

By Ledyard Bailey

This time putting a hole in the Frying Pan was not an act of vandalism. For the Frying Pan outfit was a fiendishly clever, cattle-rustling, murdering crew.

EVERYBODY in town had hunted the shade. Even the wind was taking a siesta. It was so still that your ears ached.

Without the least warning the old-timer broke the spell:

"This Frying Pan outfit," he said, "is cert'nly good! Listen to those horses."

It was so unexpected that the tenderfoot lawyer jumped. "Talking in his sleep!" he thought; but he listened.

A faint patter of hoofs shook the silence. At the end of the empty street four horsemen swept into sight, riding two by two. Even the tenderfoot noticed how smooth-gaited their horses were, and how deftly handled. They moved in close order: one blanket would have covered the four of them—a buckskin with a black stripe, a blue roan, and two bright bays with white stars.

The horsemen passed the hotel, wheeled right into line at the hitch rail of the Red Onion, dropped off, and filed through the swinging doors.

"To look at 'em now," said the old-timer, "you'd judge those horses had all been raised on the same bottle. But ever' one of 'em was stolen in a different county."

He had not stirred. His ornately stitched boots were still crossed on the porch railing, his chair tipped back against the wall, his hat brim down over his nose, and his thumbs hooked in his belt. Sound asleep he was—like a weasel.

"Stolen! Those fellows are horse thieves? And you people let them ride in here in broad daylight, right past your sheriff's office? What's the matter with this town?"

The old-timer sighed. "That's no way for you to talk, son! They're artists. Why, only last week they sold a matched team to 'Old Man' Hargis from over in Gentile Valley, for three hundred dollars—cash. And the first night out, with the old man asleep under his wagon, they stole 'em back again!"

From his tone, the old-timer took an

honest pride in the accomplishments of his fellow citizens. The lawyer held his tongue; he was learning.

"Horses, though, are only what you might call the luxury end of their business. Their main hold is cattle. They deal wholesale in cattle; run 'em off in bunches, change brands to suit their own ideas, scatter them out on their range, and market them in carload lots. Every man in the outfit has his own brand, registered all lawful and regular. And they've never run across any other owner's brand they couldn't improve upon—not so far they haven't. They're artists with the runnin' iron—and other ways, too."

The lawyer looked at him. Only his weathered chin showed beyond his hat brim. In the shadow beneath was a faint sparkle that might come from a bright old eye. The lawyer was young enough to hate being played for a sucker.

"That sounds like a stage driver's yarn!" he growled. Then he stood up and stretched.

"Sit down!" said the old-timer. His voice was soft, and he had not moved a muscle, but the lawyer dropped back on his step. The doors of the Red Onion swung, the four horsemen filed out, mounted like one man, and rode rapidly away.

The old-timer spoke in his gentle drawl. "Son, you've been fretting a whole lot because it takes you so long to catch on in this town. Well, there's one man-size job all ready and waitin' for you—biggest job in the country. You get busy and bust a hole in the Frying Pan, and you'll have this country eatin' out of your hand."

"Don't rub it in!" said the lawyer sulkily. "You might as well tell me to run for governor."

The old-timer pushed back his hat, swung his boots to the floor, and sat up, all in one motion. His light-blue eyes bored into the lawyer's.

"Son, you may know everything in those sheep-hide books of yours, but you got a heap to learn otherwise. You've named the main reason I'm picking you for this job—because you got no friends. Everybody else—sheriff and county attorney included—has too many friends all snarled up with 'em, especially at election times."

TOWARD sundown that same afternoon "Beak" Leary, trouble hunter, pulled up at the break of a bare ridge to exchange ideas with his horse.

"Horse," he asked, "what do you make of such funny business as that?"

He leaned on his saddle horn, looking down the slope. The sorrel horse pricked his ears, his wide nostrils fluttering, snuffing the battle from afar. Man and horse, dark against the glowing western sky, might have been cast in bronze.

Funny business it was. In the level green pasture below them, two riders were crowding a bunch of heavy red-and-white cattle through a gap in the wire fence. Two more were circling out on the run, driving in stragglers. The cattle were heavy and slow-moving, and the riders were in a hurry. In no time at all they had the bunch lined out beyond the fence and were hazing them at a lumbering trot toward the tangle of low hills beyond the valley. And they had not stopped to shut any gates.

The lone rider at the top of the ridge drew a thoughtful thumb and finger along his high hawk nose. "Do you reckon they're crazy, maybe?" he inquired. "Those steers are rolling fat, and they'll melt off a hundred pounds apiece, crowded along like that. What do you figure is their big hurry?"

The sorrel horse—christened Fool Hen, because he was neither one—stirred to life at the question, shifted his feet, and snorted, calling attention to something that looked like the answer. This something was a fast-moving puff of dust on the gray sagebrush slope opposite them, beyond the pasture. It was moving downhill, and whatever was making it move was also in a hurry. Beak watched it and glanced away toward the upper end of the valley. Flat roofs showed there, set among cottonwoods; and the tank tower of a windmill.

"Riding to cut 'em off!" he muttered. "*And* alone. Four to one. Horse, that lad is headed for trouble. What do you say we mix into this ourselves?"

Fool Hen jumped at the word. He forgot the long miles he had covered since breakfast and plunged downhill to join the rumpus, with all the enthusiasm of a chicken after a grasshopper.

By the time they reached the shallow creek below the pasture, chase and pursuit had passed out of sight. Beak pulled up on the farther bank to listen.

Spat! it came. *Spat! Spat! Spat!*" The crackle of distant rifle shots. Then, *whang!* the heavy bark of a .45 pistol.

Beak shook his head. "Sounds like cross-firing! Rotten bad judgment, old-timer." He threw the irons into the eager sorrel and eased his long .45 in the holster. It would be outclassed in a shooting match against rifles. but in a four-to-one scrap with cattle rustlers, there was only one side for Beak Leary to take.

He found the battle ground deserted. The dust had settled, and everything was still. The only living thing in sight was the buzzard already circling overhead. One horse, a blue roan, lay sprawled in the dirt. Shot on the run, he had rolled over and over, like a shot rabbit. The saddle and bridle had been stripped off and the brand slashed. In front of him the loose dirt was furrowed, where his rider had struck and slid, but of the man himself there was no further sign. A hundred yards beyond, a red hummock lay beside the trail; one of the steers was down, too.

A shadow swept by, and Beak looked up. The buzzard was circling, spiraling down toward something on the slope above. Another bird was sailing in to join him. Watching the carrion hunters, Beak found a sick taste in his mouth. He spat it out and lifted his horse up the bank of the wash.

The dead man lay on his face behind a low rock, bareheaded, his rifle out in front, where it had dropped when the bullet from the side had smashed his skull. Fool Hen shied, snorting at the smell of blood, and Beak swung off, leaving him anchored by trailing reins, and bent over the body.

The man had been shot a second time, between the shoulders, and his shirt was blackened by powder blaze. Hoofprints showed where one of the raiders had reined in close, leaned from his saddle, and made sure work of the killing before plunging down into the draw to join his fellows.

Beak Leary straightened up and looked away along their broad trampled trail, his gray eyes narrowed and his bold jaw set. There might be something to be said for killing a man in fair fight, but that shot between the shoulders—whoever did that had a hanging coming to him.

THE rush of drumming hoofs spun him round quickly, his gun ready. A gray pony came charging over the shoulder of the hill and slid to a stop. "Hands up!" called his rider and threw a short rifle to her cheek.

Beak never argued with a woman. He dropped his gun and lifted both arms, his sombrero in one hand. The muzzle of that little rifle wabbled, but the blue eyes behind it blazed. Beak watched the eyes.

"Oh!" said the woman. "It's you!" She lowered her weapon. Beak did not shift his eyes, for he found her a lot easier to look at with that rifle out of the way.

"I'm taking your word for it, ma'am," he answered; "not knowing any different."

The girl's eyes looked past him and opened wide with shock. "Is that Uncle Chris? Is—is he hurt?" She slipped the rifle into its scabbard, dropped to the ground, and strode toward him.

Beak stood between her and the dead man, his eyes dark with concern. "Wait—please!" he said. "Don't come any closer, not now. Yes, he's hurt; badly, I'm afraid. We must get him to the house. Did you see anything of his horse?"

The girl nodded, her face quivering. One glance at that inert body had told her the truth. "Back there!" she whispered and waved a hand uncertainly. "He's standing." Then she turned and leaned against her pony's warm shoulder, her body shaking with sobs.

Beak had sense enough to let her alone. He picked up his gun. laid his sombrero gently over the dead man's head, and went after the horse. When he returned,

leading it, she was still standing beside her pony, but her eyes were dry and her lips set.

"Who did it?" she demanded at once. "Did you see them?"

"No," said Beak, and he told her what little he knew. She caught up her reins and swung into her saddle. "The Frying Pan!" she cried: "I might have known. Come on, let's ride them down."

"Steady!" said Beak and held up his hand. "Think a minute. That would mean more shooting, and there's been plenty already for one day—and for one family. And there's something else for us to do, first."

She glanced down at the dead man and shivered. Then her chin lifted: "No! The first thing is to catch them up and identify them, anyway. You're not afraid, are you?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am—just that."

She stared at him. "I don't believe you!" she said. "I've seen you ride, you know. And you were in a big-enough hurry to get into the shooting here, weren't you?"

"Well, you see," drawled Beak, "that fight was already started. It's different when you come to start one of your own."

Her eyes flashed, for she resented his tone.

But he hurried on, regardless—in a fret to change the subject and to get her mind off that notion of trailing the rustlers. "Is there any one at the house?" he asked.

"The Chinaman," she answered shortly, "and Pete, the cow hand, he ought to be in by now."

"Then you better ride ahead. Send Pete into town with word to the sheriff, and get things ready for—for your uncle. I will follow you right in."

She hesitated, and her eyes filled again. Beak watched her. He wanted to get her away. The country was too broken for a wagon, and loading a dead man on a horse is a grim business. Certainly, nothing for a woman to see, and that was certain.

"I suppose you are right," she said and sighed drearily, as she lifted her reins. Then she leaned from the saddle and looked Beak Leary hard between the eyes. "Whoever killed Uncle Chris shall answer for it to me. Don't forget that!"

SHE whirled her horse then and loped over the hill. Beak drew a deep breath. "That makes a pair of us!" he muttered and turned to his work. As he bent to make the dead man's horse fast to the roots of a sagebrush, his eyes caught a movement in the draw below. The buzzards were flapping and wrangling over that fallen steer. With the cowman's instinct to identify a dead animal, he left the horses and walked down to examine it.

Stampeded by the shooting, the clumsy, pasture-fed creature had made a frantic attempt to climb the steep side of the draw; it had slipped on a loose stone and fallen headlong, breaking its neck and rolling down to the bottom. Beak made out the brand on the left shoulder—J, in a half box. Then he noticed something else. On the right hip a flap of the sleek hide had been ripped back, as the animal rolled and slid over the rocks; its raw surface held a small, blackened metal disk. Beak pried it out with his thumb nail and rubbed it on his boot. He stared at it, lying in his palm, and his wits raced. After a minute he put the thing carefully in his pocket and went back to his grim job.

It took time. When eventually he rode up to the ranch gate, it was almost dark. The Chinaman opened the gate for him, his eyes on the led horse with its burden. Beak had done what he could and had wrapped the head of the dead man in his handkerchief and covered the body with his slicker; but he was glad the girl was not there to see.

The Chinaman said: "I help. Pete gone to town. Missy in her loom; she cly plenty."

When they had laid the body out on a bed, as decently as might be, the Chinaman said: "Missy say she like you to stay till she'iff come, anyhow. Supper comin' up."

"I'll look after the horses first," said Beak and followed him out. When he came in again, the Chinaman introduced him to a washbasin and towels, then led him into the living room, where the sup-

per table was laid before a snapping fire of piñon chunks. It was disappointing to find it laid for one only; but it had been a long day, and Beak never liked to hurt the feelings of a good cook. He placed on the mantelpiece the few belongings he had found in the dead man's pockets—a silver match safe, a heavy clasp knife, some keys, and a tally book. Then he hung his belt and gun on the back of his chair and drew up to the table.

Afterward he rolled cigarettes before the fire and thought things over. He thought of the girl, alone in her grief, and wondered if she was still crying. He doubted it; more like her to be doing something useful. Which reminded him of how she had looked when she said: "Whoever killed Uncle Chris shall answer for it."

He had agreed with her, with all his heart; but now, come to think it over, it did not seem so simple. He had no acquaintance with this Frying Pan outfit she had named, but he was wise in the ways of rustlers and could guess what they would be doing to-night, in some secret pocket of the hills. One man would be laying back on their trail to guard against interruption, while the others threw those fat and leg-weary steers one after the other, and changed their brands with the running iron. By morning they would be scattered out on a distant range, and in a week——

"Uh-huh!" muttered Beak. "In a week, what with being all ganted up with travel, and their slick coats roughed by chaparral, they'll be plumb orphaned. There's the big longhorn 'IF' in our program; if we can't identify those steers, it won't be so easy to tie into the men."

He thought of the dead man's tally book, took it from the mantel, and turned its pages under the lamp. This Christopher Jordan had been a careful and systematic man; he had made a record of every animal he owned or sold. One page caught Beak's attention—the record, dated two years back, of forty-six yearling calves, grade Herefords, with the usual printed outline of a steer showing the brand—J in a half box, high up on the left shoulder. There was also a memorandum at the bottom of the page which interested Beak. He stared at this until it was photographed on the back of his eyes; then he took from his pocket that bit of metal he had found under the hide of the dead steer and examined it again.

"Clever man, Uncle Chris!" he said at last. "Might be we can cut that old IF out of the bunch, after all." And he rolled another cigarette.

THE room was very still. Even the fire was noiseless. It seemed to be listening. Beak threw up his head. A change came in the silence—not so much a sound, as a faint jarring underfoot. He slipped the book into his vest pocket, caught his gun from the holster, and opened the outside door. He did not stand on the threshold, with the light behind him; he stepped out into the darkness beside the door. A horse was coming up the lane, and it was coming fast. The sheriff probably, but it was no use taking chances.

The horse pulled up at the gate and a big voice boomed:

"Hello-o the house! Sheriff Hardy! Come open this gate."

Beak shook his head. Clumsy work and noise. This was no way to tackle the Frying Pan. He walked over and opened the gate.

"Good evening, sheriff," he said: "Been expecting you." As the horse passed him, he noticed that it was not wet, not even blown. All the hard riding it had done had been on the last half mile.

"Leave the gate!" ordered the sheriff. "My wagon'll be along soon." He led the way into the house, stumped across to the fire, turned his back to it, and stared at Beak. The sheriff's broad red face was stern, and his heavy brows were drawn over his big ox eyes. "Who're you?" he demanded.

Beak told him.

"Rider for the Split X outfit, eh? You're a good ways from home. What's your business here?"

"My own," said Beak gently and laid his gun on the table.

The sheriff glared. "I'm the sheriff of this county," he announced. "Accord-

ing to information in my possession, there's been a crime committed here—cattle run off and a man killed. You better talk."

"I reckon," drawled Beak, "you are more competent that way than I am, sheriff, but I'll do my best."

He told what he knew—most of it, anyway. "H-hm!" growled the sheriff. "Shot the second time, you say—with a .45, close up." He lifted Beak's gun from the table and twirled the cylinder, his air serious and intent, giving his best impersonation of an old sleuth. One chamber, the one under the hammer, was empty. He sniffed at it, and seemed disappointed. "Wiped it out since, prob'ly," he muttered, as he stuck the gun under his coat and glared at Beak again.

"These four men you claim you saw—who were they?"

"I don't know, sheriff. I was too far away and uphill to see their faces."

"Why didn't you follow them, then—get close enough to identify them?"

"That didn't look like what you'd call exercising due caution, some way," said Beak, "and, besides——"

He was interrupted by a new voice, the girl's voice, coming from an open door at the end of the room. "I will answer that question, sheriff," she said and came across to join them. "Mr. Leary didn't follow because he wanted to keep me from doing so. I was just mad enough to ride them down and get myself shot. And it wasn't necessary, anyway. I know—and so do you, sheriff—who killed Uncle Chris! the only outfit in this county that can do murder and get away with it—the Frying Pan."

Sheriff Hardy pulled off his hat and blinked at her, his face redder than ever. Beak didn't blink; he had better use for his eyes. She had not been crying—not lately; and from the top of her low-crowned Stetson to the toes of her high-heeled boots she was ready to ride. Straight and slim and valiant she stood, and her blue eyes met the sheriff's stare unflinchingly.

"That's a mighty serious accusation, young lady!" he growled. "You better be careful what you say."

"Do you want the proof?" she demanded. "If you do, get your horse, and I'll take you to it. Two hours' ride."

The sheriff hesitated, shifting his feet. He was trying to think, and he made heavy work of it. Beak could almost hear the creak of the ponderous wheels in his head.

It was a creaking outside, however, and a rattling with it, that saved the situation.

"There's my wagon!" said the sheriff, puffing a great breath of relief. "It's my duty to take the body back to town, you know, for the inquest."

The girl looked at Beak. "You see?" her eyes asked; and Beak's eyes narrowed in answer. No words were needed. He saw plenty—saw that this clumsy sheriff was trying to cover the trail of the murderers, and saw also the part in the play that he was elected to, himself.

"Do your duty, sheriff!" said the girl. Her tone was so contemptuous that even his thick hide was not proof against it. He winced, put on his hat, strode to the door, and shouted to his driver. With Beak's help, they carried the dead man out and laid him, swathed in a blanket, in the bottom of the wagon box. The driver climbed up to his high seat, gathered his lines, and eased his brake.

The sheriff stepped back and lugged out his gun. "Get aboard, you!" he rumbled: "You're under arrest."

Beak made no move. He had seen this coming, but, after all, he had no real passion for jail, and for an instant he hesitated. His gun was in the sheriff's pocket, but one quick jump out of the light, Fool Hen between his knees, and it would take a better man than this lumbering lunkhead to catch him. Then the girl decided the question, stepping between them.

"Nonsense!" she cried. "Mr. Leary's a friend of mine, sheriff. I'll answer for him. He will show up when he's wanted. Meantime, he's needed here."

Beak lifted his hat. "I'm proud to be a friend of yours," he said quietly; "but the sheriff has the right idea—this time." And he turned to the wagon. His choice lay between jail and letting the girl in for more trouble, and he chose jail.

She stared at him, more puzzled than

hurt. With his foot on the hub of the front wheel, he paused, and his hand flicked under his vest and out again. The sheriff grunted, ducking behind the wagon; but Beak's hand held nothing more dangerous than the dead man's tally book.

"You had better take charge of this," he said to the girl; and, as she came close, he added, his voice so low that neither the driver nor the sheriff overheard. "Don't think I'm running out on you. This is just throwing dust; with me in jail, they'll feel safe and careless. Look after that book, yourself; we'll need it later."

Then he swung up to the seat beside the driver, the sheriff found his breath and his horse, and they got under way, leaving the girl alone with her trouble and her courage.

"It looks plumb heartless," said Beak to himself. "But there's one advantage about having a friend in jail. I'm sure to be at home when she calls."

SHE did not call, however—not at the jail. It was the old-timer who called the next afternoon, and he brought the tenderfoot lawyer with him. They demanded to see the prisoner, and the sheriff, grumbling, let them have their way. He did not feel like starting anything with this soft-spoken, sudden-moving old devil; and, anyway, he told himself, it would be easy for the county attorney to make a monkey of this tenderfoot. So he admitted them to Beak's cell and retired to his office and the solace of the black bottle in his desk.

"Miss Hallie's a friend of mine," said the old-timer to Beak, by way of introduction. "So's your boss at the Split X. He's one white man. Here's his telegram, the answer to the one I sent this morning. And here's the only lawyer in this man's town that ain't all tied up with friends. I'm backing his play, and I believe he'll win."

They shook hands, and Beak told his story. The lawyer listened, asking a question now and then; most of the questions were intelligent. One of them was plumb foolish. "You say you did not do any shooting yourself. How then do you account for that empty chamber in your revolver that the sheriff talks about?"

"Don't display your ignorance, son!" snapped the old-timer. "Would anybody pack a gun with the hammer down on a cartridge?—anybody with sense enough to sit a horse?"

The lawyer laughed at himself and ran the case over in his mind for a minute.

"Here's the weak spot, of course," he said. "No one saw the raiders or heard the shooting, except yourself. They will claim an alibi and have their witnesses to prove it. How are we going to break it and corroborate your testimony? One point occurs to me: that dead horse was a blue roan, you say; and one of them rode a blue roan when they passed through town here, yesterday. Can we prove ownership?"

"We can't!" said the old-timer. "Miss Hallie took Pete and rode out there, before sunup this morning, to prove up on that horse. She's smart, that girl is; but not smart enough to beat the Frying Pan. The horse had been skinned—thorough—durin' the night; even his shoes were pulled off. Didn't I say they're artists?"

Beak had seated his visitors on his bunk; he himself squatted on the floor, his back to the wall, facing the door of his cell. He glanced up now, his eyes meeting the old-timer's for an instant, and that old fox rose without a sound and looked through the bars, up and down the corridor. It was empty.

"I'll have plenty witnesses," said Beak calmly, "if you'll bring them in."

The lawyer looked at him, doubt in his eyes. "Character witnesses? They would help, of course; but with the kind of jury we're likely to get——"

"No!" said Beak. "I won't trouble my friends. The witnesses I'll call will be strangers to me, but I reckon they will be good enough to outsmart your Frying Pan." And he told them just what he wanted.

The old-timer turned from the door, picked up the telegram from the bunk, and read it over. "This says," he remarked, "that you're one natural-born trouble hunter, and it's no use tryin' to head you away from it. An', furthermore, it says to give you your head, no

matter how crazy you act. All right, son; we'll bring in your witnesses."

He looked hard at Beak. "Any message?" he asked.

"Thank you!" said Beak. "Tell her I'm obliged—and she's not to worry."

They shook hands again and went away, the lawyer more or less tangled in his mind, but the old-timer as placid as a bog hole and as dangerous.

