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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STORY OF THE FOSS RIVER RANCH: A TALE OF THE NORTHWEST ***

The Story of the Foss River Ranch

A Tale of the Northwest

By RIDGWELL CULLUM

AUTHOR OF

"The Law Breakers," "The Way of the Strong," "The Watchers of the Plains." Etc.

A.L. BURT COMPANY Publishers New York

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TO MY WIFE

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CHAPTER I - THE POLO CLUB BALL

It was a brilliant gathering—brilliant in every sense of the word. The hall was a great effort of the decorator's art; the people were faultlessly dressed; the faces were strong, handsome—fair or dark complexioned as the case might be; those present represented the wealth and fashion of the Western Canadian ranching world. Intellectually, too, there was no more fault to find here than is usual in a ballroom in the West End of London.

It was the annual ball of the Polo Club, and that was a social function of the first water—in the eyes of the Calford world.

"My dear Mrs. Abbot, it is a matter which is quite out of my province," said John Allandale, in answer to a remark from his companion. He was leaning over the cushioned back of the Chesterfield upon which an old lady was seated, and gazing smilingly over at a group of young people standing at the opposite end of the room. "Jacky is one of those young ladies whose strength of character carries her beyond the control of mere man. Yes, I know what you would say," as Mrs. Abbot glanced up into his face with a look of mildly-expressed wonder; "it is true I am her uncle and guardian, but, nevertheless, I should no more dream of interfering with her—what shall we say?—love affairs, than suggest her incapacity to 'boss' a 'round up' worked by a crowd of Mexican greasers."

"Then all I can say is that your niece is a very unfortunate girl," replied the old lady, acidly. "How old is she?"

"Twenty-two."

John Allandale, or "Poker" John as he was more familiarly called by all who knew him, was still looking over at the group, but an expression had suddenly crept into his eyes which might, in a less robust-looking man, have been taken for disquiet—even fear. His companion's words had brought home to him a partial realization of a responsibility which was his.

"Twenty-two," she repeated, "and not a relative living except a good-hearted but thoroughly irresponsible uncle. That child is to be pitied, John."

The old man sighed. He took no umbrage at his companion's brusquely-expressed estimation of himself. He was still watching the group at the other end of the room. His face was clouded, and a keen observer might have detected a curious twitching of his bronzed right cheek, just beneath the eye. His eyes followed the movement of a beautiful girl surrounded by a cluster of men, immaculately dressed, bronzed—and, for the most part, wholesome-looking. She was dark, almost Eastern in her type of features. Her hair was black with the blackness of the raven's wing, and coiled in an ample knot low upon her neck. Her features, although Eastern, had scarcely the regularity one expects in such a type, whilst her eyes quashed without mercy any idea of such extraction for her nationality. They were gray, deeply ringed at the pupil with black. They were keen eyes—fathomless in their suggestion of strength—eyes which might easily mask a world of good or evil.

The music began, and the girl passed from amidst her group of admirers upon the arm of a tall, fair man, and was soon lost in the midst of the throng of dancers.

"Who is that she is dancing with now?" asked Mrs. Abbot, presently. "I didn't see her go off; I was watching Mr. Lablache standing alone and disconsolate over there against the door. He looks as if some one had done him some terrible injury. See how he is glaring at the dancers."

"Jacky is dancing with 'Lord' Bill. Yes, you are right, Lablache does not look very amiable. I think this would be a good opportunity to suggest a little gamble in the smoking-room."

"Nothing of the sort," snapped Mrs. Abbot, with the assurance of an old friend. "I haven't half finished talking to you yet. It is a most extraordinary thing that all you people of the prairie love to call each other by nicknames. Why should the Hon. William Bunning-Ford be dubbed 'Lord' Bill, and why should that sweet niece of yours, who is the possessor of such a charming name as Joaquina, be hailed by every man within one hundred miles of Calford as 'Jacky'? I think it is both absurd and—vulgar."

"Possibly you are right, my dear lady. But you can never alter the ways of the prairie. You might just as well try to stem the stream of our Foss River in early spring as try to make the prairie man call people by their legitimate names. For instance, do you ever hear me spoken of by any other name than 'Poker' John?"

Mrs. Abbot looked up sharply. A malicious twinkle was in her eyes.

"There is reason in your sobriquet, John. A man who spends his substance and time in playing that fascinating but degrading game called 'Draw Poker' deserves no better title."