THE trial of the case against Leary, charged with murder, moved fast. The county attorney had no trouble in proving that this defendant was a stranger; that he had refused to account for his presence at the scene of the crime; that he had been discovered standing beside the murdered man, with a revolver in his hand, one chamber of which had been discharged; and that the dead man had been shot by a revolver held close to his back. The fact that he had also been shot with a rifle, in the head, was not material, other than showing that this murderer had had accomplices, who had made good their escape with the stolen cattle. Any one could tell by the man's face that he was a desperate character, quite capable of any cold-blooded crime.

The tenderfoot lawyer had made no attempt to interfere with these proceedings. It looked like a dead open-and-shut case for the prosecution. The jury evidently thought so. So did the four horsemen of the Frying Pan, who had been summoned as witnesses to prove ownership of certain cattle brought in from their range, and alleged to have been part of those stolen in the raid.

"It would seem, however," said the county attorney in conclusion, "unnecessary to occupy the time of this court with testimony on that point. The cattle, gentlemen of the jury, are now in the custody of the sheriff and may be examined at your pleasure. To men as intelligent and experienced as yourselves, it will be obvious at a glance that these cattle have no resemblance—other than in the accident of color—to those stolen from the murdered man's pasture. They will speak for themselves."

The tenderfoot rose. "If it please the court," he said, "it may be stipulated that the defense agrees that these cattle shall speak for themselves."

The county attorney smiled patronizingly. "I felicitate my learned young brother upon his readiness to hasten the course of justice. With that understanding, your honor, the State rests."

The judge looked at the tenderfoot. "Call your witnesses," he said.

"One moment, if your honor please. I now introduce this memorandum book, the property of the murdered man, and ask that it be marked Defense Exhibit A." He handed the tally book to the county attorney, who glanced through it and nodded.

"No objection!" the county attorney said carelessly and passed the book to the clerk. There was a pause.

Beak Leary had been sitting beside his lawyer, his manner listless and bored. Even the allusion to his own hardened appearance and desperate character had failed to interest him. Now he turned his head, and his eyes met those of the old-timer, who lounged on a bench at the far side of the room. The old-timer rose quietly and stretched, leaning against the wall. Other men, five of them, in different parts of the room, stirred in their seats, restless and bored. They were quiet men, and they moved quietly, not disturbing the court.

"Call your witnesses, Mr. Attorney," said the judge brusquely, "if you have any." He also was bored with this farce. It was not the first time he had had to sit there and watch a losing fight against the Frying Pan, and he knew how hopeless it was.

The tenderfoot's voice was smooth: "My witnesses, if your honor please, would scarcely comprehend the nature of an oath. Nevertheless, as the distinguished prosecutor has stipulated, they shall speak for themselves. I move you that this court now adjourn to the jail yard and examine the witnesses for the defense—those cattle in the custody of the sheriff."

The county attorney was startled, but having made his bluff he had to go through with it. The four horsemen exchanged puzzled glances, but their nerve was unshaken. They knew how good

their work had been. Everybody filed out to the jail yard.

THE old-timer had been as good as his word. He had produced the witnesses—eleven of them. Two were fat and sleek and comfortable—left-overs from that hurried raid on the dead man's pasture. The brand, J in a half box, was on their shoulders. The other nine did not show much family resemblance, for a fact. They were gaunt, rough-coated and wild-eyed; and their brand, most artistically finished, was a boxed O—the duly registered brand of that well-known cattleman, Tom Orchard, who always rode a blue roan horse.

Beak took the testimony of his witnesses himself. One of the range steers was led into the sheriff's branding chute. Beak's lawyer handed him a barber-shop mug, with a shaving brush and a razor. The jury were bunched up at his back, watching. He lathered the steer's right hip thoroughly. Then he paused and asked that Exhibit A be produced. The clerk handed the tally book to a juryman. "Open it," said Beak, "at that page that's turned down, and read it out loud—all of it." The juryman read it, but he did not need to raise his voice; that crowd could have heard him whisper. He read the memorandum at the bottom of the page: "One hand-span in front of the top of the right-hip bone. New—all 1892."

"Thank you," said Beak, as he opened his razor and shaved off the rough hair in front of the steer's hip bone, exposing the fine line of an old scar. He slit the hide with the razor, ran his forefinger under, drew out a blackened metal disk, and handed it to the juryman. "Rub it up!" he ordered. The man rubbed it on his sleeve and held up a silver dime, dated 1892.

The four horsemen bunched together suddenly, their backs to the corral fence. The old-timer and his five quiet friends moved in quietly, on either side of them. Nobody else moved at all.

The tenderfoot lawyer spoke out, his voice ringing: "Your honor! I charge these men with murder. Demand their arrest!"

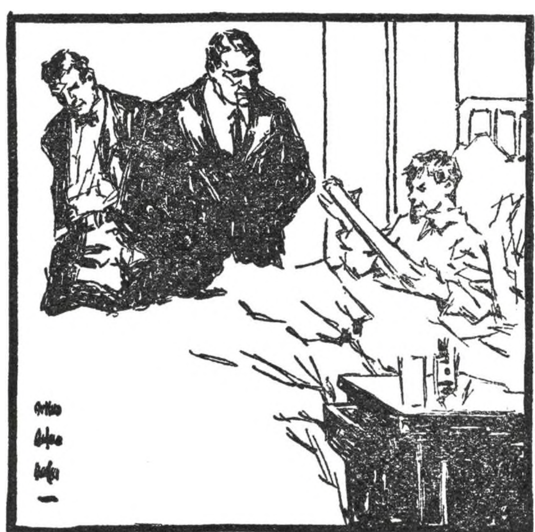
"Do your duty, Mr. Sheriff!" barked the judge. The sheriff, dazed and ponderous, was slow to move, and the four horsemen set themselves for a quick jump. And the old-timer's gentle voice broke up the play. "Take it easy, boys!" he drawled. "It's go to jail, or come with us!" They looked him over and chose jail.

"This defendant is discharged!" said the judge and shook hands with Beak. So did plenty of others—one in particular—the crowd making way for her, their hats off.

"I knew it!" she whispered. "I felt safe as soon as I saw you, standing there beside Uncle Chris." Her blue eyes were wet, but they shone like stars. Beak Leary had studied the stars in the sky, many a night, but he had never seen any so dazzling bright as these. One thing he was sure of—with twin stars like them to guide him, a man could always find his way home, no matter how far off the trail he might wander.

SAD NEWS FOR TEACHER'S PET

YES, the little boy or girl who used to get in good with Miss Teacher is going out of style, like the horse and carriage, the transatlantic liner, and the Charleston. Remember how you—merely to use an illustration—used to bid for the honor of dusting out the felt blackboard erasers? Remember how you envied the gentlemanly little boy who succeeded in getting the honor, and how you loathed him, as he beat out the clouds of chalk on the stone stoop? And how you snickered, when he had to sneeze? Well, that's all done with now. Some clever chap has invented a new way. The vacuum cleaner! Hereafter, the janitor of the school building will visit each classroom after hours, and apply his patent vacuum cleaner to each eraser—without even the hope of getting an extra good-conduct mark tacked onto a report card.



"Miser" Morgan

By James Gordon Fraser

Author of "'The Big Feller,'" Etc.

That it is not always safe to judge by appearances is an old story that was brought home to the Big Hitter when he learned the truth about "Miser" Morgan, the umpire.

OVERHEAD, thin, discouraged rays of sunshine filtered occasionally through the gray clouds that scudded here and there across the dampish April sky. Around all sides of the great steel stadium, one of the biggest opening-day crowds of all time shivered indifferently, ignoring the weather and intent upon the scene spread out before its eyes.

Down on the patch of green turf, which the walls of humanity inclosed, cut irregularly by the unsodded base lines, a dozen alert, quick-moving figures in color-splashed uniforms and two in plain navy blue moved about like chessmen upon a gigantic playing board. Two of them, in gray and red, danced back and forth near the khaki cushions that marked second and third base. A third, in the same color scheme, stood, swishing a club of polished ash, near the hard-rubber rectangle that marked home plate. And scattered around the field, nine others—these in white and blue—moved restlessly about, as though impatient for action that was slow in coming.

Fifth inning of the first game of the season. The Behemoths at bat, with the score three to two against them. The Pioneers in the field. Two runners on the bases, one out and one run needed to tie. And "The Big Hitter" at the plate!

Slowly, carefully, the long arm of "Duster" Mooney, pride of the Pioneer pitching staff, swung back. Suddenly, at the top of his swing, his hand released the ball. Like a bullet, it sped across the plate. Behind the crouching catcher, one of the figures in navy blue raised his right arm aloft. His voice floated out in the tense silence: "Strike three!" All around the stadium released breath made a humming sound, as thousands of throats let it out.

Over in the bleachers, an anæmic, undersized man, with a suprising voice, gave

vent to a hoarse roar: "Kill 'im! Kill the robber! Hit 'im! Oh, the thief!" Others echoed his cry. All eyes were on The Big Hitter. What would he do? Knowing what he had done, at times in the past, there was a real sense of expectancy in the minds of the watchers. Would he raise the club, made impotent now by the arbiter's ruling, to bring it down on the umpirical skull? Would he burst into one of those scorching, sizzling tirades for which he was famous? But, no! He had turned and was walking rapidly back to the home dugout. Without a sign of irritation, he cast the bat down upon the pile in front of him. And then——

"Look at 'im!" The anæmic fan in the bleachers nudged his neighbor. "Look at 'im! Wish we could hear what he's sayin'. He's callin' that ump everything he can think of. He's tellin' 'em what he thinks o' the robber. Wish we could hear it."

But the fan was wrong. What The Big Hitter was saying was something entirely different. What was it? Oh, that's the story! I'll tell you—a little later on.

WE saw him first in Asheville when we opened the warming-up with the Bear Cats of the other league—an annual institution now, serving the double purpose of putting a final edge on training and of putting back into the pockets of the owners some of the cash expended for maintaining a training camp. The games don't count, of course, in the league standing, but there is plenty of rivalry; so much of it, in fact, that the regular league umps pick up some extra change by coming down and handling the games. It is easy money.

Morgan was new in the league that year. We had read during the winter that he had been drafted out of one of the Western sand-lot circuits, but nobody with the Behemoths happened to know him, and there was considerable curiosity among the regulars. An umpire does not figure much in the sport pages, as a general rule, but he is a mighty important part of a ball game, nevertheless. Bill McGlory, manager of the Behemoths, used to say that bum decisions won more ball games than pinch hits, and I agree with him.

It was old Harry Earl, club secretary and business agent, who finally tipped me off to Morgan's arrival. Loafing around the hotel the night before the first game with the Bear Cats, I happened to mention to Harry that it was "pretty near time the new ump showed up."

"Oh, he's in town all right," said Harry. "He got here this morning."

"That so!" I asked him, surprised. "Where's he keeping himself, then? Some of the boys was saying a while ago they hadn't seen him around the hotel."

"No, he ain't staying here," Harry informs me. And I must have looked surprised, for after a glance around to see who was within earshot, he went on:

"You know, Larry, there's something funny about that bird—something queer, I mean. What do you suppose he put up to me the first time I laid eyes on him? No, you needn't guess; it wouldn't do you any good. Keep it under your hat, and I'll tell you.

"You know we have to pay the ump a flat twenty bucks a day for every day he works and his expenses, including transportation and hotel bills. The Bear Cats split it with us, of course, later. Well, this Morgan blew in this morning with the proposition that he wanted me to figure up his expenses—hotel, car fares, Pullmans and all—and slip it to him in a lump once a week. Didn't want me to pay the bills; wanted to pay 'em himself. Can you beat it?"

"Funny one, ain't it? And you say he ain't stayin' here?" I asked.

"No; that's the queerest part of it. After he sprung his scheme on me, I was just interested enough to keep an eye on him. And where do you suppose he went? To a little cheap-John boarding house down by the station. It'll cost him about as much a week there as we're paying by the day here. Every time the sun sets, it shows him a profit."

That was a queer one. It had me guessing.

"But why let him get away with it?" I asked.

"Oh, Billy said it was all right," Harry explained. "The ump is entitled to the

same expenses the players are, and if he wants to live like a bum, that's his lookout. Of course, if we wanted to be technical—— But what's the use? Morgan will be in there this summer, won't he, calling plays on us as well as the other clubs? No use starting him off with a grouch on the Behemoths. With the fighting club we got this year—Big Tim and all the rest—we'll have enough trouble with the umps, as it is."

Somebody called Harry away then, but I stuck around the lobby quite a while and thought it over. It sure was something to think about. I've known plenty of umps in my day, and some I liked and some I didn't, but this fellow, Morgan, was something new. I couldn't quite dope him out. With the salaries they get these days, most umps live on the fat of the land. Morgan was a new one, coming up from the sticks, with a big raise in pay. Of course, he might have been playing the ponies or some other such racket during the winter layoff, like many of them do, and be broke in consequence. But that, alone, wouldn't explain a petty room-and-meals graft like this.

What would "Big Tim" Jordan, for instance, do with a club like that to hold over an umpire's head? I shuddered at the thought. There isn't a tougher man in the league on umps than Big Tim; they say he was born hating them. And you know how it is—if the players once get something to ride an ump with, his life is pretty sure to be miserable. I could see dark days ahead for Mister Morgan when I finally gave it up and went to bed.

KNOWING what I knew, I looked around for Morgan at the park next day, with considerable interest. Having him sized up as a nickel nurser and penny pincher, I naturally expected to see some little rat of a man with a mean face and an ingrowing disposition. But Morgan didn't turn out that way at all.

A big fellow, he was, and good looking, in a dark, quiet sort of way. I come from the hill country, myself, and I knew where he got those high cheek bones, that solid set to his jaw, and those sharp, deep-set eyes. Not the talkative, gushy, good-fellow kind, was Morgan; but, on the other hand, not the mean, sullen, grouchy kind, either. Strangers wouldn't take to him, at first, but they wouldn't be repelled by him, either. He was something of a puzzle to me, thanks to the information that Harry Earl had slipped me. The only thing that fitted was the clothes; or, rather, they didn't fit any too well. And even his shoes were patched. If you looked close, it was plain that Mister Morgan was not, to put it mildly, a gentleman who believed in the clothing ads that tell you appearance is three fourths of the battle.

It was also plain, that very first day, that there were several other things Mister Morgan was not, and that one of them was "a homer." That is what ball players call an umpire who shades decisions a little for the home team; in other words, who calls them with one eye on the play and one eye on the crowd. They are common enough, as everybody knows. And when you find an ump that isn't that way, you've found a man with principles. There aren't too many.

Of course, neither the Behemoths nor the Bear Cats were "home team," in the strict sense of the word, in that series. But Morgan was in our league and would be dealing with us all summer, whereas he would not see the Bear Cats again, in all probability, for at least a year. And yet, in the very first game he worked, he called three close ones against us. I won't say he wasn't calling them as he saw them, because I'm sure now he was. But they were the kind of plays that he could have called either way without being guilty of grand larceny—and we got none of the three.

One of them was the real start of the feud between Morgan and Big Tim Jordan. Not that it wouldn't have started, anyway, because it undoubtedly would. But when Big Tim, a .350 hitter in any man's league and as indifferent to base hits as a Scotchman is to hard money, got up in the last of the ninth with the score three to two against us, and runs waiting on second and third to romp in on a safe blow; and then, when Morgan called the third strike on him—zowie! War was declared then and there. Tim was

persuaded out of actual hostilities, but all of us who knew him were satisfied that Morgan's path was going to be strewn with no roses that year.

WITH all the talk going around in the hotel that night, and Tim in the thick of it with Morgan's name on his tongue, it was to be expected that everything would come out. I know I didn't say anything, and I don't believe Harry Earl did, but I knew, as early as the first inning next day, that somebody had.

Coming up fourth, with two down and little Tod Ehret on first, Tim knelt down beside the plate and pretended to be tying his shoe string, while he talked with Wallie Blair, who was catching for the Bear Cats. Wallie and Tim were together in Syracuse before they were drafted out of the International, and I could see Wallie had been tipped off to what was coming.

"Wallie," said Big Tim, "do you know what is the lowest form of life?"

"No," says Wallie, like the interlocutor in a minstrel show. "What is, Tim? Umpires?"

"No," corrected Tim—"not umpires. There is one thing lower—misers. They're the lowest there is. I knew one, once. I was going to kill him, but he fooled me."

"How, Tim?" asks Wallie.

"He bit his tongue and poisoned himself to death!"

After which Tim stepped into one and cracked it into right for a triple, scoring Tod and pulling up at third, still laughing. Wallie was laughing, too, and so was everybody else who was "on." Everybody, that is, but Morgan. He had heard every word of the dialogue Tim had cooked up, of course, and he must have known what it meant. But he didn't let on that it got to him. He just went ahead, calling plays for and against us. If his face was a little flushed, and his jaw set a little tighter, it was unnoticed behind his mask. Unnoticed, at any rate, by everybody but me. As I say, I'm from the hill country, myself.

There were times, though, when I wondered if I hadn't been mistaken about Morgan coming from God's country. He took a lot of punishment while we were working up North. The name Big Tim Jordan had tacked onto him, stuck. All the players were calling him Miser Morgan behind his back, and some of them were not so careful to make sure they were behind his back, either. Especially, after it was discovered that he was making the night jumps in a day coach, in spite of being allowed Pullman fare in his expense account, and after Tod Ehret had reported his refusal to chip in for the fund that was made up when "Zipper" Bagley, one of the rookie pitchers, got sick and had to be left behind in a hospital.

"'I am sorry, Mr. Ehret,'" Tod reported, Morgan had told him, "'but I don't feel that I can spare it.'"

All this, of course, was duck soup for Big Tim Jordan, who appeared to have taken upon his broad shoulders the burden of making life miserable for The Miser. Not only because Big Tim was a .350 hitter and therefore a person of consequence and able to get away with stuff nobody else could pull, but because it got to be a sort of battle of wits—a one-sided battle, it is true—and Tim took pride in his ability to hand the boys a laugh every day with new comedy which he must have spent his nights thinking up.

"Say, Wallie," he would ask Wallie Blair, "did you hear about the miser who went out of the store and forgot his change?"

"No, Tim. I didn't," Wallie would reply.

"No?" Tim would come back. "And you never will! They don't do it!"

Then they'd both laugh, in an insulting way, and next time they would have something new to pull. It must have been hell for Morgan, having to stand up there and take it. But he did. And, to give him credit, he took it without taking advantage of his job to hit back at the lads who tormented him. He called some bad ones on Tim, of course, but no more than might be expected of any ump, and he gave Tim some good ones, too.

That was about the situation when we hit the old home town and got ready to open the regular season.

WE were up in Billy McGlory's room, talking over the relative merits of using old "Whitey" Hughes, the veteran of our pitching staff, or "Rube" Buzzell, our new left-hander, in the opening game next day, when one of the boys came up and told me Miser Morgan wanted to see me downstairs.

That was considerable of a surprise, but there was a bigger one to follow, for the very first thing Morgan said to me was:

"Do you know where I can find Jordan?"

As it happened, I did, but I didn't say so right away. For there was something in the manner of The Miser that counseled caution. His face had a tense, drawn look, like that of a man stirred by strong emotion. His eyes were burning with a light I'd never seen in them before, and he talked in a low, quiet voice that sounded as if he wanted to shout, but was restraining himself by sheer will power. It was plain as daylight to me that Morgan was all stirred up about something.

What was it? Had he come to a sudden conclusion to have it out with Big Tim Jordan, once and for all, before the season opened? Was he going to call for a show-down, then and there? Nothing would suit Tim better, I knew; he could lick two like Morgan and would enjoy doing it. But there was the team to think of. A fracas like that wouldn't help the club morale any. Therefore, I hesitated a long time before I answered The Miser's question.

He noticed the hesitation and apparently guessed its cause, because he hastened to reassure me.

"Oh, I'm not going to start anything, Conover," he said. "Not what you're thinking, anyway. I just want to ask Jordan to do something for me. A favor, if you will. And, Larry," he went on, grabbing me by the arm, "he's got to do it! He's *got to*, Larry! Do you understand? He's *got to!*"

I didn't understand, of course. How should I? But I could see that Morgan was in dead earnest. And I got Big Tim Jordan for him out of the poker game in Tod Ehret's room. He came willingly enough, but I didn't tell him what I wanted until I got him out of the room. He jumped to the conclusion, same as I had, that The Miser was on battle bent.

"Remember, Larry," he cautioned me, on the way downstairs, "he's come after it himself! I'm not starting anything; you can testify to that."

But it wasn't a question of "starting anything." Unless it might be an argument. For Morgan, who had been walking up and down impatiently, while he waited for us, opened right up on Tim.

"Jordan," he said, "I know you don't like me. You've shown that pretty plainly in the last few weeks. But I've got to ask a favor of you, just the same. And you've got to grant it! It's a matter of life and death to me—more than that! And nobody else can do it! I wouldn't have come to you if I could have helped it. But I couldn't. Danny has got it into his head that he wants to see you, and he wouldn't understand. I can't tell him. The doctors say it will help him more than the medicine!"

Tim was looking at me, puzzled, but I couldn't help him. It was all over my head. I gathered, though, that somebody named Danny wanted to see Tim.

"He's sick, you know," Morgan went on. "Been in the hospital for six months—three operations, and they can't even tell yet whether or not he'll pull through. Only a kid, he is. But he's a real fan—knows the game and follows the players in the papers all the time. He admires you because of your hitting, Jordan; that was one of the things he talked about when he came here—having a chance to see you. And now—now it doesn't look as though he'd get to see a game this year, if ever! And he wants to see you, Will you go?"

Would he go? I had my mind made up already. He *would* go, if I, Larry Conover, had to drag him. A sick kid! Sure, he'd go! But it wasn't necessary to drag him. Whether he knew it or not, Morgan had touched Tim's weak spot. An industrial school kid, himself, and brought up mostly in alleys and back yards, Tim was always a great hand for kids. He always had a flock of them around him outside the clubhouse, and he

swiped more balls to give them than we used in regular games all season.

NEITHER Morgan nor Tim said much on the way over to the hospital, and I didn't see any need of cluttering up the record with conversation. When we got there, Morgan led the way to a room on the top floor—on the sunny side, it was, and a big one, too. A nurse came out of it just as we got there. She seemed to know Morgan, but she looked at Tim and me curiously.

"He's been asking for you," she told Morgan. "I've been fixing him up a little—for company."

The Miser stopped with his hand on the door. He looked at Big Tim, with a sort of apologetic expression.

"There's just one thing, Jordan," he said. "Would you mind—could you pretend, just while we're in here—that we're friends?"

He smiled a little, as he said it, as if the idea seemed ridiculous, which well it might. But Tim didn't smile.

"Why, yes," he agreed. "Sure."

Morgan pushed open the door, and we followed him in.

"Hello, Danny boy," I heard him say. "How are you hitting to-night? A little better, eh? You'll be ready for the big series, at this rate! I've brought some visitors for you."

He went over to the bed that stood at one end of the room and bent over it a moment. When he straightened up, I got a good look at what was in it. I wish I could forget it, but I can't. Not while I've got two of my own growing up, anyway—both of them as healthy as young wild cats, thank God, and just about as full of the devil.

For Danny was more than just a "sick kid." You've seen these pictures they use in charity drives sometimes—of little ones starving over in Armenia or India or somewhere, with nothing much to them but skin and bones and eyes that make you shell out to the canvassers, no matter how hard boiled you are? Well, this kid reminded me of those. That's how bad off he was. He wouldn't have weighed much more than a medium healthy sparrow, if they had stuck him on the scales. Why, his arm wasn't much bigger than my thumb! I was afraid I'd break it when I shook hands with him.

But he didn't waste much time on me. It was Big Tim Jordan he was interested in—"The Big Hitter!"

"Oh!" he said, when Morgan introduced Tim. "Oh!"

There was a look in his eyes—eyes were about all there was to his thin little face—that sort of made me swallow hard. You know the look. You can see it in the eyes of little chaps, thousands and thousands of them, all over the land, worshiping and idolizing the stars of the great old American pastime. That's what makes baseball the great institution it is. Kids making heroes of the stars and trying to be like them, or like what they think the stars are. Reading about them; talking about them; arguing about them; fighting about them! Training and practicing, best they can, so they can be like their heroes. And here was this poor little shaver, flat on his back in a hospital, when he ought to be organizing a nine on some back lot, worshiping Big Tim Jordan!

It got to Tim—hard. He didn't know what to say. But there was just enough kid in him to let him get away with it.

"Hello, old-timer!" he said and sat right down on the edge of the bed. "What's the trouble, anyway? Laid up, just when the season's opening? That's tough. What's wrong? Get a Charley horse or something?"

The kid smiled a little. "Oh, didn't old 'Buck' tell you?" he asked. "I s'posed he would—you being such friends and all. It's my back. Got twisted some way. Doctors are trying to straighten it out." He smiled, then went on:

"Hope they hurry up. I want to try out that bat you sent me. It's a dandy, isn't it? Mighty nice of you to send it to me by old Buck."

With his free hand—Tim was holding the other—he reached down beside him and brought up an old bat. Tim took it from him. It was second nature for Tim to grab a bat, anyway.

"It's lots o' company for me," the kid explained. "I always keep it here on my

bed, and sometimes, when I try real hard with my eyes shut, I can almost see you making home runs with it. Bucky says it's the very one you hit that record homer with, down in Richmond."

Tim cleared his throat—a couple of times, then he stood up and dropped into his batting stance. I was glad he didn't look at me. I was blowing my nose, right then.

"Sure, Danny," he said. "That's the one. Just like this!"

He took a vicious cut with the bat, and the kid's eyes almost popped out of his head. Tim did it again, three or four times, to show just how he swung. When he handed the bat back, the kid handled it as if it was solid gold. As a matter of fact, it wasn't Tim's bat, at all—wasn't heavy enough for him. But the kid didn't know that. And I, personally, would have been glad to kill anybody who tried to tell him different.

The kid was talking again. "Course, I know you're a friend of old Buck. He tells me all about it every day, and when you were down South, he wrote me big, long letters every night. Told me everything you said and did, 'cause he knew I wanted to hear about you. I was a little worried when the papers said Buck was having to call strikes on you sometimes, but I knew it wouldn't make any difference—not when you knew Buck! Squarest they come, Buck is!

"Made me come here, Buck did, when he got transferred. Got the best doctors in the country. Must have cost lots, but Buck didn't care. Best old brother ever, Buck is!"

Morgan had gone around to the other side of the bed, and the kid reached up and got his hand. For a moment, they sat there—Miser Morgan, the tightwad ump, on one side, and Big Tim Jordan. the ump baiter, on the other. And the kid between them, looking from one to the other, with a proud smile on his thin little face. Somehow, it didn't seem so far-fetched to me at the time.

The nurse broke it up, bustling in with a meaning look at Morgan. He got up quickly.

"Well, Danny, boy," he said, "the nurse thinks we'd better go now. You mustn't have too much excitement—yet. Tell Mister Jordan good-by and wish him a hit or two to-morrow."

The kid hung to Tim's hand, as if he hated to let go, but the nurse finally got it away. I was glad she did. I'm soft-hearted, anyway, where kids are concerned—always did hate to see them sick or suffering. I guess Tim was glad, too, although he didn't hurry any in saying good-by, and I heard him promising to "come again, real soon."

Morgan went out with us. After he had shut the door, he halted. For a minute or two, he looked Big Tim Jordan square in the eye.

"Jordan," he said, "I want to thank you."

"Aw, hell!" said Big Tim. "That's all right."

WHAT? Oh, yes, I did promise to tell you what Big Tim Jordan actually said when he walked over to the dugout, after Morgan called the third strike on him in the opening game. Well, it won't take long.

A poor say of a rookie infielder gave him his opening.

"Tough, Tim," he commented, as Tim dropped the bat. "The Miser is still missing 'em. Wonder how long the damned penny pincher will last, anyway!"

Tim went over in front of him, facing the bench. He talked loud enough for everybody in the dugout to hear him.

"Listen, busher," he said, while the rookie's jaw hung down in amazement. "Maybe you mean all right, but that kind of talk don't go around here any more. Get that?

"That ain't no miser out there behind the plate—that's old Buck Morgan! That's who that is—Buck Morgan. He's the best damn umpire in this league or any other, and he calls 'em as he sees 'em. What's more, he sees 'em. That's old Buck Morgan out there, and don't you forget it. Buck calls 'em right! And if there's anybody thinks different, now's the time to argue it out with me!"

I sort of sidled out beside Tim, just in case——

But there wasn't anybody!

Wolf Blood

By T. Von Ziekursch

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Fierce the wolf dog was, but loyal and tender toward one old friend.

THE bitter wind that flowed down through the passes was like an endless avalanche of invisible ice that came in tumbled chaos. It smashed and tore, then ebbed to a moaning stream that gathered power in a renewed fury at intervals, until it flattened the low forest of birch. Trees, their fiber frozen, crackled and snapped with sharp reports. Eerie whistling, as the air currents played through ice-cased branches, like the breath of old gods on wild pipes, added to the North's mad cadenza.

Nature was a cruel Titan in his cups, blustering, terrible, spreading the touch of death with the blue-white fingers of ice. Strange things happened in the wilderness. A loose, hanging ledge of snow, frozen solid, was raised like a great ghost, amid unearthly wrenchings, and lifted high on an open hillside, to be smashed against a wall of trees.

Terror that was not of living things stalked abroad, an inanimate bearer of death's keen sword, the storm. Deep in the hidden coverts furred denizens shivered, and hunger went unsatisfied, its gratification for once not dominating all.

It was cold. That flow of icy air came from the North and West, the blown kiss of the boreal ice.

Vague, mystic unreality was everywhere. The wilderness was an unbelievable world, deceiving in its pale beauty, under which lurked stark horror, a merciless quality.

Each branch and twig shone with glistening gems, like so many bands—tinted glass. There was softened contour to every hummock and ridge. On the flat, the snow gleamed with a ghostly shimmer, an enameled richness.

Twilight fell, the soft, strange twilight of winter, and darkness followed. Unreal swishing sounds came through the forest, without location of origin, as though some silken-robed goddess of the night went abroad, invisible in her cold

magic, to weave awful spells. The swishing increased. The air was filled with low crackling.

An arc of cold flame seemed to rise in the east, evanescent, gone, like a reflection. It came again, was fixed a moment, then played a weird dance. A bar shot high across the heavens; another followed, and the aurora shone like the spokes in some wheel of a winter god's chariot. They rose and fell, changed hues—lavender, white, yellow and orange—leaping, surging, the great lights as mysterious as the North itself.

The rustling faded, and the lights were gone, but the pale, greenish glow lingered, glistening from the frozen snow surface, reflected by the heavens.

FROM a fringe of willows in a bottom something came, a stumbling dark thing—a dog. His haunches sloped lower than his withers, and his tail hung out and down in back—the marks of the wolf. He was a gaunt thing, the animate spirit of starvation in a bleak surrounding.

His rear paws were spread far apart to keep him from falling, but he stumbled on, for in his blood was the wild independence of the wolf strain. That blood would not bow to the domination of the white man, in whose traces his mother, the husky dog, ran, although to submit and return would bring the frozen salmon again, each morning and night.

On his neck the furry mane showed where the harness had rested, and his muzzle was sore, where the wire had been wound about to hold his jaws closed, after he first sought to slash the white man with the wolf's bite when the white man beat him.

Many days before, the white man had taken that wire off and tried to bend the strong will of the pup with the whip again. And the pup leaped to the attack, uncowed, and was battered down with the heavy butt of the whip. As the man went for the hammer, the pup arose, its head sore and bleeding, and fled into the forest.

That night, as the man fed his freight team again, he waited, with the hammer ready, but this wolf's whelp did not return.

The pup's nature was different from that of his husky mother. All the qualities of his wild sire, captive of a breeder of sledge dogs, were his heritage. And they came out stronger, as he'd become more than a pup. He possessed that same breadth of head of the wolf, the same sloping haunches, the big fangs that turned in instead of out, the amber-brown eyes that slanted, the swiftly shuffling gait, and the independence.

From his mother came the depth of chest of the working dog. But he lacked the resourcefulness of the wild that comes of experience, and now he had not eaten since the morning he left the white man, many days back. His head was still swollen, and the hair matted with frozen blood, for the freight driver was no gentle creature. And hunger possessed him—gnawing, brutal hunger that brought flecks of white foam to his jaws, as he leaped unsteadily and too late after the snowshoe rabbit that had been crouching not far in front.

The pursuit was vain, and the wolf dog went on and on, seeking life that he might kill to live. The depths beckoned, as a retreat that would protect from this bitter wind, but his hunger was raging and forced him to keep going.

Almost a year old, he had not learned how to hunt nor any of the lessons that are so essential to the preservation of life among even the strongest of the wild.

Slowly he worked down along the fringings of bog willow, and the bitter wind moaned over the ice sheathing. Just inside the coverts something moved, and the wolf dog sank to his belly. His eyes burned with the clouded flames of eagerness. His muzzle sank on his forepaws, and the slaver of starvation was upon it, as his tongue curled out repeatedly.

His advance was creeping. Like clouds passing before a pale moon, those lambent fires wavered and brightened in his eyes. He was nearing that movement among the willows. Something crackled, and he rushed fiercely. There were thrashings in the bush, a snort and a terrible howl of agony.

Limping on three legs, the wolf dog

came out into the open, one foreleg dangling. The caribou bull fled, crashing through the frozen brush from the mad assailant that had leaped at its throat and been battered down by broad hoofs.

The wolf dog whimpered only once, as he hobbled on, though he sank down repeatedly to mouth the broken leg. Through the forest came again that faintest rustling as of silk, and the pale splendor of the aurora lighted an unreal world of cold glass, a world of torture, as the wolf dog moved through the night, seeking vainly for water, while the fires mounted from that leg.

He stopped at last on the edge of a creek, where the ice was scoured clean of snow by the wind. But there was no water, and his thirst mounted in this cold desert.

Once he licked at the hanging edge of a snowbank and yipped, for a small spot of blood marked where his tongue had touched. Throughout the night he lay there panting, quiet, while high above him in the forest and over the wastes the wind moaned.

IT was there John Blanket saw him in the morning, as he followed the pathway of the open creek on his way to the trap lines.

"Loup!" he exclaimed, for the marks of the wolf were plain, and he raised the gun. Then he lowered it and muttered in the gutturals of his own people, as his keen old eyes noted the hair of the neck and across the muzzle, where the harness and wire had been. He saw also the flecks of froth, the swollen, misshapen leg, the gaunt flanks, and the circlings of lighter hair about the eyes, like those that the wolf dog's husky mother bore.

John Blanket brought a long thong from his pocket and deliberately made a noose of it, as the wolf dog slowly swung its neck, then went creeping off. The wiry old man moved swiftly; a few steps, and the noose was about the dog's muzzle; another turn, and it was knotted.

John Blanket knelt on the ice. One hand held the furry mane, while he examined the broken leg, and the dog's struggles were vain.

In most workmanlike manner the old Indian drew his skinning knife and cut small branches from the near-by willows. Once the dog whined and rubbed a fevered nose against the old man's hands, in fruitless efforts to bite, as the leg was set with the crude splints and bound fast with a part of the thong.

Then John Blanket arose. A strength that belied his thin frame swung the seventy-pound dog to his shoulders, and he turned back along the creek, as he had come, to the cabin.

There he brought a pot of water and moose meat and took the thong from the dog's jaws. Those shifting, reddish eyes watched him; then the dog lapped eagerly at the water. But it ignored the food and nosed the splints on its leg. Deftly the noose dropped over its muzzle again.

"You no tearum off, Loup," John Blanket said, and he went out to the delayed tour of his traps.

Thus the wolf dog was named with the name of his wolf ancestors, and thus he came again to the hands of man, hands from which he had fled once to seek shelter where his instincts called. But he had fled the harness of the white man, and it was man of another breed who had picked him up and mended the broken bone; who had given him water and had not beaten him.

Throughout the day he crouched in the darkness beneath a rude bunk of poles in the cabin of the Indian, except when the fires that burned within him drove him to the pot of water. The thong about his jaws prevented his lapping it up, and fierce thirst assailed him before the ancient forest man returned with the pelt of a marten.

There was nothing of fear or hesitation about the manner of John Blanket, as he again took the thong off and let the dog drink; but when it did not offer to touch the meat and began nosing at the splint, he fastened those jaws again, though the dog twisted and turned and snarled in frantic efforts to avoid that noose.

After he had eaten, the old man sat a long time smoking and looking down at the dog.

"Ten—twenty day, leg be good again, mebbe so," he said. "John Blanket no gottum dog. You be tamn good dog, I'm tink. Hoh! You, Loup!"

The dog raised its head. There was nothing of unfriendliness, nothing of threat in this man.

As he sat looking at the dog, the old man's eyes brightened. Perhaps he saw again the days of his youth, before he'd known the white man, and when as a boy he'd trained and driven his own wolf huskies, or later years, when in the full vigor of his manhood his mighty teams had served the big fur companies.

He was thin now and old. There were some strands of black amid the white of his hair, but not many. His face was wrinkled, too.

Through clouded eyes he looked at this wolf dog and saw into the past. It assumed changing forms. There had been many great lead dogs at the head of the teams he had driven—dogs that were as children to him; dogs that had fought for him and saved his life many times, in ways that are familiar to every driver of a dog team in the wilderness of the North. There had been some he trusted, even above his own judgment, his knowledge of nature, and his instincts.

There'd been Wamise, the swift black malemute, that tore the throat out of the bull moose that stove in John Blanket's ribs and was trying to crush out his life. Then there was Mahnuk, the one-eyed husky pup, that John bought from a Russian trader for an otter skin. Mahnuk was of the gigantic Alaskan breed, a grim, whitish-gray dog that died in battle with a maddened bear, which tore loose from a trap and almost ripped the arms off John Blanket's body when his trade gun jammed. Tuque was another, the wonderful Tuque, most beloved of them all. Sole living survivor of a team, he had dragged John Blanket and a small child, both delirious with the smallpox, through the frozen wilderness to the post, where the white men saved them. And Tuque died in the throes of exhaustion, as he brought the sledge within sight of the post.

John Blanket reached down to touch the mane of the wolf dog, then went to his bunk, and his eyes were moist, perhaps with a tear that memories brought—memories of great dogs he'd loved well.

DAYS passed, each like the other to the dog. That thong was fast about his muzzle, while the old Indian was absent on the trap lines, so that the splint could not be torn off. But during the evenings, as John Blanket sat and smoked or worked on the furs his traps had taken, the thong was off.

The dog hobbled about the cabin and did not cringe, as he had done at first, when the old man touched him. He ate of the moose meat, too, and the rabbits and fish. Occasionally, as he stood still, he rested the injured foot on the dirt floor, and John Blanket said: "Leg gettum strong bimeby."

At last the crude splint was taken off, and the dog limped heavily at first. Then John Blanket called to him, and he responded to the name which he had been given. A wise little smile touched the red man's face, and from that time on the dog followed him in the forest or ran at will, as John Blanket made the round of his lines.

Sometimes that one word, "Loup!"—his name called through the reaches—brought him to join the old man; sometimes he came of his own accord. He learned, too, to bear the burden of pelts on his back, without objection; and to drag a small sledge that John Blanket had to carry traps and other heavy loads.

Many days and sometimes whole nights he roamed through the forest and learned of the wild. He found out how to take the big rabbits by creeping close and leaping upon them, and he stalked the partridges and became a hunter as keen as any of the wilderness folk.

There were no periods of starvation, either, such as are the lot of the meat-eating wild; for, though his own fresh kills were more to his liking, there was always meat for him at the cabin of John Blanket. The strength gradually returned to that leg which had been broken, and he grew and thickened, a magnificent beast of sleek fur and tireless thews. The best the wilderness could afford and the best man could offer

aided in his growth. He was a hunter, a killer, a wolf in the forest, a dog in the cabin of the old red man, who never beat him, and whose patience was the patience of a man who knew the ways of this mixture of bloods, and governed himself accordingly.

Standing within the protecting curtain of forest, high above an open slope, near one of his marten traps, one day John Blanket saw something that moved far down at the bottom of that open slope. A caribou bull came running along the edge of the thickets, and a moment later a dark, leaping form sped into the open, pursuing. John Blanket recognized the dog. Soon the gap closed. Now, as the bull whirled to give desperate battle, the dog did not plunge beneath those hoofs. He swerved aside. A nimble jump in and out, another, and the bull's hind legs sagged, where the hamstringing wolf slash reached. But the dog leaped again, and there was blood on the snow. John Blanket marveled at the ferocity of that onslaught, as the bull fell under the swift death thrusts that were the slashes of a wolf rather than the bites of a dog.

He watched and saw the dog rest beside its quarry. Then he saw another form come slinking by the edge of the forest, and another—the dark stalkers of the depths coming to the kill—great timber wolves.

The dog arose, and John Blanket could see that his mane was swollen, and his head was thrust forward and low. The rifle lifted, and the red man pressed it against a tree, squinting down the sights at the first wolf. But, before he could press the trigger, the dog went to the attack. It was swift and furious. As the wolf leapead aside, the dog swerved, too. His paws seemed barely to touch the snow. If the wolf had expected the heavier-footed fighting ways of a dog, it was surprised and bowled over among the thickets. Then a yip of hurt followed the clattering roar of John Blanket's rifle, and the second wolf dragged itself into the brush to die.

There they found it, and it seemed a closer friendship grew up between man and dog in this war against those that both deemed a foe.

AS the approach of spring brought the fullness of maturity on the dog, he roamed at will, a swift-footed and tireless monarch in his domain of the forest, paying allegiance only to the wrinkled red man, who was his god; who fed him when his own powers failed to provide; who stroked his neck and rubbed his sharp ears; who drove him in the little sled at times, and who never lifted a hand to beat him. His muscles were long and hard; his body lines graceful, sloping; the depth of his chest was a well of apparently endless reserve. That constant supply of food during the days of his growth, uninterrupted by periods of starvation, such as are the lot of the wild, had paid well, and he bulked considerably above a hundred pounds of bone and muscle and sinew, a mighty beast that was a match for anything in the forest. As he grew, too, the bond of love he offered to the ancient red man seemed to become complete.

The snow surface was softening when John Blanket hitched him in the sledge and piled the little bales of cured furs upon it. Last season and the year before, John Blanket himself had dragged that sledge with the furs to the town on the big river, three hundred miles toward the south and west.

Since Tuque, the best loved of all his lead dogs, died in the traces, he'd had no dogs nor felt the need of them, now that he no longer worked for the fur companies and ran the mail.

But his heart was light, as he plodded at the side of the sledge or steadied it on the slopes, and saw the effortless manner in which the huge gray beast dragged it over the miles. Once, on a smooth stretch, John Blanket stood on the runners, as the dog driver rides behind a fine team, and there was no slackening of the pace. Often of nights on that journey, they sat by the little fire, built Indian fashion with a tiny blaze, and John Blanket's arm rested across the neck of the dog.

At last they came to the town, and men stopped to look and admire the dog that shuffled with the sliding gait of a wolf, dragging the sled, to halt at last before the post of the fur company.

There was one at whose approach the mane on the wolf dog's neck swelled out —a great, red-haired man, with thick neck and little blue eyes. Jem Allan they called him, and he drove a freight team for the mining companies. As he neared, the dog's muzzle wrinkled, and his mighty legs gathered in a half crouch. But the man saw those signs and did not come close. Instead, he went into the post and stood beside John Blanket.

"Where'd ye git that husky out there?" he asked.

"Findum," John Blanket said.

"Where'd ye find him?" the white man asked.

Something disturbed John Blanket, intuitive warning of trouble. He turned away, and the white man pressed close upon him.

"Ye found him where he weren't lost," he said.

"Him my dog. Findum," John Blanket said simply.

"The devil he is!" the white man said.

John Blanket took the skin of a fisher from among his furs, a handsome dark pelt, and those of two martens. He held them all out in one hand and might have offered more, but the white man struck them to the floor and went out, as the factor approached.

His trade completed, John Blanket left the post. He was uneasy. He'd intended to rest here for many days, weeks perhaps, to meet others of his kind and enjoy that great holiday of the spring trade, when the trappers knew relief from the long loneliness. Instead, he loaded the sledge with his supplies and turned back into the forest. There, in the morning, another trapper found him, horribly battered beside the overturned sledge that had caught in the brush and acted as an anchor on the dog. There was blood and matted hair on the soft snow, where the empty traces lay, but the dog was gone.

The team of Jem Allan, freight driver, was gone, too, and Jem Allan with it.

Weeks afterward, John Blanket recovered and returned to the forest. His heart was heavy, and he dragged the sledge himself. The white man's law forbade his seeking vengeance in the only way he knew, and Jem Allan had been gone for a long time. Some day—— John Blanket was getting old, and the punishments the white man's law could inflict on him did not mean so much to one who had only a short space still to go along the trail, anyhow.

MANY miles farther toward the west and south, nearer the big water that never sleeps, the team of powerful huskies that drew the freight sled of Jem Allan paused at last by a cabin on the edge of another town, a typical mining town. There the man released the great wolf dog from the sledge, where it had been tied, but he did not take off the thong from its jaws.

"Ye're quite a dog, now," he said, "but I knowed ye, and we'll see how ye act. Ye were a wolf as a pup, and that old red called ye Loup, which is Wolf. I'll see if ye're wolf still, and if ye are, I'll take it out of ye."

The great dog stood with head and tail low, but those shifty, amber eyes followed every move the man made, although there was no outbreak of useless hostility.

At first, that muzzle of thongs which was looped about his jaws was taken off only when he ate, and even then Jem Allan took no chances with him. Later, it was removed altogether, and the wolf dog was placed far back in the team that hauled the little carloads of ore from the mine along the narrow-gauge tracks or dragged the heavy freight sleds.

Sometimes, the long whip lashed out, and when the other dogs cringed, the wolf dog stood erect, shivering slightly where it bit through the heavy fur. But he did not cringe, and once, when that lash snapped along his nose, and the blood came, he turned. But the traces held him, and Jem Allan came close.

"Ye'd turn, would ye?" he said, and swung the butt of the whip.

A thousand lights blazed in the wolf dog's head, and he sprawled, but struggled up unsteadily. Even as his teeth bared, that elastic whip handle descended again, like a blackjack.

"I'll take the wolf out of ye!" Jem Allan said and struck a third time.

The dog lay quiet, stretched on the snow.

After that he never turned, but Jem Allan was watchful always. At night he put the team in the stockade, in little sheds that were their kennels, or chained them so that they might not run away when he was on the trail. No love existed between him and any of his dogs. They were slaves; that was all. And when the leader died by having his neck caught between the poles of the stockade, as he sought to escape, Jem Allan put the wolf dog at the post of honor, leading the team. But in this freight team there was no honor to the leader. They were work dogs only.

A YEAR passed in that fashion, and another, and the great wolf dog became the talk wherever men discussed dogs. Other dogs came and went, but he held that post at the head of the team. In summer it was the ore, in winter the freight, and the constant work added only to his power of muscle and sinew. Often at night he lay and looked toward the forest and the rising mountains toward the east. Sometimes he howled, too, a deep-throated howl, that rose and quavered off into silence—the cry of the wolf.

But the mining men often stopped to watch him as he led Jem Allan's team, and the stories of his prowess resulted in a rôle that brought him greater fame, a match race of Allan's team against that which hauled freight for another mine. The course was along the ridges of the hills, twenty-five miles inland, to an Indian village and back. And when one of those frightful storms caught them high in the hills, and Jem Allan lost his way and sat on the sled, cursing and using the whip, it was Loup who led the way out to safety and triumph. Three days later the other team was found, its dogs exhausted, its driver with face frozen.

In all this no love and no companionship ever grew up between the wolf dog and Jem Allan. In the dog smoldered a hatred that the man saw. He resented his own inability to break that independent spirit. The whip fell often, but Loup never cringed—never whimpered in acknowledgment of defeat. Sometimes his muzzle wrinkled, as the white man came near, but Allan never risked the chance of a bite from those mighty jaws. At times he'd seen their power unleashed on one of the other dogs, for the wolf dog held himself aloof from those that were servile.

Offers were made for him in money, and in gold that was brought in by some of the mining men, but Allan rejected them, for he had a pride of possession in this dog, which other men coveted. One morning an Indian child got into the stockade, and when Allan came he saw that it sat and played with the wolf dog. Two days previous, Loup had torn the sleeve of a white man who stood admiring him and tried to feel the width of his shoulders.

"Ye'd play with the dirty reds and kill a white man," Allan said, and that day, when the ore car struck, he plied the whip more heavily than usual.

But out of that race between the freight teams came a change in the life of Loup. The superintendent of the mine, a man named Martin, bought the big leader for his own team, and Allan had to sell to this man.

These were different dogs from the bulky, powerful brutes of the freight team. There was more of spirit to them. They were cleaner of limb and faster on the trail. A half-breed named Pierre Gustine was their driver, and the hostility which Loup had held for Jem Allan did not rise up toward this driver, whose color and scent was like that of John Blanket. But this slim breed driver was different from the old Indian who had found Loup on the ice that day so long back. He was aloof, strict, ever seeking greater speed and not averse to punishing his dogs for the thrill their achievements on the trail gave him.

Their tasks were light. They brought the mail and the emergency supplies. They carried Martin, the superintendent, on the sled in his winter journeyings. And where the wolf dog had been a slave to man, when he toiled in the traces for Jem Allan, he now became a plaything of man. He was a leader born. His speed, his tremendous endurance and

power, built on the foundations of that first year and on the heritage of his mixed bloods, his intelligence—all these made it so. They were qualities that decreed his post at the front of a team.

The half-breed driver, from whom he might have welcomed friendship, offered none and was merely a taskmaster. From the white men who admired him, even from Martin, he accepted no friendship. The approach of one merely brought ominous signs of the hatred that had been nurtured by Jem Allan in his puppy brain for all whose skins were white.

BUT his fame spread, as, year after year, he fairly dragged his team to victory in the races that were staged between the fleetest teams from the different mines. In these contests, too, great teams that were not of the mines, and their drivers entered for the prizes that were offered.

Once, when Pierre Gustine was blinded by the glare of the ice and became confused, insisting on turning his team from the course that led along the river, the wolf dog circled again and again, constantly back in the right direction, until the pitiful agony of complete blindness overtook the breed driver, and he sat on the sledge, with head entirely buried in his parka. Then Loup chose his own direction with uncanny knowledge and led the team on and on, in a steady lope, throughout the day and far into the night, until Pierre Gustine called them to a halt and let them rest in the traces, a full two hours. When they started again, two of the seven dogs could not rise, as the cramps of the trail stiffened their legs. Dazedly, unable to see, the half-breed worked among them until the wolf dog leader dragged them up and on, and Pierre Gustine fell on the sledge and hid his swollen, inflamed eyes in his parka.

All that night and the next day, the team went on, with Loup choosing the way. At last, Pierre Gustine knew by the jerking of the sledge and by the whimpers and howls that two of his team could go no farther, as the cramps assailed them.

In the evening of the second day they came to the finish with the half-breed and two crippled dogs riding the sledge, for the rules of the dog race are that all dogs must be brought in, dead or alive.

The ferocity of Loup, where white men were concerned, became as famous as his prowess throughout the mining country. He was a great, lonely, savage beast. Through every tale that spread of his fame, his endurance, and high courage, ran a thread of warning that he was an outlaw. Only Pierre Gustine, the half-breed, could handle him and was tolerated to come near him, and he snarled at him, too, when the whiplash crackled. But he was growing old and heavier. And then one bright day in early summer when the drift ice had all gone out, Martin the superintendent, came to the kennels, where his team was kept, and looked at Loup.

"If you weren't the savage you are, I'd take you with me," he said. "You're growing old." He shook his head slowly, and there was something of pride in his eyes. "I guess you'd never do down in the cities," he added.

As he looked on, a half-clad Indian boy came to the fence, on the other side of the kennel, with a chunk of coarse bread in his hand which he held through, and called. Loup arose, and Martin saw that he took the bread, then licked the child's hand, which he might have torn off with one of those terrible slashes.

A long time the superintendent studied the huge beast, then mused aloud, as he walked off: "Either the years are taming him, or there's been a reason."

Later, another man came in Martin's place, a big, light-haired man, and eventually the tales of the wolf dog's feats and ferocity came to him. He went with Pierre Gustine to the kennels and laughed at the warnings, even at the tenseness of the dog, as he approached, and at the wrinkling muzzle, as he reached down to stroke the shaggy mane.

Then Pierre Gustine rushed in with the whip butt, as the yellowed fangs tore through the heavy mackinaw of the new superintendent and ripped the flesh along his arm.

Years before, that leap of the wolf dog would have been fiercer. It would

have sent those fangs at the throat rather than the arm. However, if the years had taken something from his elastic springiness, they had not lessened his ferocity nor old hatreds, and, as he lay there, flattened by the loaded handle of the whip, his amber-brown eyes flamed their hatred, not at the half-breed who had struck him down, but at the white man who would have touched him.

THE next day Jem Allan came to the kennels and took him again to the freight team he had left so many years before. Life became again a round of toil and abuse for him. Allan was older, more impatient, harrying his dogs, as they dragged the loads of ore from the mine. Their renewed relationship, started with a fight for mastery, as Loup rebelled at the first stinging crack of the lash.

"Ye'd tear the arm of the boss and get away with it," Allan said, "but ye'll not turn on me. I'll show ye I'm still yer master. I'll send ye to Rome."

The heavy whip handle rose and fell, and the process of beating into subjection, known as "sending a dog to Rome," in the vernacular of the dog-team driver, when a recalcitrant is beaten into unconsciousness to break its spirit, went on until Loup lay quiet on his side, his head a swollen, bloody thing. Then Jem Allan went to a near-by shack and came back with a hammer. He jerked the great head up and broke the still mighty fangs out with four blows.

From that time on the wolf dog changed. Days passed before he could stand, and he was put in the traces, not at the lead he'd always held, but far back in the team, where the whiplash bit through his fur. The springiness was all gone from those great sinews, and he strained at his work, with tongue hanging out. When the other dogs turned on him he was helpless, his fighting weapons gone, leaving only jagged, sharp stumps that could not penetrate their fur. His eyes were becoming dimmer, and he stumbled sometimes. Always at night he lay looking toward the east, over the forested mountains. Perhaps he saw again that lonely cabin in the twilights of the great forest, where a kindness that he understood had always been, where an old red man had carried him and fixed his hurt and given him water to ease the burning thirst of his fever. Perhaps, also, the days and nights of his freedom to hunt and play in the independence of his wild spirit and to come in answer to the old man's calls welled up in memories again. He arose to his haunches and threw his head back. Dismal as a note of doom, the quavering cry of his wolf ancestors rolled out, and the other dogs awoke, with manes bristling.

Loup circled the stockade. There was one spot where two of the poles were wider apart than the rest. Years before, a lead dog, that had preceded him with that freight team, hung himself by trying to leap over at this spot. Loup thrust his great head between those two poles, and one of them gave way, where it had rotted at the base. His shoulders jammed, but in the night he struggled and panted and squeezed. A wild urge possessed him. The distant forest beckoned, and old madnesses were upon him. He fought and turned, straining and pushing with his hind legs. Eager flames played in his eyes, and at last he lunged, headfirst, in the snow—free.

New life seemed to return to his body as though forgotten youth settled its mantle over him again. He leaped up and away—away toward the east, toward those distant, forested hills, toward the things that called. It was as though a voice came to him from beyond them —the guttural voice of an old man. It spoke his name. But he hesitated, then halted and turned. In the shadows about the cabin where Jem Allan lived, he crouched and crept behind a pile of wood. Occasionally his muzzle quivered, and his lips wrinkled up, so that those jagged stumps of fangs, which had been broken by the hammer, were bared. Pale, clouded fires passed across his eyes. The late morning of winter had brought little light when there were stirrings inside the cabin. Then the door opened, and Jem Allan came out in the gray, half light toward the woodpile. The wolf dog's legs tensed. His tongue curled out, and his muzzle wrinkled. Then he leaped. A hundred and twenty-five pounds of ani-

mate hatred struck Jem Allan on the shoulders, and hot breath was at his throat, as he fell. An inarticulate cursing sound came from him and ended sharply, as mighty jaws closed. But the fangs that would have killed in one slash, at this vulnerable spot, were missing. Instead, it seemed that sawing knifes tore at him, as he fought and struck with his fists. Sticks of wood flew up, as man and dog writhed in their silent struggle in the snow. A knife rose and fell twice. Then the man lay still, and, standing over him, the wolf dog lifted his head. At the sound of that awful, quavering howl the other dogs in the stockade yipped and snarled, and when the full light of the short day came, the wolf dog loped unsteadily through the forest, far away toward the east. The fur of his legs was dark with the blood from two knife wounds in his shoulders, and the wounds burned where the cold air touched them, but he went on and on.

AT night he hunted, creeping slowly through the thickets, and on the third night, when ravenous hunger gnawed at him and sharpened old instincts, he caught a snowshoe rabbit and ate it, fur and all, when he could not tear it with those jagged stumps of fangs. But soon he would be at that cabin, where memory told him food would be waiting, as it had been years before.

In the days that followed, he traveled always toward the east, deeper into the wilderness. He was hungry, but his hunting prowess was not great, for the years of servitude had sapped his powers. He saw caribou, but the fangs that had been his weapons of the chase were gone, and he was helpless to cope with any big animal. And he was weakening, as the constant exertion and the lack of food kept those knife wounds from healing.

There came a night when he could scarcely stand erect, and when he stumbled and fell often, but he held on, though sometimes he crept. He was nearing the valley in which he knew the cabin of John Blanket stood. As he came slowly over the hills, a wind soughed down through the passes, the bitter *jee-bi* wind that the red men say is the breath of the ice spirits. It moaned over the frozen crust of the snow, like a flowing avalanche of invisible ice. On its wings rode a moisture that was the mist of the arctic. It clung to the branches and was frozen upon them, until every twig had its glassy sheathing, and the snow crust was thick and smooth.

An eerie whistling rose, as the wind played on a million iced harp strings, which were the trees of the forest; it was the whistling voice of death that sent its knifelike fingers to search out the hearts of living things.

Far toward the east, ghost lights touched the heavens and were reflected, pale and unreal, illumining a ghastly world with deceiving beauty. Like an arc of colorless fire, those lights flared across the heavens, low, ebbing, rising, lost in sudden blackness that was mephitic. A lavender ribbon of cold fire shot straight up, like the beam of a searchlight. It turned to yellow, orange, and white. Other spears of varicolored light reached up into the distant skies. The iced branches seemed to drip weird fire, and there were rustlings, as though silk-garbed spirits sped through the night to the source of that magic fire. The moaning whistle of the wind arose like the shrieks of dead things.

The fingers of pagan gods wove strings of gems, where the glow of the great lights touched the maze of ice-sheathed branches with topaz one moment, then sapphire, amethyst, and a sudden burst of blazing cold white, that sheathed the world in diamonds. The air was filled with low cracklings, and swishings, that came from everywhere and nowhere. The wind increased. The gods of the North were mad. Sound, light, and darkness mingled in whirling chaos. The iced branches clattered and crashed against each other, as the trees bent and flattened under the maniacal breath of the North. The wind pressure snapped frozen branches and trunks, and the wilderness seemed to shrink.

Through the wild bedlam of this incarnate fury, along the side of a slope, something moved, and the wolf dog came creeping. His mane was coated

with ice. Sharp crystals of it were about his eyes, and down over his muzzle was a beard of it, where the moisture of his breath had frozen. In between his toes were hard chunks of ice, and his pads were raw. But he made no effort now to chew it out. He could not stand erect, but crawled with effort at intervals. Near here, some stirring memory told him, had been a trap from which John Blanket occasionally took the sleek body of a marten or fisher. Down below, there in the valley by the creek, would be that cabin he sought.

LIFE ebbed very low in Loup. He was old and gaunt with starvation. His eyes were dim, and his life was slowly ebbing. Again and again, he crawled into the mazes of brush that he could no longer see clearly. His nose was raw, and blood was frozen upon it, but he went on slowly, creeping, dragging himself and panting, as though the heat of summer pressed upon him. In an open space on the down slope he slid and rolled until the brush stopped him. He lay quietly a while, then began that creeping advance again, with agonizing effort.

Down in the valley it would be easier, once he gained that stream which led past John Blanket's cabin. The ice would be free of brush down there, and the wind would be less.

He pushed at last through a tangle of willows, and a foot below, down the bank, was the open space of the little creek. But he lay quiet, listening. A low, gasping chant came to his ears in the lulls of the wind. It was in gutturals, the cracked, weak voice of an old, old man singing the death chant of his people, his prayer to the spirits of the wilderness.

Around a bend in the creek something moved slowly. It dragged itself like an animal, a few feet. Then it sagged and lifted itself on one arm—a man.

Yellow and wrinkled, the head of John Blanket stuck out of his capote. His eyes were sunken, and the straggling hairs on his head were few and white.

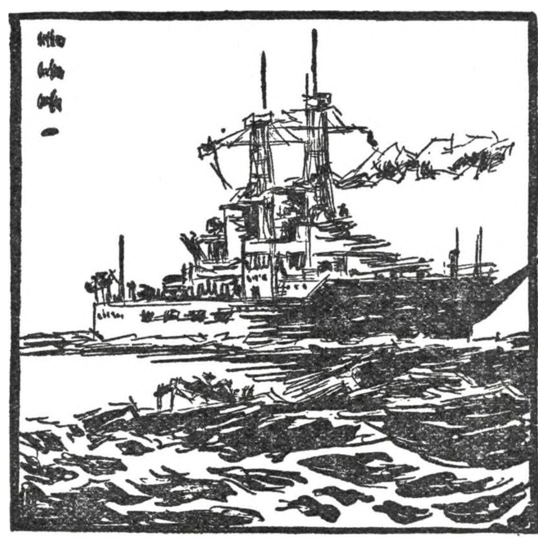
Again he reached out and pulled himself a few feet, the legs that had been broken by a crumbling windfall log, dragging after him. The fur glove was gone from one hand, and its fingers were stiffly frozen. A strange light seemed to burn in those sunken eyes, and John Blanket pushed himself up slowly, until his head arose, and he looked at the heavens. That guttural chant started feebly and ended in a choking cough.

On the bank the wolf dog's head swayed, as dim eyes tried to fix the figure of the man through the curtains that were lowering. The dog was not suffering now. He whined, as a puppy might, then half crawled, half fell down onto the ice and moved slowly, with laborious effort toward where the sounds of the man's voice had come from.

He whined again, and John Blanket turned his head to stare at the dark shape, with unseeing eyes. It was a puppy—a hurt puppy that he saw, and he'd had no dog since Tuque died in the traces. He was going to shoot it for a wolf at first, too. Then he saw it in different form, a great young wolf dog, a glorious thing that lived at the cabin with him and hauled the little sled for him. He'd called it Loup, because that was the name the French traders gave to all in which the blood of the wolf was strong. But spring was coming, and to John Blanket it seemed he lay on the soft moss before his cabin. They'd go down with the furs soon. That thought disturbed him. He mustn't take this dog, that he'd learned to love so well, where the white men could steal it from him.

He reached out, and a shaggy, ice-coated form crept close against his body. A warm tongue licked his face once, and a low sigh came from the dog. It seemed to stretch contentedly, and then slowly to relax and stiffen. John Blanket's arm rested across its neck, and he drooped, wilting very slowly, until his wrinkled face was in that ice-sheathed mane.

Like pale funereal candles, the streamers of the aurora stood against the dark heavens, and the wind died away to a steady dirge. An overhanging bank of snow broke off and slid down to the creek, where it covered them in a mound of white.



When the Squadron Dropped Anchor

By Frank E. Evans

Author of "The White Slacker," "The Green Serpent God," Etc.

Accused of the most dishonorable conduct, cast off from the navy and the life he loved, Graydon still found opportunity to serve his country and erase the stain on his honor.

THE echoes of the ship's bugle, calling away the second whaleboat, died softly in the still harbor of San Juan de Gracias. The boat crew ran out on the boom, down its swinging rope ladder to the thwarts beneath, and pulled out to the gangway. At the head of the gangway stood a man in blue civilian serge and wide-brimmed panama hat. The brim half hid the eyes that were held to the seam of the cruiser's deck. His shoulders sagged like those of a fighter waiting the knock-out blow.

The curt announcement of the ensign on watch, "Your boat is alongside," brought the man's head up with a jerk. His shoulders braced and his heels met. Mechanically his hand went in salute to the brim of the panama. In the old formula of the quarter-deck he answered: "I have your permission to leave the ship, sir?"

There was no answer. For a moment he faced aft to where the colors rippled over the taffrail. Then, with head down, shoulders drooping, he turned and ran down the ladder to the waiting whaleboat. The ensign stepped to the rail.

"In the whaleboat there. Land Mr. Graydon on the beach and return to the ship!"

"Aye, aye, sir! Shove off for'ard! Out oars! Way together!"

Swirls of phosphorescence leaped away from the driving ash blades, to trail like ropes of pearl in the wake. On the low-lying beach to which they raced, slender palm trees, silver lances in the blazing sun, stabbed upward through the heat mirage that ran like white fire. The thatched roofs of the native village sprawled in untidy array before the blurred eyes of the man in blue serge.

The next stage by which Stanley Graydon, ex-captain of marines, severed his ties with the service was a schooner that warped alongside a wharf at Santander, capital of the Republic of Santander,

three days later. To the beauty of those sea leagues and to the bizarre life on the schooner he was blind. His thoughts were elsewhere.

One picture, that of the unforgetable night in the wardroom of the U. S. S. *Franklin,* flagship of the Special Service Squadron, haunted him like a nightmare. There was Dixon, squadron intelligence officer, face white as the cloth on the poker table, voice shaking with cold passion, denouncing him as a card sharp. He had dashed the undealt pack full into Dixon's face. Only the restraining arms of his shipmates had kept him from driving his fist full into that sneering countenance. Then, like the ever-changing picture on a screen, Dixon coolly searched through the scattered cards until he had separated an even dozen.

Held against the light, while their breathless shipmates crowded closer, Dixon pointed out the tiny pin-prick points in their upper corner. A swift manipulation. Five of the marked cards lay face up on the table. The ace-high full on which Graydon had won the last pot. A sharp, curt order by Dixon. The surgeon returning from his cabin with a pack of cards—a pack that was an exact duplicate in pattern and color to the marked pack. The deft fingers of Dixon weaving through them, now and then holding one to the light. In the corner the tiny telltale points.

That same night—the vision followed swiftly—a corporal of marines, one of his own crack detachment, pacing slowly before the closed door of his cabin. The morning, with the admiral's orderly, one of that gallant platoon he had led into the Bois de Belleau, at his door.

"The admiral's compliments, sir, and he would like to see the captain in his cabin."

The picture came clear. Kelly's gloved hand falling away smartly from the visor of his cap. The strained face relaxed, and the haunted look in Stanley Graydon's face softened. He would never forget Kelly, blessed old leatherneck, with his hand outstretched, and his husky voice.

"It's a damn, dirty shame, captain. We're with you, every marine in the outfit. You'll come clean out of this barrage."

The measured toll of the schooner's bell sounded midnight. Stanley Graydon, leaning over the rail, hands gripping the shrouds, went on with the reconstruction of his hell.

FOR a full hour they had talked it over, and every word of the white-haired admiral had burned into his memory. His ten years of clean service. His brilliant record overseas. His taut performance of duty in the squadron. His heavy poker losses for two straight months, and then his phenomenal change of luck. At its end, the admiral had delivered his edict.

"Here is my verdict, Graydon: Trial by general court-martial, or your resignation for the good of the service. I may have no right to offer you that alternative, but your record merits it. With all my heart I wish that you may be able to disprove these damnable charges. I will give you a fortnight and the assistance of any officer you may name."

His fine old face was twitching, and his voice a bit shaky.

The fortnight had expired, a space of veritable exile. At its end the net of circumstantial evidence had tightened slowly and inexorably. He had dully accepted the alternative of resignation, for he had to find sanctuary for a while, some place where he would have time to think more clearly. But the thought rankled in his mind that his choice would be construed as a tacit admission of his guilt.

It was the admiral himself who had suggested Santander as a temporary anchorage in which he might have time to plan his course. Santander was in the vicinity, and its rich coffee and sugar plantations and its forests of hardwoods might lead to some business opening, while he fought for vindication.

The schooner tied up alongside the wharf at Santander, with disorderly tumult. Its very antithesis of the orderly man-of-war discipline that was steeped in his blood brought a wry smile to his lips. He made his way to the Hotel Grande Centrale, a rambling white hostelry facing the Plaza Concepcion.

The inevitable statue of a general, with cocked hat and brandished sword, astride of a fiery rocking-horse, dominated the sleepy plaza. At its sight Stanley Graydon's native optimism was beating back to full tide. He raised his hat in mock salute.

"Greetings, old-timer!" he said softly. "I knew you when you were masquerading as Dessalines, in the Champ de Mars, at Port-au-Prince. I ran across your bows in Caracas, as Simon Bolivar. The day we hit the beach in Guatemala last March, you were holding the spotlight of a dusty old square as Carrera. Some day I'll set up a little banana republic of my own. Then I'll write out a treasury warrant for the price of 'One (1) statue, imitation bronze. Model AA, Series 2408,' and the big mail-order house in Chicago will ship me your twin brother. Wait until I get into the café, my dear general, and I'll drink your health."

A barefooted waiter placed a green "swizzle" on his marble-topped table. As he raised it to his lips, he was aware that a group of officers at a near-by table was watching him with undisguised interest. One was a swaggering, swarthy giant of a man, with a sweeping black mustache and the rank devices of a colonel on his shoulders and cuffs. The others were, with one exception, conventional tyes of Central American soldiery. The exception was a youngster, barely out of his teens, but with a captain's devices on the freshly starched khaki, with its red piping. His face was oval, and his features were clearly cut. Stanley Graydon appraised him as far superior in birth and breeding to his mates.

The swarthy colonel returned his casual glance with an ill-favored scowl. He turned to the others, and a ripple of laughter swept over them at his remark. It was clear to Stanley Graydon that they were in the mood for sport with a gringo. He paid his score, and, as he passed their table, a roar of derisive, raucous laughter followed.

"Damned 'spigs!'" he muttered contemptuously. "Probably had as much as two drinks, and feeling them."

Out he went, blissfully unconsicous that his straight, flat back, trim shoulders, and precise stride marked him indelibly in a caste strikingly at variance with the business men, generous of girth, careless of bearing, who ventured into Santander.

EARLY the next morning he started for a ride into the savannas. His mount was a spirited stallion, and his spirits rose, as he cleared the cobbled streets and cantered briskly on. Ahead lay the panorama of the rolling savannas. For miles the lush acres, pale green with sugar cane, rippled like an inland sea. Here and there showed irregular patches of varied crops. The red roofs of haciendas loomed above their blotched huddles of outbuildings. Above them tossed the silhouetted feathers of giant palms against the pale blue of the tropical sky.

To the south the sun danced on a broad expanse of water, where a great bay, with a bottle-neck entrance between bold headlands, lay like a silver mirror in the frame of dark-green shores.

"Ramona Bay! Lord, what a picture!"

His mind raced back to the charts and maps over which he and Dixon had worked out maneuver problems for the admiral. With his background of overseas service, he had been detailed as Dixon's assistant. All the plans of naval action on the West coast had stressed the overwhelming importance of a base on Ramona Bay. Its seizure by a hostile force would have exposed the fleet's line of communications to a deadly menace; the home coast to dangerous raids; the diversion of naval units that would be vitally needed in the main theater of operations.

The sudden thunder of hoofs and boisterous laughter broke into his reflective mood. Out from the cover of a patch of woods came the riders. The distance narrowed, and he saw the red piping on khaki uniforms and recognized the riders as the group in the café. There was studied insolence in their faces, and Stanley Graydon reined to one side to give them a wide berth.

The horseman on the near flank, the swarthy colonel, deliberately moved toward him at a lively canter. His own

mount, crowded uncomfortably close to the cactus hedge, wheeled and lashed out with his heels. The unshod hoofs drummed viciously into the flank of the colonel's mount. A riding crop slashed across the rump of Stanley Graydon's stallion, and a burst of derisive glee greeted the animal's frenzied leap.

His crop lashed back with retaliatory slash across the colonel's hands. His stallion, now panicky, bolted. A pistol shot whistled overhead. Furious at his apparent flight, he was unable to check his racing animal until he had covered a full half mile beyond the wooded stretch.

The rest of the day passed without incident, while he gathered information about Santander's commercial life from the loquacious manager of the hotel. By deft questioning he also learned that the bellicose colonel was Henriquez, commandant of the Palace Guard. The youngster was Captain Juan Navarro, whose father, Don Rafael, was a wealthy landowner on the shores of Ramona Bay, and highly esteemed throughout Santander.

All this, however, held no clew to the patent hostility of the Henriquez faction. At all events, he was determined not to let it disturb his plans for a second ride into the interior, the following day.

Noon had passed before he wheeled his stallion homeward. He was trotting regretfully out of the cover of woods into the heat of the savanna lands. The drum of fast-flying hoofs and an exultant cry warned him that treachery was afoot. He had purposely gone unarmed, but now how he longed to close his fingers over the butt of a service pistol. Out from their ambush rushed a squad of horsemen, Henriquez at their head. With horses rearing and kicking, pistols barking, the unequal fight was on. The butt of a pistol fell with solid thud on the back of his head, as they milled about him.

When Stanley Graydon recovered his senses he was trussed in his saddle like a pack of coffee. Ahead of him he saw Captain Navarro, limp in his saddle, supported by one of the party. A crimson splotch was staining the youngster's side. Beyond loomed the gates of a hacienda. Through a grove of mango trees water gleamed. At the end of a row of flame trees, scarlet with blossom, the troop halted.

The gates swung open, and they moved at a walk to the steps of a wide veranda. The agitated cries of a woman, the stern bass of a man's excited queries, were enough to tell him that it was the hacienda of Don Rafael Navarro, on the shores of Ramona Bay.

The coolness of the interior into which he was hurried was grateful after that trussed-up ride in the blazing sun. His wrists and ankles were swollen from their bonds. His head ached frightfully from the pistol-butt's blow. It left him lethargic to the hostile looks of the group that faced him. He listened with a mocking smile, while Henriquez told his fantastic tale of a fight in which Graydon was made the aggressor. There was no flinching from the steel-blue eyes of Don Rafael.

He was tempted to protest that he had been unarmed; that the wound of young Captain Navarro could only have been inflicted by a wild pistol shot from one of his own friends, but at his first words Don Rafael silenced him.

"Enough! It shall be as you advise, Colonel Henriquez. He will remain a prisoner here. On the outcome of my son's wound shall await the final decision. If the good God wills that my son shall die——" He halted. The silence was significant.

"José!"

A forbidding *mozo,* barefooted and clad in blue denim, stepped forward. The orders were too swift for Stanley Graydon to follow, but they awoke an evil grin on José's face.

"Your hands and feet will no longer be bound, señor," Don Rafael addressed him. "If you attempt to escape, however, José's machete has a sharp edge, and my hounds are quick on the trail."

A snowy-haired woman, evidently his wife, drew herself sharply against the wall, as he and José passed. Her sensitive mouth was twisted in aversion.

Outside the grilled door of his room, José squatted on his heels, smoking innumerable cigarettes from the blue packet that is a hall mark of the tropics. His

naked machete hung in a rope sling at his side. In the morning José gave surly answers. Captain Navarro had been delirious—weak with fever. José ended this disquieting intelligence by drawing his blunt thumb across his wrinkled neck. Still there was no word from Don Rafael. It seemed there would be none until the fate of his son had been determined beyond doubt. Oddly enough, it was José who forced the hand of his master.

"José!" called Stanley Graydon the next morning. "José! Where is my breakfast?"

The figure curled up on the matting outside did not answer. Stirred by an uneasy premonition, Graydon stepped to the locked grill door and stooped to look at José's face. It was bluish and livid. The lips were pressed tightly against the yellow teeth. There were great dark circles about the eyes. He stooped lower. The body was taut as a bowstring. The eyes stared at him in the fixity of death. The legs were drawn sharply up against the stomach, where the last agonizing cramp had shot them.

"Cholera!" he muttered. "Poor devil!"

GRAYDON'S calls for Don Rafael rang insistently. The maid who finally came gave one affrighted look and bolted, shrieking her terror. Then came the old don, who listened, with troubled eyes, to his prisoner's startling proposal.

"Put me in charge of your men, Don Rafael. I know how to handle men, white or brown. I know how to fight cholera. Learned those tricks in the Philippines, and I've never forgot them. Escape?" He laughed tolerantly. "I wouldn't leave you and your wife to fight this scourge if you threatened to whip me off the place."

Don Rafael bent his head in grave thought. There was a tribute in the steel-blue eyes when he lifted them.

"I thank you, señor. I need you."

Day and night, Stanley Graydon carried on his grim fight. Under his unsparing leadership, his peon laborers learned to police their grounds and huts as though the god of kitchen police was their patron saint. They fought the mosquitoes in their breeding spots, as though they were chastising the devil in person. They fought with oil and lime and shovels to drive the plague from their borders. They held to his laws without a murmur.

For a week the hacienda stood isolated from a world that knew nothing of its plight. Then Colonel Henriquez rode debonairly up the scarlet-flanked avenue. He was scornful of the agitated peon at the gates; blind to the sinister yellow flag that hung above the hacienda's veranda. It was Don Rafael who broke the news to him. Henriquez wheeled his horse, drove his spurs into its flanks, and rode away as though the devil of the old patrician followed his incontinent flight. That night Don Rafael unbosomed himself to his prisoner.

"You came to us the potential murderer of our first-born, Señor Graydon. In my heart your sentence to death had been passed. Colonel Henriquez, the black-hearted craven, has wiped that out. He had been my honored guest for years. We differed in politics, but I thought him a brave and honest man. When I told Juan of his cowardly desertion, I learned the truth of the fight in which he was wounded."

"And that, señor?"

"Henriquez thought you a spy from the United States. There was something on foot, and they determined to kidnap you so that you could not thwart their plans. Ah, señor, something evil is marching on, but Juan has not yet the courage to tell me all. When he was delirious he babbled of secret plans, of strange foreign agents, of Ramona Bay. They have given me troubled nights. Perhaps, when Juan is himself again, he will tell me all."

"Ramona Bay!" exclaimed Stanley Graydon.

"Whatever concerns Ramona Bay, señor, is of vital import to your country as well as mine," and the old don's voice was grave. "We will be allies, you and I, as we have been since the day you cast your fate with an old man and his wife."

He caught up a decanter, filled two glasses with golden wine, and they drank to their compact, standing.

Ramona Bay! If there was hidden intrigue on foot in Santander, it could mean but one thing. If he and Don Rafael could unmask it, he would be striding far in his hope for rehabilitation.

At noon the following day Don Rafael, visibly perturbed, sought him out. His first words came with a rush of Spanish that Stanley Graydon found difficult to follow. Juan, now clearly on the road to recovery, roused by bitter contempt for Henriquez, had made a clean breast of it. Through mock marriages of native women to foreign agents, the groundwork for titles to land bordering on Ramona Bay had already been accomplished by the Henriquez faction. A revolution, headed by Henriquez, was scheduled to break out in the capital on the first of the month.

TEN days was the slender interval —days that would see gun running at its peak; the corruption of troops by gold, and lavish promises of increased pay. The old patrician's face was haggard.

"These foreign agents, Don Rafael—how have they worked under cover and betrayed your government?"

"Ah, señor, there have been more of those far-off nationals in Santander in the last six months than usually venture here in as many years. They have come in the guise of scientists, interested in the phenomena of subterranean rivers that abound in the valleys to the west of here; as business men, and as tourists. We have been blind dolts. There has not been a revolution here in fourteen years," and the old man's eyes shone with pride. "That has been due in the main to the laws that forbid aliens to acquire land. It has barred out the great concessions. You see how it is being circumvented. Tell me, señor, what must we do?"

"The first thing is to warn some powerful and loyal man in the government," came the quick answer. "He must move with caution, or he will bungle it. As for the rest, I have thought of a plan; but first you must take this step."

As they strode back to the hacienda, framing the dispatch that must be sent to the capital, Stanley Graydon saw a rider dismounting there. There was something disquietingly familiar about the man's carriage. As recognition flashed over him, he was torn by conflicting emotions. Dixon! The man who had driven him from the service by lying charges. Dixon! The one man in a thousand who could set in motion the nebulous plan he had framed for the salvation of Ramona Bay.

Dixon greeted him with the old inscrutable smile. There was nothing in his manner or speech, as he explained the reason for his unexpected visit, to suggest that they had ever been shipmates.

"Just ran down, after a conference with the admiral, for a 'look-see' at Ramona Bay and the general conditions down here," he said coolly. "Yes, I called at the legation, but I rarely bother with those diplomat chaps. They told me everything was peaceful. Also, that Señor Navarro," and he bowed politely, "was the chief landowner out here and friendly toward us. So I took the liberty of riding out."

With a quick smile, Don Rafael insisted that he spend the night, and then checked himself.

"Thanks, señor," replied Dixon, as Don Rafael outlined the situation. "I shan't let thoughts of cholera disturb my sleep. I've been shipmates with it at Rio and on the Isthmus, when they were pest holes. Quarantined in half a dozen fever ports."

Through Don Rafael's story, however, he had turned his battery of cold, gray eyes on Stanley Graydon. He fancied once that he had caught in them a glimmer of admiration, for the old don had been eloquent in his praise.

With scarcely a pause, Don Rafael plunged into the revelations made by Juan. His long fingers forked through his white beard. His eyes were afire with the startling import of them. Dixon listened, imperturbable, emotionless.

"Your story is very interesting, señor," he commented. His voice, stripped of feeling, was in sharp contrast to the appeal for help.

"Fortunately," he went on, "in my capacity as the squadron intelligence officer, I have come here well informed of

the general situation. Neither Washington nor the legation has even hinted at what you tell me. I am afraid your son has been imposed upon, or that his mind is not yet clear. You must also remember that Colonel Henriquez's conduct would contribute to your son's sensational denunciations."

"Then you would not consent to send a radio through to the admiral, outlining these reports?" Stanley Graydon broke in impulsively. "It would be of untold value if the squadron should cruise down this way and be on hand for any developments."

"I would hardly care to endanger my reputation in the service by any such ill-timed action," came the curt reply. "A man's reputation in the service means a great deal more to him, Mr. Graydon, than a civilian could possibly comprehend."

There was unmistakable menace in that blunt ultimatum. It would have been a lethal blow to Stanley Graydon's pride should Dixon choose to denounce him to the old don who had learned to lean so heavily upon him. His eyes flashed, but he took the rebuke standing up.

Through the dinner Dixon carried the difficult situation with an aplomb that wrested grudging admiration from him. Dixon had always been an enigma to him. Gifted far beyond the average, reticent and cold-blooded to a degree, he had held aloof from the heated discussions of the wardroom. This evening, despite the rebuff he had administered, he chose to talk of out-of-the-way ports, of international affairs, of his destroyer duty in the North Sea, and he held them under his charm.

Behind it all, however, the brusque rejection of their impassioned pleas rankled deeply. It seemed beyond belief that he could dismiss so lightly the menace to Ramona Bay.

IN the morning Dixon joined him on his daily inspection. His questions were to the point, his approval free and ungrudging, as Stanley Graydon showed him the precautions that had been carried out with an iron hand. Through it all he held a fatalistic scorn for the menace of cholera, so far as he was concerned. For the first time he referred to their service on the flagship.

"Sorry, Graydon, about that row we had aboard ship. Personally I am no purist, but I am a fatalist. Seen many a fine chap make a damaging slip in his career. That was due to something beyond his control. I've got over the angry resentment that swept over me that night. I should perhaps have let it go. Talked it over frankly, brutally, with you afterward."

"So you still think I cheated at cards!"

"I may have treated you unjustly, Graydon. Still, the admiral gave you every chance to clear yourself. Let's try another tack. I always admired your professional ability. I admire the way you're handling this tough job down here, and the way you hold your head up. I am willing to admit that, in spite of the most damning evidence, you may be innocent. Here's hoping you can prove it."

Stanley Graydon's impulse to blurt out in savage, unsparing retaliation was checked by but one factor. That was his earnest desire to convince Dixon of the seriousness of Juan's revelations. In the face of these revelations, he had no wish to incur further enmity.

On their way back to the hacienda, Dixon summed up his observations.

"You're dead right, Graydon, in laying down the law for those ignorant peons." He smiled tolerantly as he went on. "I'm destined to die at sea, just as I was destined to follow the sea. So don't mind if I allow myself a little latitude on your rules."

True to his tenets, Dixon steered his fatalistic course, eating mangoes with relish, drinking unboiled spring water. He was missing at breakfast the third day. Stanley Graydon, a prey to misgivings, found him in bed with the unmistakable marks of cholera on him. They were there in the faint livid tinge of his face; in the spasms of pain that raced through his body.

With the discovery, the last trace of bitter resentment on Graydon's part fled. The iron will of the man, his serene fatalism, his stubborn fight for life, where a

peon would have succumbed without a struggle, enlisted Graydon's admiration.

Don Rafael heard the news with an air of deep abstraction. It was apparent that something of greater import had him in its grasp.

"Ah, if only Señor Dixon had acted as we begged him to! Now, if he recovers and relents, it may be too late." His face was drawn.

The bitterness of it brought inspiration to Stanley Graydon.

"That radio is going, Don Rafael!" he cried. "I'll write the message, sign Dixon's name to it, and the legation will have it coded and on the air before night falls!"

Don Rafael's voice boomed out exultantly for a mounted messenger.

"We'll have the squadron at anchor in Ramona Bay two days before Henriquez is ready to spring his coup. We'll have a division of destroyers searching for those gun-running expeditions. And when it's all over, Don Rafael, I'll tell why I came to Santander. If you'll give me your hand at the end of that story, it will be all the reward I shall ask."

"God bless you, señor!" Don Rafael's voice was husky.

From Dixon's bag Stanley Graydon brought a sheaf of official message blanks. He framed his dispatch in convincing naval terms, explicit and shipshape, and signed Dixon's name to it. Behind him Don Rafael's lined face was creased with a smile of beatific joy.

Stubbornly Dixon held to the faith that death could come to him only at sea, but he was weakening fast. Another day passed before the message seemed to have penetrated to his indomitable soul that he might not outlive the day. His mind was clear as the tone of a ship's bell. His voice, despite its weakness, held the cold quality that was the index to the man.

"Graydon," he gasped, "they'll be piping me over the side soon. Listen to me for a moment, old man. When I've finished, bring Don Rafael here. You'll need a witness to the last part of my yarn." He choked for a moment and then went grimly on:

"I've always been crooked, Graydon. I 'gouged' my way through Annapolis on the one subject I was weak in. Steered a lone course. Never a messmate, I wouldn't have sacrificed my lone hand if it meant a step toward flag command."

A flicker of pain played over the mask-like face.

"Needed money to make my ambitions come true. Played the stock market from the day I drew my first pay check. Bottom fell out of the market last fall. Wiped me out. Needed money desperately." The thin lips pressed tightly against his bared teeth. "Sold the only thing that would get the price I needed—copy of the secret plans for the defense of Panama Canal. Final payment the day I delivered them."

THE cold gray eyes bored straight at Stanley Graydon and read in his eyes incredulous disbelief.

"Two weeks from to-day, Graydon," the dogged whisper went on, "the *Franklin* will be off Balboa. Draft from Mare Island to replace the sick and short-time men. Mess attendants in draft. Filipino boys—all but one. He looks like a Filipino. Officer of general staff in his own navy."

"And the copy of the secret plans?" Stanley Graydon asked breathlessly.

"Secret drawer, at bottom of my clothes locker. He'll slip into my cabin first day aboard. Get papers."

Weakened by the compelling strain, the cold, measured whispers died away. Stanley Graydon's tense face was twisted in mingled aversion and sympathy.

"Here, old man," he snapped, "you've got to get this story off your chest. I'm going to give you a shot of strychnine. You've got to go on!"

He bent over with the hypodermic, and Dixon grinned sardonically.

"Be damned to the cholera!" he muttered. "Hasn't downed me yet. Graydon, you've got to get back to the old ship. I don't want those devils to get the plans at any price. To hell with their dirty money. I'm not going out with the guilt of a traitor on my soul."

"They'd never let me over the gangway," Stanley Graydon protested.

"Send for Don Rafael!"

From his closed teeth a groan escaped, but he had regained the mastery of himself when Don Rafael tiptoed into the room. Dixon's eyes were dull, but the old authority of the quarter-deck was in his faint voice.

"My anchor chain is running out, Graydon. You, Don Rafael, swear me to the truth by the most sacred oath you know. Graydon, take down every word. I'll sign it if it takes my last breath of strength."

With uplifted hand, Don Rafael gave the oath. In Dixon's dim eyes there still flickered the iron will of the man who had always gone crooked. Slowly, with infinite effort, came the confession:

"I, James Harkness Dixon, commander, United States navy, being in full possession of my faculties, do hereby solemnly swear that Stanley Graydon, captain, United States marine corps, is guiltless of cheating at cards on the U. S. S. *Franklin*, on the night of Friday, January 3rd."

His emotionless voice trailed away. Only the racing of Stanley Graydon's pen across the paper broke the acute silence of the room.

"I, James Harkness Dixon, did falsely and maliciously," the weak voice persisted, "bring that charge to cover my own guilt. I do further swear that I brought this accusation to throw suspicion later on Captain Graydon for reasons that he has sworn not to reveal."

He turned his head with an effort. There was a trace of the old peremptoriness in his whispered order:

"Now, Graydon, as soon as Don Rafael has witnessed it, I want to talk to you alone."

THE old don left them, and Dixon began. He was speaking quickly, as though the wings of death were beating over him.

"I marked the cards. Planted duplicate deck in your room. Dealt you that ace-high full off the bottom. If the sale of those plans ever got out, you'd have been the culprit. My assistant. Combination to the safe."

Stanley Graydon leaned forward. The knuckles of his hands showed white under their tan. Full comprehension of it all was in his steady eyes.

"Same crowd at bottom—Ramona Bay. Knew you and Don Rafael were right. You're too fine a lad to sacrifice." He tried to raise himself on one elbow, but Stanley Graydon caught him tenderly. "Steady, old man, steady!" he said softly. "They had you in a devilish fix. I understand. Steady!"

There was a world of gratitude in Dixon's staring eyes. A faint smile played over the pain-worn face.

"You've got to make knots to get back. Graydon. Get that copy. Destroy it."

"I'll tear it to bits within a few hours, Dixon. Sent a radio to the admiral through the legation. Signed your name," he hastened to reassure him.

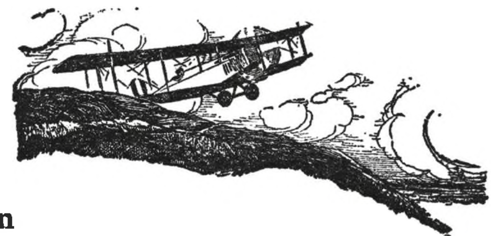
Approval, sheer and complete, shone through the dulled eyes of the dying man.

"Good lad!" he whispered. His hand sought Stanley Graydon's.

He fell into a heavy stupor. At his side Stanley Graydon waited. The weak fingers relaxed. The sun was low over Ramona Bay. The thunder of guns came into the still room.

Stanley Graydon stepped lightly to the open windows. There, in the sunlit distance, the gray ships of the squadron were at anchor. The note of a bugle came faintly on the wind. He stepped back to the bed. If only Dixon could have lived long enough to grasp the significance of the flagship's measured salute! Dixon's eyes were fixed in the glaze of death. His tortured soul had found its anchorage.

To "Lucky" Lindbergh



By Ruth C. Anderson

HAIL to the blood of the vikings bold,
Wild blood of a frigid zone!
Hail to the race of dauntless men
Who fear not the bleak unknown!

Hail, Lucky Leif! whom the sagas praise;
Here's a son you may proudly claim;
Who has winged his way through the pathless sky
As you sailed the uncharted main.

Hail, lucky lad! whom some called "Fool;"
Rejoice in that name and be glad!
'Twas ever the custom of men of this world
To first call their heroes mad.

Hail to the mothers of vikings bold,
Whose eyes shine with unshed tears;
Who watchfully wait, while they hope and pray;
Who scorn to succumb to their fears!

Hail to Thee, God of this earth below
And King of the heavens above!
Who watches o'er heroes, or fools, if you will,
With an unfailing mercy and love.

The Esculapian Creed

By Robert J. Pearsall

Author of "Lonesome Stakes a Claim," "The Game Warden Intervenes," Etc.

A man who had never been any too straight, decides it is time to be decent. By brains and determination he outwits those who take strong measures to stop him.

HE was a contractor of the hard-boiled school and not averse to a fight, else David Spencer would still have been yielding a shovel; but, emerging from Woland's house, he stood for a moment with his hand on the outer knob of the door, almost doubtful of what he had done and afraid of its consequences.

It was a dark, damp, raw night, with a chill fog drifting in thick from the Pacific and dripping in heavy drops from the magnolias and pepper trees which bordered the sidewalk; but it was something more vital and disagreeable than weather conditions that made him shiver slightly, as he descended the steps and turned to the right up the street.

"Now what?" he muttered. "What the devil will he do?" Which question, if interpreted in the exact terms of his thought, would run: "What will the devil do?"

As Spencer walked on through the fog, a street light reached out a wavering, ghostly finger toward him. When he passed under the light, it revealed him clearly, a tall, lean, powerful-looking man, still young, with a craglike, stubborn jaw, a hard mouth, and, oddly, a broad, high, idealistic forehead. It was that latter feature with which he had been born; his lower features, life had molded.

Perhaps there is meaning in the fact that it was the stubborn strength expressed in his jaw and mouth that came to his rescue now. Squaring his shoulders and puckering his lips to a whistle, he called to his aid the rather mild approval of his conscience, concerning his defiance of his four former confederates whom he had left in Woland's house.

Mild, was the word. There was certainly no elation about it—no revival uplift.

Indeed, it struck him now as rather sardonically funny, the way he had re-

jected temptation, turned down a hundred thousand dollars or more in easy profit—embarrassed, tongue-tied, defensive, exactly as if he had been discovered in a criminal position, and not the others. Recalling the scene, he smiled.

THEN his smile faded, as he pictured the four others and thought of their almost immeasurable power. Huge Woland, fat as Falstaff, but hungry with insatiable ambition; handsome Hammond, the public orator, forever glossing facts with phrases; Armock, the former shovel man, basest of all, perhaps, a knave raised to king; and sanctimonious Lindsey, whose fear was always in unsuccessful struggle with his greed. Certainly there was plenty to grin at about each malformed individual; but not if taken as a group, with their collective strength and greed battening upon resurgent Bayland, or their collective strength and enmity directed against him.

And he had broken with them in a way that could not be passed over. They had planned according to their creed—which had been David's creed from his poverty-stricken boyhood till now—to take the maximum profit from the rebuilding of that section of Bayland which had just been swept by fire. To that end they had made an agreement, fixing prices of everything, to which all contractors and builders were expected to subscribe. And, of course, they found easy justification. In Hammond's sounding phrase, the gain was their due "by right of position and superior foresight."

Indeed, the deal was little different from others from which David had taken his share of profit, and he was not yet quite sure why he'd refused in this case. The fact that he'd fought three hours, with a fury that surprised himself, to save the section from burning, surely had nothing to do with it. And the extent of the fire, which had destroyed over a thousand homes, made an argument for the agreement. Swift rebuilding was required, concerted action, and harmony.

"A long, strong pull together," said Hammond impressively, as usual. "We need coöperation rather than competition, a uniform incentive, a just and sure reward. So, after careful thought, Mr. Woland and I have prepared this agreement."

It was very odd, but for the moment David seemed to himself to be two entities, one of which listened approvingly to Hammond's words, while the other flared with a quick, protesting anger. It had happened before, but this time the protesting side of him gained control.

"But that's illegal," he blurted, and immediately he was surprised at his own words, which, at that, had not gone as far as his thoughts. It was not the illegality that troubled him.

The others stared at him fixedly, as he took the paper and read it. He could feel their amazed anger growing—feel the tension increasing. When he had finished reading, he figured a little on a piece of paper. All the while he felt guilty, as though of betrayal, and yet something drove him on.

"A million dollars!" he said slowly, without looking up. "Yes, just about a million dollars."

"What d'ye mean, Spencer?" rumbled Woland warningly.

"There'll be that much unjustified profit to split," explained David tonelessly. "This agreement will add about a million to the normal cost of rebuilding. I know we've done something like it before, but—— No; I can't sign it."

"Why the hell can't you?" rasped Armock.

"I—I'm damned if I know."

But a moment later, as he pushed the paper, which the others had already signed, over to the middle of the table, around which they were all gathered, he found himself trying to explain the action—to explain it to himself as well as to the others. But his first words seemed merely childish, even to himself.

"My father was a doctor in that neighborhood," he said. "And his father before him. And so, you see——"

Armock laughed coarsely. Woland's frown grew blacker. Hammond and Lindsey looked delicately annoyed at this crude introduction of personal details. But once the words were out, David knew that they hit close to the actual truth.

"My father died there," he went on slowly and at first almost apologetically. "He died from overwork in a typhoid epidemic. I was only seven then. My mother and I were left in poverty. That's why I couldn't go on, follow in his footsteps, and be a doctor, too. There'd been three generations of us doctors. I had to go to work, and I've made good, but I've always been sorry, some way, that I've missed the other thing. It's in my blood; but that don't matter. This is what matters." Now he spoke with sudden heat. "My father gave his life for that neighborhood, when it was hit with typhoid. Now it's been hit by fire, and I—— Well, you see what I mean."

"But it's for the general welfare," began Hammond.

"Oh, cut that," said Woland heavily.

THEN he turned to David Spencer. His manner was polite, his voice even and authoritative.

"Your feelings do you credit, I'm sure; but, of course, they can't be permitted to interfere in this instance. After you've signed this agreement, you may get out of the building business, and that's my advice to you, if you can't work along with us. But for reasons that will be clear to you, you must sign this paper."

"But I'm not signing." David tried to match Woland's calm.

Woland leaned forward, with a creaking of chair and table, and for a moment stared at David, with gimlet eyes. None of the others spoke. David held his breath, almost in fear, for which he unjustly despised himself. There was something terrible about Woland when opposed. He was a modern buccaneer, as remorseless, as unscrupulous, and as jealous of his power as any of his ancient prototypes of the black flag. And he was probably more able than any of them. By a combination of strength that crushed down opposition within the ranks of his trade, and cunning that befooled or controlled forces outside of it, he had made himself the undisputed master of the building guild in Bayland, and of its many ramifications. For complete control, he needed the coöperation of the other four who were with him to-night—the "Big Five," they in that room were called—but, even with them, he dominated. He had to; it was his nature.

So David expected an explosion, and he had the more right to uneasiness when it did not come. Sometimes Woland acted violently, sometimes by stealth; and it was in the latter case that he was most dangerous. For a long minute he studied David with a mixture of cold rage and colder appraisal, then he relaxed.

"You're mistaken. You'll sign," he said, almost carelessly.

"I won't," muttered David, and if his voice was not too certain, his jaw and eyes spoke decision.

"You will. Meanwhile, good night!"

And Woland came to his feet and, with a dangerous smile, bowed David to the door.

Woland had come to a decision while studying him—had formed a plan to beat David into submission. What could it be? Financially David was secure; he might be injured, but he could not be ruined; and he was a man without family, whose personal life contained nothing upon which an enemy might lay hold to injure him. Furthermore, though lacking Woland's gross power, David had a will of his own which Woland must recognize, knowing that neither torture nor the threat of death would change it, once it was fixed. Yet Woland was confident. Now, proceeding up the street, David racked his brains for an answer to the riddle of Woland's plans, and failed to find it; but he swore the more firmly that Woland would also fail. Nothing would induce him to sign that agreement.

If he did not, power of a sort lay in his own hands, wherein lay the reason for Woland's insistence. To-morrow night the agreement would go before the assembled Builders' Council for the approval and signatures of the small fry, which would ordinarily be a matter of routine. But if the small fry knew that the big ones had split, if David took a stand against the steal, others would probably revolt, and the fine unanimity would be shattered; especially, as the agreement was so arranged that the big ones profited a lot, and the smaller fry

a little. But if David signed, his locks were shorn by the same act; he could not protest.

ALSO, there were the newspapers to be considered and, too, the courts Though, without documentary proof, not much could be done, against a combination which controlled banks, material dealers, organized labor, and, in a lesser degree, the world of politics and publicity. If David had that paper in his hands, that damning, illegal agreement—— But that was not to be thought of. Woland and the others would guard it with their lives.

However, though Woland could not know it, David was not really dangerous; he was not even potentially a mischief maker, in his present state of mind. In refusing to share in the steal, he had gone his present limit in revolt. Indeed, in another hour, he might be accusing himself of foolishness in doing that. It was his own past code and practice against which he had rebelled, and he had no other code handy. It was a rough, tough, devil-take-the-weakling world in which he had battled for the last twenty-odd years, and its mental habits were strong.

"Dashed if I know," he was thinking; "it's Woland's way that gets things done. I'm through with it and him; but if not that, what then? Life's foggy, like this night. But I'll not sign."

David was now climbing Pinnacle Hill, within six blocks of his home. Here the street wound through the bottom of a narrow canyon, very black and lonely. Oddly, for he was by no means timid, David found himself shrinking a little. It had been Woland's suggestion that he walk that night instead of using his car, in order to avoid calling attention to the meeting. Now David rather wished he had not complied.

But when David came to Summit Point, he loitered a little and looked down to the right. Below lay the burned sections, invisible now, of course. But his memory pictured it; by daylight it was like a scorched cemetery, with chimneys upstanding for tombstones. David stood thinking what an ugly and merciless thing fire is, without knowing that at that moment something equally merciless was coming around the bend of the road upon him.

He heard, without perceiving, the soft whir of the motor, such a well-accustomed sound; but when the brakes creaked sharply, he turned with a swift premonition of danger and a thought of the brutal auto-bandit gang, then loose upon Bayland.

The car slid to a stop, a little beyond David; but, as it passed him, two men had leaped from the running board upon him. David knew what was coming and met, rather than waited for, the attack; he struck out at the foremost man with all his strength. The blow smacked home on the fellow's cheek and did no more than stagger him, and the other ruffian had slipped past David's guard and was swinging in an unobstructed blow from David's left side. Metaled knuckles contacted with the side of his head, and David was sent reeling dizzily to the left.

"Help!" he shouted. "Help!" A third party had now leaped from the stationary car and was upon him from the right.

"You fool! Take that!" hissed the newcomer venomously.

Crash! David was out for an instant, but came to in a moment, only to find himself lying on the ground, with two men going through his pockets, and the third standing over him with something that looked like a sandbag in his hands.

"You cheap skate!" one of the searchers snarled. "You'd better have more than that."

"Left his money at home, the dirty piker!"

"I think he's seen us, too. Would know us. We were all too slow."

"Give him the works, then, damn him!"

More blows. Insensate, vicious rage. It was the terrible practice of the auto-bandit gang to make those who failed to reward them in valuables pay in pain. But this seemed more like murder. Oddly, however, even while he tried to save himself, tried vainly to cry out again, David seemed to notice a queer, theatric quality in the men's threats, as though their rage was half make-believe.

But there was no make-believe about

their blows. David curled his arms across his face, but they were dragged away again. These men were fiends! Then came a terrific shock and the mercy of unconsciousness.

SLOWLY, hours later, David struggled back from nothingness. Urgently, desperately—as he remembered afterward—goaded by a word, a terrible word, the sheer horror of which had penetrated through the mantle of oblivion that had enveloped him. And that terrible word, now that he was conscious, he could not instantly recall.

He was lying on a bed. His head was aching furiously; it seemed all one pain, which was particularly severe around his eyes. Everything was velvet darkness. Something was over his eyes; he could not open them. He lay quiet for a minute, recalling slowly what had happened. The quarrel with Woland and the others, the walk homeward, the attack, the—the word he had heard!

"Blinded!" some one had said. "Blinded!"

And in a sudden rush of horror, David shouted out the word to the silent room.

"'Blinded! Blinded?'"

There was some one there, a hand on the coverlet. A little, fear-filled pause. Fear seemed in the atmosphere of the room. Was it altogether David's fear?

"Am I?" David cried.

Came a woman's reply hesitantly:

"Not necessarily."

"Where am I?" David asked weakly.

"In Doctor Durbrow's house. Here's the doctor now. He's awake, doctor."

"All right, nurse."

And footsteps, muffled in deep carpet, approached the bed.

The nurse moved away, and a certain perfume, of which David had become vaguely conscious, grew fainter with her departure. Partly as a relief from its torment of fear, David's mind seized upon the incongruity of that. Queer, he thought. Nurses don't use perfume, do they? But he felt the doctor bending over his bed.

"Ah! You're coming around. Good!"

"Yes. How did I get here, doctor?"

"Why, you see, you were knocked out almost in front of my house—No. 1561 Scenic Way, this is. I'd just come home and was putting my car in the garage, when I heard the fracas. But the fellows got away. I was too late to do anything but carry you in and notify the police."

ODD! The doctor's voice had the same theatric quality he had noted in the bandits, as of a speech prepared beforehand. And his sonorous tones reminded David of Hammond, that master of impressive, insincere speech. Dislike stirred in David, but he put the feeling aside. He certainly should be grateful to the doctor.

David told him so. Then, trying to speak evenly: "I was just asking the nurse about my eyes."

"Oh, yes, your eyes." The doctor hesitated. "By the way, there was nothing left in your pockets—nothing to identify you."

"I'm David Spencer."

"Oh, the builder!"

"Yes. I live only a few blocks away. I was walking home from—— But what about my eyes?"

"Well, Mr. Spencer," replied the doctor slowly, "I think it's possible you've no cause to worry. But the fact is, the men beat you up, you know, especially around the eyes. Maybe they wanted to prevent you from ever identifying them by sight. And it may be that they've succeeded."

"Oh!" said David faintly.

"But I hope not. After a few days of complete bodily inactivity, with, of course, no light striking the eyes, we can tell better. But that's necessary, at least."

"Oh!" David said again.

That was all he dared say; for a moment he was not sure of his self-control. After a time he found himself suggesting quite calmly:

"I suppose it would be best to move me to a hospital. I'm a bachelor, you know. I'd be better off in a hospital than at home."

"Oh, no!" The doctor's reply was very quick and positive. "You shouldn't be moved at all. *Any* activity is dangerous."

"But I don't want to bother you."

"No bother at all, I assure you. Plenty of room in this house. No one's here but myself and a housekeeper, with Nurse Minturn to take care of you."

"Mighty kind of you, doctor. There's some things about my business need doing. I suppose I can have some one in from the office."

"Oh, yes," agreed the doctor. "You can sign things, and so on. But the quieter you are, the better."

David asked the time; it was a little after nine in the morning. And a little later Doctor Durbrow departed, saying he had some calls to make and promising to telephone for Sanderson, David's most trusted clerk.

Blindness! David was glad when the doctor was gone; it had been hard for him to hold his voice to a level tone. But now, alone with the hideous fear, he found it harder still to bear. Darkness! Darkness forever! David moved restlessly, and the nurse rustled over to the bedside, and with her floated the perfume.

Queer, David thought again. It was a relief to David to consider that matter of the perfume and the rustling dress. And for more relief, he turned his thoughts to the problem that had been troubling him when those devils had leaped upon him and beaten him down. What had Woland intended to do? Why was Woland so sure that David would be forced to yield and sign the illegal agreement? How insignificant was anything Woland could do compared to this! How very insignificant——

David caught his breath. A shiver ran over him. What if——

Was Woland capable of this? A foolish question. Woland was capable of anything, if it served him.

The men might have been hidden in Woland's house, ready to follow and deal with any one who threatened trouble. Woland might have feared trouble with David, for he was very shrewd. Only, why merely blind David? Why not a more effectual blow, completely silencing him?

True, he was knocked out for the time and prevented from speaking at the meeting to-night. But, by Heaven, he would talk enough later, if it proved that Woland was behind this. He would see that Woland got barred sunlight, and everybody connected with the affair. And then he was brought to pause by the knowledge that Woland would know he would do that. And Woland played safe; he never attacked a man without knowing just how he would disarm him. All the same, there were oddities about this affair, things not quite natural, about the doctor, the nurse, even the men who had beaten him up. Were they all playing parts?

But here came Sanderson from the office—good, incorruptible old Sanderson, who had been with David from the day he took his first contract.

Scrawling his signature on a batch of papers, with Sanderson guiding his pen, David was grateful that Sanderson was so thoroughly to be trusted. For David had to trust him now. Ah! A weird thought came to David. He started and splattered ink on the paper.

But Sanderson was speaking.

"That Middleton purchase voucher is missing. It must've got mislaid somewhere. I discovered it was gone, just as I was starting. I'll find it and send it over later. It should go out to-day."

So! The Middleton purchase voucher! Missing, was it? Another accident—maybe! And it would be sent over later, naturally. "Lord! I have it," thrilled David. "The whole scheme."

"Sanderson," whispered David, "we're still alone? Nurse gone?"

"Yes."

"Listen! Put down your head and listen."

Presently Sanderson left. A little later he came back and left something with David, which the latter concealed beneath his bed cover.

YOU'RE feeling better?" asked Doctor Durbrow, coming in later in the afternoon.

"Very well, indeed," replied David. "Specially my eyes. They feel almost well again."

"Good! Very good, Mr. Spencer." Again he rubbed his hands softly—stealthily, it now seemed to David. "On

the other hand, that's a dangerous feeling. If you were to trust it and lift that bandage for a moment, you'd never see again."

David shuddered unaffectedly. He wondered—what if the doctor spoke the truth! *He would never see again!*

"I suppose I'd realize that better if I'd been conscious when my eyes were hurt," David replied. "I'll be mighty glad to make sure. How long before you can give them another look?"

" 'Fraid you'll have to wait about another ten days. Then we'll look at them in partial darkness. We may find them entirely healed. On the other hand——"

"I may be blind," completed David.

"Yes," said the doctor gravely. "But I rather think the chances are——" A tap at the door interrupted him. "Miss Minturn, will you see what's wanted."

"A messenger from Mr. Spencer's office," Miss Minturn announced.

Just so, David thought, trembling a little; but on no business connected with that office, if he were not greatly mistaken.

He heard the footsteps of the messenger coming across the floor. Yes, he could even recognize them. A dissipated youth, but David had not thought him a crook.

"That you, Tom Dunphy?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Spencer," said the messenger nervously. "I'm sorry you're hurt, sir. Mr. Sanderson found the Middleton voucher and sent it over to be signed."

Quite right! Quite natural indeed! The thing Mr. Sanderson would certainly have done had he found the voucher. That is, if David had not expressly forbidden him to do any such thing, or to send any other paper over for signature.

Doctor, nurse, and messenger stood together at the side of the bed. David extended his hand for the paper. It was the same shape, size and weight as the Middleton purchase voucher, which was undoubtedly the reason that the purchase voucher was missing. For David thought he knew what this paper was. He shifted it to his left hand.

Some one suggestively touched David's right hand with the handle of a pen, but he made no move to take it. Instead, he carelessly slid his right hand under the coverlet.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Sanderson did say something about losing this. In a minute——"

HE hunched back on his pillows, so his head tilted backward rather unnaturally, chin higher than forehead. As though absent-mindedly, he folded the paper along its creases and gripped it tightly in his hand.

"We were talking about my eyes," he said. "Just now, they're the interesting thing. Where were we? Oh, yes, you were saying, doctor, that light striking on them just now would put them out forever."

"Yes; or, rather, it's medical science that says so, not I." A slight nervous testiness had come into the doctor's voice.

"The same thing, of course," said David. "You are a follower of the Esculapian creed, doctor?"

"Of course," said the doctor somewhat uncertainly. "But——"

"Then you couldn't voice anything but medical science, unless for the patient's good. You couldn't take advantage of a patient's helplessness—oh, no! That's why what you say sounds so strange, considering——"

Slowly, as he spoke, he gripped his right hand around a bulgy something under the coverlet.

"——considering," he went on evenly, "that I tried the experiment about an hour ago, *and still see.*"

It was a lie, he had not dare try it. It was a lie with which he sought to plumb truth. Abruptly he stopped speaking, held his breath, and listened. And he got the truth. From nurse and doctor came sharp exclamations of astonishment and anger and fear, but not, thank Heaven, of unbelief. A great relief welled within David. He lifted the revolver, so they could see it outlined under the coverlet.

"And I'm watching you now, and have you all covered, with this revolver that Sanderson brought me. I can see you from under this bandage. You see how I've shifted it, so when I bend my head back, I can look out under the edge.

That was a bluff. He could not see them. But he would.

Suddenly he jerked his gun out from under the coverlet and flourished it toward the trio. He heard them start back and cry out in alarm. At the same instant, David thrust the bandage upward with his left hand, while pain shot through his eyes and ringed his head. For a moment he thought he had reasoned wrong, and was blinded, for there was nothing before his eyes but darkness, ribbed with reddish streaks. Then slowly, out of the bloody dark, drew three human figures, and a gigantic-looking revolver swaying in David's hand, describing a circle which fortunately included all three.

"Mr. Spencer! I warn you——" faltered the doctor.

"Not blind yet, Doctor Durbrow—not blind yet. Just getting to see—light!

Swiftly David threw his legs sidewise and sat up on the edge of the bed.

"I'll swear to you, Mr. Spencer——"

David had stolen a glance at the paper. He laughed in triumph. It was the illegal agreement.

"How much was Woland paying you to help trick me into signing this? Whatever it was, he'd double the amount to have this back again. Don't you wish you might get it?"

"I swear I don't know——"

"Oh, the devil, doctor, don't bother about perjury. It was a clever enough dodge. I bet you never thought of it. If you were smart enough for that, you'd be smart enough to choose a regular nurse for your assistant. Or, anyway, you'd see that she sudbued her taste for rustling skirts and cheap perfumes, for the time, at least."

The doctor took his frightened eyes from David long enough to glance angrily at the woman. David laughed softly.

"Don't blame her, or yourself either, for those little slip-ups. I suppose nurses that would help in such a scheme are pretty hard to find. And doctors, too. They'd have to be scrubs, wouldn't they? By the way, *are* you a regular doctor, or aren't you?"

"I am," with a sudden flash of defiance. "And you can't prove——"

"A doctor, mender of bodies," interrupted David, with mingled contempt for the specimen before him and reverence for the profession of his ancestors—"as a preacher is a mender of souls, and a builder a mender of cities."

The doctor tried to laugh. "In Bayland, for example!"

David flushed, but lifted his head, with a high smile on his pain-racked face.

"The Esculapian creed—yes, by Heaven! Service first, profit second, and rascality nowhere—that's the ticket. I'm thankful to you and Woland. I needed just this little experience to make a builder's creed. Get your friend Woland to pass you into the Builders' Council tonight, and you'll hear the beginning of it."

The doctor sneered. "You'll make that go down with Woland, of course."

"With this illegal agreement in my hands, I guess he'll be good. And Hammond and Armock and Lindsey, too. And most of the others are square shooters. Glory be, there'll be a surprise party. As for you, doctor, we'll see what we'll see. It's likely you're through with medicine. And now, if you'll kindly dismiss the young lady and get me my clothes, please——"

THE LAST WORD

MOLLIE had just acquired a new dictionary and, with the important air of a young miss of twelve, she went to her father and demanded:

"Shall I find every word in the dictionary, father?"

"Oh, no, dear. New words are coined every day, and sometimes they don't get into the dictionary for years."

"Well, then, where shall I find the very last ones?"

Her father frowned for a moment, looked across the room at his wife, and said: "Ask your mother. She has them every time."

The Timber Butchers

By Aimée D. Linton

A young Frenchman and an old Indian, both victims of injustice, strike up a friendship while returning, over frozen wastes, to the scene of happier days. And it proves a real friendship!

THE young Frenchman summoned the last reserve of his strength and pressed doggedly forward. Ahead of him, some two hundred yards, a thin thread of pale-blue smoke mounted into the steel-blue sky. Where there was smoke there was a fire; fire meant human beings. Hope, the mother of energy, revived within him.

For two days Leon Racine had eaten no food. He was nearing the point where men see wraiths in dead trees and hear voices from the skies. He had no gun, no weapon of any sort. He had traveled through a dead, white world, with never a human dwelling or a splash of forest to relieve the dead level of its white. Before gray night had floated down upon the snowy wastes, he had seen in the far distance what looked like a small forest. To get to that forest, into its shelter and lie down! He had two matches; perhaps he could build a fire. For two whole days he had had no rest—not even for his eyes. Nothing in all that wilderness but stumps of butchered trees, charred forests, the very nadir of desolation.

As he neared the small forest, the fire grew brighter. He caught the savory odor of cooking meat. He covered the intervening distance with strength borrowed from that odor.

The figure at the fire looked up, as the Frenchman staggered in. Leon saw that it was an Indian. By the hollow sockets of his eyes and his lean, high cheek bones, an old Indian.

The old Indian regarded his visitor gravely for a few seconds.

"You done out?" he asked, as the young Frenchman sagged down beside the fire.

The Frenchman nodded. "An' ver' hongry!" he added huskily.

The old Indian grunted understandingly. He turned over the rabbit which he held on a green stick over the fire and stirred up the bed of coals.

"You come long ways?" he asked the Frenchman presently.

The Frenchman nodded affirmatively.

"When you eat las' time?" the Indian asked after another silence.

"Two days 'go."

The Indian raised his sunken eyes to look at the Frenchman, grunted again, and shook his head.

Ten more minutes passed, an eternity of longing for the Frenchman. He tried to keep his eyes off the cooking rabbit and studied the large pile of dry wood which faced the opening of a small, green-spruce shelter. Before cooking his supper, the old Indian had made everything ready for the night.

AT last the Indian removed the rabbit from the coals, drew a large knife, and cut it into two parts. He passed the larger portion on the point of his knife to the Frenchman.

"Eat ver' slow," he admonished; "she not cook too good."

At first the Frenchman was too exhausted not to heed the warning. But as he ate, he felt new life returning, and he wolfed the greater part of it. Half a small can full of tea finished the meal. Leon drew his ragged coat sleeve across his mouth and exhaled a deep breath of satisfaction.

"You save my life!" he murmured.

There was the faintest smile on the withered, masklike face of the old Indian. He finished the tea the Frenchman had left, then carried on a green chip some coals over to the pile of dry wood in front of the spruce shelter. With some dry bits of bark he coaxed the wood into a blaze. Then he unrolled a pair of old blankets and spread them over the green boughs inside the shelter.

The Indian turned and looked at the Frenchman. Leon crawled into the shelter without words. The Indian followed him.

From his pockets the old Algonquin drew out an ancient, hard-caked pipe and a small bit of black tobacco. He cut a fill for the pipe which left just one more pipe full. With a bit of burning twig he lighted the pipe and handed it without a word to the young Frenchman.

The eyes of the young Frenchman shone. For over two years he hadn't had a smoke. Under its lethal effects he felt the disagreeable past fade into the mellow glow of retrospect.

When he had smoked it to the last shred of tobacco, Leon handed the pipe to the Indian with a dreamy, happy smile. Then the Indian smoked slowly, in dreamful relaxation.

Neither spoke, as if they feared to break in on anything so tremendous. The white smoke floated out before the dark faces of the two, making a screen between their past and present, the disagreeable in their thoughts drifting out on its incense.

At last the old Indian asked casually: "Where you come from?"

Leon Racine felt no desire to evade the question.

"Stony Mountain Pentensharee," he answered without hesitation. An Indian, he knew, never betrays a confidence.

"W'ere you come from?" the Frenchman asked in turn. In the North such questions are equivalent to the "How do you do?" of the South.

"Kingston Penitentiary." The Indian's voice was toneless and flat.

"You serve your time?" Leon asked.

Without looking up, the old Indian answered after a short pause:

"I serve twent'-five year!" His head sank on his chest, and his weary old eyes closed in their sunken sockets.

The young Frenchman looked at the old Indian pityingly.

"W'at for dey geev you twenty-five year in de pen? Dat long tam!"

For long minutes the old Algonquin silently regarded the crackling spruce fire, seeing in its blaze, perhaps, the consuming of his life's hopes and dreams.

"Dey think I kill a white man," the Indian began, monotonously at first. "White men cut timber south of where my tribe it winter. But no cut timber 'way up on de Missinaibi, where de trees dey reach de sky! Dat where I go now —where is my tribe an' my tall trees. Me Chief Kitchee Shin-Guok—Chief Big Pine!"

He threw back his lean, stooped shoulders proudly.

"But you not keel de w'ite man?" Leon interrupted.

THE old Algonquin looked at his questioner absently, as if his mind were unwillingly snatched from pleasant reveries. He shook his head.

"No; me not kill de man." The tired old eyes flashed in a second's resentment. "One chopper at de shanty what wanted de cook's woman, he do it. De woman she die little while time 'go, an' she say to de miss'nary dat de chopper he do it, but dey both say I do it. I go to de shanty for to sell fish, little while time 'fore her man he has his head split open with an ax. She say dat I want her for my woman. So white man send me to de penitentiary."

The old chief's head fell forward on his chest; his eyes deadened.

"Le diable!" Leon swore softly. There was a long minute's silence.

"Eef dey see you keel de cook, dey sen' you to de rope, *hein?* But dey don' see you keel de cook an' dey geev you life! *Oui!* Injun no chance! But Injun no good!" the Frenchman's lips curling cynically. Then, after another pause, "Maybeso, you t'ink dey hang de chopper w'at keel de cook, *hein?"* There was a world of irony in the voice of the young Frenchman.

"Yes; dey hang Gribble now—or put him in de pen," the Indian agreed dully.

Leon laughed derisively.

"Mais, non! W'at de use bodderin' 'bout w'at 'appen long tam 'go!" Leon threw out his hands with French expressiveness. "Injun he pay de pen'lty. Gret peety, course!" His tones were biting.

"Course dey geev you lota monney t' mak' up for de pen, *hein?"* Leon quizzed.

"Dey buy me my fare on de train till I leave him an' dey give me twent'-five dollar for buy some food for journey. So me buy gun where me leave de rails. Yes; dey give me lota money," he repeated with satisfaction.

"Dat a lota monney for sure!" Leon's lips curled. "Twenty-five dollar for twenty-five year workin' for de gover'men'!" But the young Frenchman's irony went over the head of the old Indian.

"Yes; an' dey say me own a lota land where is my fam'ly an' my tall trees. Say I worth a lot now," the chief repeated recitatively.

The Frenchman shot the Indian an acid look. But the old Indian was gazing dreamily into the fire.

"Oui; lomber it wort' a lota monney now!" Leon said significantly.

The chief looked up with quick apprehension.

"You think I sell my big, tall trees for lumber?" There was infinite scorn in the husky old voice.

The Frenchman shrugged. No use in warning the old chief of what he feared the timber butchers had done to the old convict's trees.

The Indian arose and replenished the fire, and when he sat down again he asked:

"What for dey sen' you to de pen, huh?"

The black eyes of the young Frenchman snapped resentfully.

"Me? Oh, *mon Dieu!* I stole monney!" There was no mirth in the chuckle the young Frenchman gave. "Stealin' monney gret crime w'en it stole from de wrong man! Me, I work all winter in de shanty. I save my wages for mak' leetle home for ma Bernadette w'at waits for me. I do not gamble an' drink; I love more ma leetle girl. I put down in leetle book de days I work, an' I know de monney w'at's comin' to me w'en de drive she comes.

"But de tam keeper he say I not earn so mooch; he mak' it fift' dollar less dan I mak' it. He show me de tam sheet, say I don' know how to figger. I say he one dam' liar for sure! He say he fire me. But he don' fire me; good lomberjacks not so easy fired!

"Dat is in Feb'rar'. I got on workin'. I t'ink maybeso it come out right 'fore de drive she come on. W'en I see de drive she be on soon, I go to de boss an' I show heem ma leetle book. He say to me, 'You t'ink any dam' pea soup know so mooch as a man w'at keeps books? Get to 'ell outa here!' Den I know dat hees tam keeper mak' heem hees wages outa cheatin' de men.

"I watch my chance, an' jus' 'fore de

drive she start, I tak' from dat dam' t'ief one honner dollar—w'at I know he tak' from me."

Leon Racine grinned reminiscently. The Indian waited for him to finish.

"But dey get me 'fore I go one honner mile. De lomber bosses dey say dey gotta mak' zample of dose dam' t'ievin' pea soups, an' dey geev me t'ree year in de pentensharee—t'ree year for one honner dollar!" He ended hotly, with a withering French curse.

The old chief grunted. A long silence ensued.

"You serve your time?" the Indian broke the silence with.

Leon Racine chuckled. *"Parbleu, non!* W'at for I do dat w'en I see a good chance for to run? I got de chance; I run! Been runnin' for t'ree weeks now. Eef dey get me, it mean t'ree more year, maybeso."

Leon shrugged his shoulders half indifferently, half defiantly.

"But dey not get me, *par le Dieu!"* he blazed. "I keel de man w'at tries!" In the glow of the camp fire his eyes gleamed dangerously.

"Ugh!" the Indian grunted inexpressively. He motioned then to the Frenchman to take one of the blankets; he rolled himself up in the other. Both convicts were soon fast asleep.

IN the early morning the two were on their way again, headed north. They ate their breakfast as they went—a piece of dry bread each.

There was a good crust on the snow, so they made good time.

"Me not know what de matter with dis country!" the old chief complained after a silence which had lasted some hours. "No game, no fish, no trees! When I left it was not so."

The Frenchman smiled oddly.

"You been 'way long tam, chief," he rejoined vaguely.

The old chief looked at Leon with questioning in his tired old eyes.

"Beeg changes since you go," Leon added.

In the afternoon they shot a rabbit and one ptarmigan and that night the two fed royally.

"You go to your home?" the Indian questioned when they had eaten.

The Frenchman shrugged.

"I not have no home. Fadder, mudder bot' dead; brudders an' sisters all married. Dey not want for to see jailbird brudder!" He smiled bitterly.

"Den you come with me to my people—up on de Missinaibi," the old chief invited.

But Leon shook his head. "I go now for to find ma leetle Bernadette. She leev wit' her fadder over dere"—he pointed to the northwest—"but maybeso she ees married," he added moodily. "I go wit'out sayin' not'ing to her."

The two relapsed into a long silence, like all wilderness men, parsimonious of speech. Above them a myriad white eyes looked down on the two human specks, the only life, seemingly, in all that frozen immensity. They gazed unwinkingly into the fire, the one seeing visions of the future, the other pictures of the past. In the young Frenchman life pulsed strong and deep; in the old prison-worn Indian, older by twenty years than he should have been, life stretched to a thin thread which might snap at any moment.

Without exchanging further words, they lay down in their blankets and soon were asleep.

At the first pale streak of dawn they were again on their way. Though to the old Indian the country was so pitifully changed, yet by his perfect sense of orientation, the inheritance of centuries of observation and almost a worship of the four cardinal points of the compass, he knew he was headed for home—home and his beloved forests.

Here and there small forests of second-growth spruce relieved the eternal whiteness and desolation. But the timber which a quarter of a century before had poured over the country, was gone. In places only the burned, gaunt trunks of a forest stood up against the wintry sky. Sometimes a charred stump showed its head above the snow, like a blackened hand from a graveyard of burned forests. Fire and ax—everywhere their slain victims made a dumb appeal to the old Indian who walked on the snow above their remains.

It bit into his very soul. But over and over he kept telling himself that when they topped the ridge overlooking the valley of the Missinaibi, he would see his beloved forests, his tribal wigwams, his squaw and papooses.

AS he journeyed beside the young Frenchman, old memories fought their way through the tight matrices of his brain and walked with old yearnings. In thought, the years slipped away from him. Surely it was but yesterday he had left his tribe, his squaw, his papooses! They would see him as he descended into the valley and would run to meet him—his squaw, Yellow Birch, laughing Little Feather, and restless Little Red Moon. He would call aloud their names in Indian when he saw them—We-nah-sik, Pung-gee Me-gun, and Mis-kose Kee-Sis. There would be such a laughing, happy reunion!

Unconsciously his bowed shoulders squared and straightened, his labor-dulled eyes glowed, as he visioned his welcome. Once again he was the strong, straight six-foot Indian chief of thirty.

Leon Racine caught the look on his companion's face, and his own features screwed into a grimace of pity.

That night they slept in a rude shack, a trail cabin, the temporary abode of some prospector. It stood in a small clump of second-growth spruce. True to one of the laws of the North, a pile of kindling lay beside the rusty little stove, and over in a corner was a large pile of cut spruce wood. It's a way they have in the North; it guards against a traveler being frozen to death before he can cut any wood.

When they had a good fire going and a pail of snow on the stove to heat for drink, they prospected the cabin for food. In a tin can on the shelf, Leon found some tea, salt, a little sugar, and a small chunk of bacon. Riches beyond the yellow dreams of avarice! Not even the tobacco they had had the first night of their meeting could approximate in importance the value of that bacon to the two convicts.

They sat beside the fire after supper in dreamy silence.

"To-morrow by sundown we reach my home," Chief Big Pine at last murmured happily.

Leon smiled abstractedly. He was weighing his chances of finding his Bernadette in the little cabin where she had lived with her father. But a pretty girl like her, in a country where women, pretty or ugly, were at a premium, would be sure to be married. Plenty of chances for her to marry well, he reflected ruefully. She didn't have to wait for a convict! And he had dropped out of her life as soundlessly as a meteor leaves the sky. The old chief, Leon felt sure, was in for a bitter disillusion regarding his "big, tall trees;" Leon wasn't going to lay himself open for any bitter disappointment, if facing possibilities would prevent it. Bernadette was married, beyond all reasonable doubt.

A light knock sounded on the cabin door. Leon rose and opened it.

A slender young Indian stood outside. *"B'jou,"* he greeted quietly and stepped inside.

The young Ojibway was an exceedingly good-looking Indian, with a very evident dilute infusion of white. His eyes were restless, and there was in his bearing little of his race's apathy. He carried a brace of ptarmigan over his shoulder.

Leon welcomed the young Ojibway's arrival. He might, perhaps, find out some things he wanted to know.

"You get plenty game here?" he opened up with.

The Ojibway smiled strainedly and shook his head.

"Very little game in this country," he answered.

"W'at wrong?" Leon asked.

The Ojibway grimaced. "Some white people tell you, maybe."

"But de w'ite man ees not many in dees contray. An' de French dey——" Leon began to object.

"I not mean the white French," the young Indian explained. "I mean city mens what thinks they great sports!" The Ojibway's lip curled. "Maybe you not been in this country in huntin' time?"

Leon waived the question. *"Oui*—I not t'ink of dat."

"Come from big cities way down"—the

Ojibway waved a slender brown hand southward—"I been guide to some of them. Great sports!" His voice had an acid edge. "Take back deer in carloads, leave lot in woods; shoot does, young fawns—anything they see move!"

The apathy on the old chief's face gave way to a look of surprise.

"Dey not got no meat 'way down dere?" he asked wonderingly.

The young Ojibway laughed the soundless Indian laugh.

"Heap plenty meat, yes. But white city men not shoot for meat—shoot for sport! Bring dogs, run deer—no want still huntin'—too lazy. Deer no get 'way from dogs. Soon no deer in this country—an' soon no Injuns neither!"

The old Indian sat up; his face became almost animated.

"My second father—grandfather—what lived on Western plains say dat what de white man do with de buffalo."

The young Indian nodded.

"White men from the city want heap plenty everything. When he fish he take the black stick; blow all the fish outa the lake, leave no fish in water. Leave little fish on the banks to die, take big fish. Wah!"

"But white men makeum laws for stop dis?" the old chief protested.

The young Ojibway looked speculatively at the old Algonquin.

"You live in this country?" he asked after a few seconds' scrutiny.

The old Indian hesitated, then nodded.

"Then you know that white men make heap plenty laws. He make so many that he break um alla time. When no more fish, no more deer, powerful white man bring fish in pails, put um in rivers an' lakes. Most of um die; bring more. Take deer what is left, put um in park; say to white papooses, 'This is a deer; useto be like the blades of grass in this park. Wah!" The young Indian curled his lips in sour derision.

"White man so clever, Injun so stupid—not understand. Injun not use all the fish and deer; white men take um. White man owns the country. Wah!"

It was a long speech for an Indian. When he had finished he clasped his brown fingers around one knee and relapsed into silence, gazing moodily at the fire in the little stove.

Then Leon asked the question which had been burning to be asked.

"You see one leetle French girl up there?" He pointed to the northwest.

The young Ojibway thought a minute. "One little French girl I see—yes; three moons ago; live one sun from here."

Leon's eyes glowed. "Black eyes, cheeks lak de wil' rose, lips lak de scarlet berry——"

"Live where the river she forks," the Ojibway continued. "Knit socks for the shanty men; father work in the woods."

Leon was too happy to ask more. Surely it was his little Bernadette! And surely she was not married! With the other two he gazed into the fire, seeing in it pictures of a life to be lived.

The eyes of the old chief, too, were almost warm. He, too, was dreaming his dreams. Long after the two young men had dropped off to sleep, the old chief lay in his bunk, looking toward the northwest—and home. Through the cabin's one little window, which faced the north, he could see the flaming aurora sending its shafts to the zenith, glowing, fading, advancing, retreating. He passed into sleep under the happy illusion that they were the lights of his tribe's wigwams.

IN the early morning, after they had replaced the fuel they had burned, Leon and the old chief parted company with the young Ojibway.

For both the old chief and the young Frenchman this was to be the day of all days. The two walked with nervous haste, the homing urge prodding them forward at almost a run.

The country was still a desolation, but here and there smoke rose from the shack of some lone prospector. But only by its rivers and lakes did the old Indian recognize the country at all. There were no forest landmarks. Ahead of them, at long intervals, a solitary pine stood up from the white wastes, lofty, charred, like a totem above dead memories.

The old chief shuddered when he looked at them. They carried a dread significance. But then, when they topped the divide——

The truth was boring dully into his tired old brain; his eyes grew dark with foreboding.

By three o'clock the sun was veiled in a mournful haze. The storm which had been threatening for two days was not far away.

"Storm comin'," the old Indian announced; "we mus' hurry." An eager light was in his old eyes. "My tribe it not far away now."

Leon nodded absently. His feet were bounding lightly forward, keeping time to the rhythm of his thoughts. *"Ma petite fille! Ma jolie Bernadette!"* It helped him to walk more quickly.

In the leaden gray of the late afternoon they stood on the ridge which overlooked the Missinaibi.

For one long minute the old Indian spoke no word. Leon slanted an eye at him. The Indian's head was thrust forward, his chin upraised, like a dog's when he scents home. Then the grim mask of his face lifted. He pointed a trembling hand over the bare, treeless valley.

"My trees! Dey not dere!" His voice rose in a quavering crescendo.

Leon could say nothing. He had known pretty well how it would be, but he had hoped that the old Indian was a little prepared. Surely the desolation as they came along——

"Where um gone?" The trembling old voice rose like a dirge. Where de wigwams of my tribe?"

"P'raps dey move nort' w'en de trees dey go," Leon suggested desperately.

The brown, wrinkled face lighted up a trifle. A hope nursed for a quarter of a century isn't easily strangled.

"Yes; p'raps dey move on." The old chief's voice was weary, sad, monotonous as the desolate wastes around them, as parched as his waste emotions.

The old Algonquin seemed rooted to the spot. Leon waited.

"But my father, an' my second father. an' my third father"—he broke out again, his voice a thin wail—"dey live here; dey die here. Dose trees——"

That was it! Those trees held the entombed spirits of his ancestors. The sporadic teachings of prison chaplains served but to root the more deeply that Indian belief. There was a life beyond this one. Very well. The spirits of his ancestors were in those trees. The trees had been destroyed—cut up; burned, perhaps. What had become of the spirits in them? What had happened? His theology went no farther. Everything swept into the desolation of dear, immemorable things! The mind of the old Indian jangled discordantly.

"I go now for to find ma leetle Bernadette," Leon at last broke in. "You come wit' me. Maybeso we can fin' out 'bout your people."

Without a word the old Indian turned and followed the young Frenchman.

The roof of the sky crept down ever closer. A few flakes of snow began to flutter earthward. They came thicker. A wind from the southeast began to rise. But it was on their backs. Leon quickened his walk.

Half an hour later a light from a cabin ahead of them shone blurringly through the thickening snow. Leon broke into a run. In his eagerness he forgot the Indian who dragged leaden feet after him.

Leon Racine, the escaped convict, looked pretty much like a scarecrow that has been exposed to the elements for some time. He had replaced his convict's garb with gleanings from dump heaps on the outskirts of the towns through which he passed. His face which was covered with a three-week growth of beard, resembled more a heap of burned straw than human features. But his snapping, black eyes, his black, curly hair, now grown to normal length, would reveal him to one who had loved him.

WHEN, in answer to his rap on the door, it was thrown open, the light streamed full in his face. There was a mere second's hesitation. Then ragged green-black coat sleeves and red-flannel dress sleeves became entwined in a manner peculiar to angle worms and humans. French terms of endearment became mingled in the same twining fashion, while the door stood open and the snow drove in over their heads and melted in the warmth.

"My Leon!" "My Bernadette!" they murmured in antiphony.

"After so long a time!" She held him at arm's length. "Where have you been?" she asked.

Then Leon gathered himself together to blurt out all his shame. But before he had finished she reached up a quick hand to cover his mouth.

"Say no more, my Leon! I know why you took the money! I tell the good Father Roman at the post mission what is in my heart, and he tells me to wait—to have faith. You are a good boy, he says. So I pray the Blessed Virgin every day to send you back to me, and I give the good Father money to burn a candle for me. And my prayer it is answered! No more prison for you now, my Leon!" She rumpled his black, curly hair playfully. "You are going to be a good man."

"Two days' journey to the post, my Bernadette; then the good Father will tie us up so tight——"

He broke off. The old chief stood behind them.

"Dis is my good frien', Chief Beeg Pine," Leon introduced them; "we have travel' togedder for days."

"Better feenish de journey den, an' come inside," Bernadette chided happily. "I chop me my own wood. Den 'long come mans an' burn whole cord in five minutes! To-morrow you chop me two cord, Leon, for to mak' up for w'at you burn since you come!"

While she scolded, her eyes shining with love and happiness, she was setting some supper on the table. In less than five minutes Leon and the old chief were sitting at a real table to a meal of cooked meat, some biscuits that were still warm from Bernadette's own supper, and some corn sirup.

Leon ate as people eat who are both happy and hungry; the old Indian ate as people eat whose hearts are sick.

"Chief Beeg Pine he look for his people," Leon explained to Bernadette when he and the Indian had finished. "B'en 'way for twenty-five year now. Useto leev here. You know anyt'ing 'bout dem—de pine-woods tribe?"

Bernadette wrinkled her brows in thought for a moment, then nodded.

"*Oui*, useto know of dem. But"—she shook her head sadly—"no more dem now! Firs' de smallpox it come, leave ver' few. Den de flu it come—'bout five or six year 'go, maybe. *Mauvais honte!* Not one lef' now!"

The head of the old Algonquin chief sank on to his chest. The young couple heard a low, animallike groan break from lips gone purple. But no words came. Before the sympathetic gaze of the two sat an old Indian, older by twenty years than he should have been—old and withered like the dry, brown beech leaves that cling to bare trees in winter. He sat as one in a dream, hearing, seeing nothing. All gone—family, tribe, trees—all gone! The white man had done it all. Their laws had punished him for the crime of a white man, their filthy diseases had taken his family and his tribe, their greed his tall trees.

He didn't have to analyze to arrive at this conclusion. The facts stood out in black relief. It hurt him to the bottom of his simple, accepting Indian soul. All gone—family, tribe, trees, game! Through the veil mists of his sick abstraction he heard Bernadette's French chatter.

Leon, his eyes wandering often to the Indian in sympathetic understanding, was listening attentively to recital of family affairs.

"After my father was killed by that tree, two months ago, the shanty boss comes to see me—to comfort me, he says!" Her tones were derisive. "But I know what he wants! I hate him!" The words came hotly through her white, tight-clenched teeth.

THE cabin door suddenly opened. A man in shanty attire stamped into the room.

"Takes more'n a storm t' keep me away!" the newcomer laughed raucously, shaking the snow from his heavy mackinaw onto the clean floor.

Then, as his eyes fell upon the two men inside, "Gittin' stormy out," he amended in more matter-of-fact voice. A ragged pea soup and an old Indian were not persons to be considered.

A short, reddish beard, streaked with gray, covered most of the white man's

face. A nose that had refused to run in a straight line to his chin was almost as red as the reddish stubble.

The eyes of the old Indian lifted colorlessly and got as far as the white man's hands, on the left one of which two fingers were missing.

The man threw his coat, cap and mittens on the floor beside the stove and settled himself with comfort and assurance in a chair beside the fire.

"If it keeps on snowin' like this, it'ull be dirty work choppin' for my men tomorrow. Come down on yer neck ev'ry time yer ax bites intuh the tree." His manner was important, his tones impressive.

A spark of something like interest lighted up the eyes of the old Indian. While the newcomer sucked the snow from his heavy mustache, Leon regarded him gravely, attentively.

"You chop de trees down?" the Indian asked in a voice that was low and husky.

"Y' bet!" The white man cut a fill for his pipe with great deliberation, his eyes wandering around the neat, clean little cabin like the unsteady glint of light upon steel. Mean, covetous, ferreting eyes of a man who stops at nothing to get what he wants. He snatched a match from his vest pocket and darted his head down to the light, with the quick movement of a snake. He drew heavily on his clogged pipe a few times, then informed his hearers loftily:

"Me 'n' my gang has cut down fifty square mile o' timber up here in the last three year."

The old chief looked at the white man steadily.

"An' you fish an' hunt?"

"Fish?" The white man laughed amusedly. "Say! One fall me 'n' Bill Simmons sent a hull carload o' fish down to the city!"

"Carload? How so many you catch?" The Indian's voice had taken on a subtle change.

"Dinnamite, ol' feller—dinnamite!" The white man spat on the bright stove damper by way of emphasis. "None o' yer Injun ways fer me! Fishin' with rod 'n' line, by gum!" He laughed contemptuously. "Why, looka here—the white man's took more fish outa this here country in the last five year 'an the French an' th' Injuns done in five hundred year!" He spat again.

Leon's black eyes snapped. *Sacré!* For this dirty hunk of white meat to speak of the French as if they were not white men!

"Same with the timber," the visitor went on smoothly, replacing his pipe between his yellow incisors. "Soon's the white man comes intuh the country she's stripped in no time." He gestured widely.

Leon appeared to be listening thoughtfully through the white man's billowing tobacco smoke. The only decent thing about this white man, Leon concluded, was his tobacco smoke. The old Indian had shared his last pipeful with him, but it would never occur to this boss of a wood-chopping gang to offer a smoke to an Indian and a Frenchman.

"W'at for you chop down de trees? De Injuns dey own dose trees up here, don' dey?" Leon's question had all the earmarks of ingenuousness.

The white man bristled.

"Why'n't the Injuns make use of 'em, then?" He spat disputatiously upon the floor. "No, they don't b'long to th' Injuns, neither. The white man owns this here country!" He fixed his roving eyes for an impressive moment upon the young Frenchman. "An' when the timber's all gone, the white man'll dig fer gold. The white man's a hustler; he gits down intuh the very heart of a country! Yer Injun's satisfied with jist one meal an' one fire ahead. Yes, it'd be a nawful thing t' let the Injun have a country like this here t'imself!" He aimed another stream of saliva at the stove damper by way of expressing his disapproval.

LEON shifted uneasily. His eyes were on the Indian who had slid noiselessly from his chair and now stood as if looking out of the little window.

The wind was now piping an eerie threnody about the little cabin; the snow sandpapered against the small window. Inside the cabin there was something electric in the air.

The old chief turned and made a step forward; his eyes were fixed piercingly on the back of the white man's head, as if he saw something there. The lids of his faded eyes were narrowed until they became mere slits of flame. His lips were set in a straight line, his face in the hardness of iron.

Apparently satisfied with his inspection of the back of the white man's head, the Indian stepped softly back to his position at the window. From there he took up the white man's challenge.

"White man takes ev'rything in a country! Injun has nothing left! White man burns, destroys, kills!"

There was something like a hiss in the low-spoken words from the window.

The white man faced his chair around to the voice at the window. He wasn't psychic, but something in the voice of the Indian struck through his opaque consciousness—something inimical, menacing.

"Whad'je mean?" he demanded hostilely, but glancing uncomfortably about like a cornered cat.

"White man very clever! Alla time he kill, destroy!" The old chief's glowing eyes compelled and held the shifty eyes of the white man, as the eyes of a bird are held by the glittering eyes of a snake.

The color began to leak out of the white man's face; his jaw dropped, his eyes dilated a little.

The Indian smiled ever so slightly, but his lips were thin and merciless. He advanced a step toward the white man.

At that advance the white man got to his feet and faced the Indian, the chair between.

"Whad'je mean?" He bellowed the question this time, trying to outvoice the fear his eyes showed was in his heart.

The Indian took another step forward. His burning eyes bored deep into the white man's face on which was now the blue-gray tint of fear. The white man recoiled a step backward from before that burning stare, that slow advance.

"Very clever white man! You not know me, huh? Not know Chief Big Pine what went to pen twent'-five year go to save your white pelt?"

The old Indian drew his shrunken figure to its full height. He raised his clenched fist to the level of the white man's face and advanced another step.

The white man fell back a pace; his right hand dropped to his hip pocket, while the Indian went on witheringly.

"You white skunk!"

In the instant that Leon Racine had sprung to his feet, that Bernadette Lissard, nearer Gribble than Leon was, had reached to grab the right hand of the white man, a shot rang out and cut short the old Indian's indictment.

For a moment the old chief swayed unsteadily; then, face downward, he fell at the white man's feet.

A suppressed scream from the girl, a terrible curse from the Frenchman, and the old Indian passed on to his lost tribe.

The white murderer looked dazedly down at the dead Indian at his feet, his back to the Frenchman.

Swift as a panther, flexible as Indian rubber, Leon was on Gribble's back in a breath. A sudden wrench, and Gribble's smoking revolver was in the Frenchman's hand. In the next breath, Gribble looked into the blue barrel of his own revolver.

"Now, M'sieu' Gribbl', hol' up your han's!"

The voice of the young Frenchman was terrible in its cold intensity.

"Now, ma Bernadette, tie dose han's! You not know, M'sieu' Gribbl' dat Bernadette, she ma leetle girl? By 'n' by we marry. Eef he moves, Bernadette, I let de filt'y blood outa hees 'eart! *C'est ça!* Dat one good knot for sure! Dat ees one ver' clevaire girl, M'sieu' Gribbl'. Don't you t'ink so?"

Leon slowly lowered the revolver. For five long seconds he regarded the bound man before him.

Then he blazed:

"I would shoot you now, you dog, but you die too easy! Sooner I want you should die a t'ousan' deat's! You keel ma friend' af'er he die slow for twenty-five year! I wish dat he 'ad keel you! But now I feenish for heem hees job! For now I tak' you down to de pen'ten-sharee! An' maybeso Chief Beeg Pine he know dat w'en I do dat, I haf for myself to geev up!"

A Chat With You

HERE is an advertisement we found in a newspaper:

"Young author, unable to catch the public eye, despite possession of exceptional gifts which include the wit of a Mark Twain, the philosophy of a Carlyle, the intricacy of plot of a Conan Doyle, the descriptive power of a Dickens, and the brilliancy of dialogue of a Dumas, APPEALS to some one having influence with publishers to get one of his COMPOSITION'S READ by a discerning and competent critic. After this, the continuity of the galling 'declined with thanks' must needs be broken."

* * * *

A MAN who feels that way about himself does not really want a critic. He may say he does. What he wants is a brass band and a torchlight parade.

Who can claim himself to be a "discerning and competent critic," anyway? Who has the authority? One says, "I like this," and the other says, "I like that;" but nowadays the final judge is the public, and you yourself are a part of a jury that forms the ultimate and last tribunal of criticism.

* * * *

SUPPOSE our author did have all the qualities he claims for himself, does it follow that he would be a success as a writer of stories? We don't think so. He leaves the one essential thing out. A man may have all these brilliant qualities, and yet not be able to tell a good story. We have read stories in which there shone great descriptive power, and yet they were not good stories. We have read narratives with wit, with good dialogue, which were certainly not good stories. We have read tales with all the intricacy of plot that one might imagine, that were decidedly hard reading. In fact, when one gets beyond a certain point, the more intricate the plot, the tougher the going is. What makes a good story is something more than this, something aside from all this, something beyond all this, something, as far as we know, indefinable.

* * * *

WIT, dialogue, descriptive power, good plots—yes, we will even admit a certain amount of philosophy, though that is a dry subject—all these help. But the story itself is the thing, and the story writer himself is more often born than made. What makes a good story? It should begin in such a fashion as to catch the interest and make it easy to read. What is required for this? There is no definite recipe. Some stories that are good stories commence with a crash; others equally good have starts as suave as the "gentle rain from heaven."

The next thing we can say with any degree of conviction is that a story should get steadily better and, if possible, increase in pace as it goes on. A story that starts well and comes to a lame ending is a deception and a snare. There is no real satisfaction in it. It is all promise and no fulfillment. It should start well, it should be easy reading from the first line, but it should steadily climb in interest.

* * * *

ANY educated man has, at his command, all the words in the dictionary. Any man who has lived much in the world has in his consciousness a sufficient variety of scenes and characters to furnish forth a dozen rousing tales. How to do it, though, is another matter. We may have at our disposal all the materials needed to make a watch or a locomotive. It is putting them together that is the trick.

* * * *

TO tell any one how to write a good story is an impossible task. A really good story is a miracle, and the fact that it happens quite a few times every two

weeks makes it no less wonderful. To tell a good story when one reads it, is easier. We can both do that. It is like tasting an apple, a peach or a cantaloupe. Of course, some are better judges than others, but any one who likes stories, at all, is a fair judge.

* * * *

WE confess that we cannot quite explain to you why "Out of the Blue," by Bertrand Sinclair, in the present issue, is such a good story. We know that it is, however, and all you have to do to understand what we mean is to read it for yourself.

The same thing goes for the complete novel that opens the next issue of the magazine. It is called "The Strongest Man on Earth," and is by Roy Norton. What makes Norton such a corking teller of tales? We admit that he has wit, plot, dialogue, and all the rest of it; but there is something more, besides. It is the tone of the voice, the smile, the clasp of the hand—the personality.

If you want to meet other writers with personality, look for Frederick Niven, Fred MacIsaac, Albert W. Tolman, H. R. Marshall, Frank E. Evans, Millard Ward, Emmet F. Harte, and Ralph Guthrie, all in the next issue of this magazine.

The Popular Magazine

In the Next Number, July 20, 1927

The Strongest Man on Earth — ROY NORTON

The Ace of Trumps — ALBERT W. TOLMAN

While the Going is Good — FREDERICK NIVEN

Marching Men — FRED MacISAAC
A Four-part Serial—Part IV.

Stinging Quirts — H. R. MARSHALL

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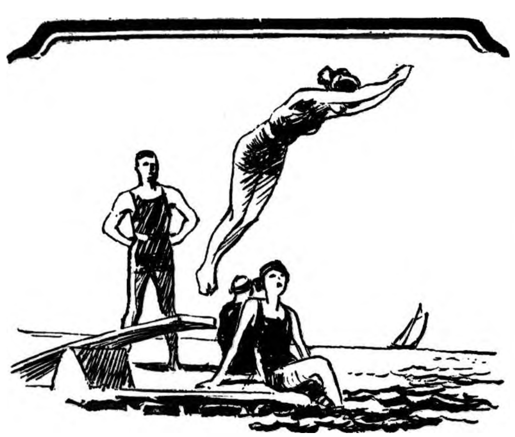

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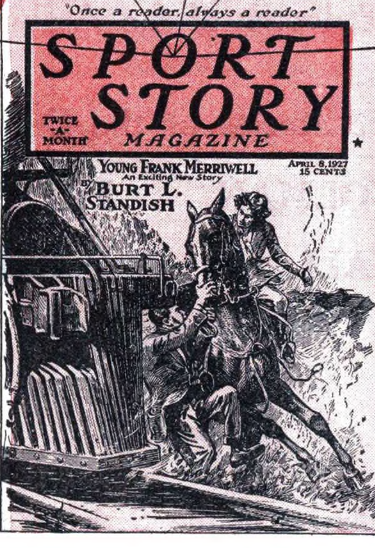

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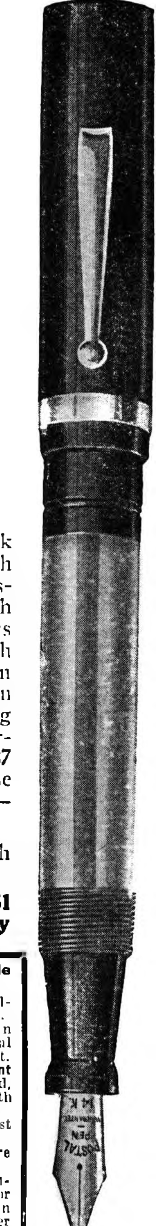

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