John Allandale made a "clucking" sound with his tongue. It was his way of expressing irritation. Then he stood erect, and glanced round the room in search of some one. He was a tall, well-built man and carried his fifty odd years fairly well, in spite of his gray hair and the bald patch at the crown of his head. Thirty years of a rancher's life had in no way lessened the easy carriage and distinguished bearing acquired during his upbringing. John Allandale's face and figure were redolent of the free life of the prairie. And although, possibly, his fifty-five years might have lain more easily upon him he was a man of commanding appearance and one not to be passed unnoticed.

Mrs. Abbot was the wife of the doctor of the Foss River Settlement and had known John Allandale from the first day he had taken up his abode on the land which afterwards became known as the Foss River Ranch until now, when he was acknowledged to be a power in the stock-raising world. She was a woman of sound, practical, common sense; he was a man of action rather than a thinker; she was a woman whose moral guide was an invincible sense of duty; he was a man whose sense of responsibility and duty was entirely governed by an unreliable inclination. Moreover, he was obstinate without being possessed of great strength of will. They were characters utterly opposed to one another, and yet they were the greatest of friends.

The music had ceased again and once more the walls were lined with heated dancers, breathing hard and fanning themselves. Suddenly John Allandale saw a face he was looking for. Murmuring an excuse to Mrs. Abbot, he strode across the room, just as his niece, leaning upon the arm of the Hon. Bunning-Ford, approached where he had been standing.

Mrs. Abbot glanced admiringly up into Jacky's face.

"A successful evening, Joaquina?" she interrogated kindly.

"Lovely, Aunt Margaret, thanks." She always called the doctor's wife "Aunt."

Mrs. Abbot nodded.

"I believe you have danced every dance. You must be tired, child. Come and sit down."

Jacky was intensely fond of this old lady and looked upon her almost as a mother. Her affection was reciprocated. The girl seated herself and "Lord" Bill stood over her, fan in hand.

"Say, auntie," exclaimed Jacky, "I've made up my mind to dance every dance on the program. And I guess I sha'n't Waste time on feeding."

The girl's beautiful face was aglow with excitement. Mrs. Abbot's face indicated horrified amazement.

"My dear child, don't—don't talk like that. It is really dreadful."

"Lord" Bill smiled.

"I'm so sorry, auntie, I forgot," the girl replied, with an irresistible smile. "I never can get away from the prairie. Do you know, this evening old Lablache made me mad, and my hand went round to my hip to get a grip on my six-shooter, and I was quite disappointed to feel nothing but smooth silk to my touch. I'm not fit for town life, I guess. I'm a prairie girl; you can bet your life on it, and nothing will civilize me. Billy, do stop wagging that fan."

"Lord" Bill smiled a slow, twinkling smile and desisted. He was a tall, slight man, with a faint stoop at the shoulders. He looked worthy of his title.

"It is no use trying to treat Jacky to a becoming appreciation of social requirements," he said, addressing himself with a sort of weary deliberation to Mrs. Abbot. "I suggested an ice just now. She said she got plenty on the ranch at this time of year," and he shrugged his shoulders and laughed pleasantly.

"Well, of course. What does one want ices for?" asked the girl, disdainfully. "I came here to dance. But, auntie, dear, where has uncle gone? He dashed off as if he were afraid of us when we came up."

"I think he has set his mind on a game of poker, dear, and—"

"And that means he has gone in search of that detestable man, Lablache," Jacky put in sharply.

Her beautiful face flushed with anger as she spoke. But withal there was a look of anxiety in her eyes.

"If he must play cards I wish he would play with some one else," she pursued.

"Lord" Bill glanced round the room. He saw that Lablache had disappeared.

"Well, you see, Lablache has taken a lot of money out of all of us. Naturally we wish to get it back," he said quietly, as if in defense of her uncle's doings.

"Yes, I know. And—do you?" The girl's tone was cutting.

"Lord" Bill shrugged. Then,—

"As yet I have not had that pleasure."

"And if I know anything of Lablache you never will," put in Mrs. Abbot, curtly. "He is not given to parting easily. The qualification most necessary amongst gentlemen in the days of our grandfathers was keen gambling. You and John, had you lived in those days, might have aspired to thrones."

"Yes—or taken to the road. You remember, even then, it was necessary to be a 'gentleman' of the road."

"Lord" Bill laughed in his lazy fashion. His keen gray eyes were half veiled with eyelids which, seemed too weary to lift themselves. He was a handsome man, but his general air of weariness belied the somewhat eagle cast of countenance which was his. Mrs. Abbot, watching him, thought that the deplorable lassitude which he always exhibited masked a very different nature. Jacky possibly had her own estimation of the man. Whatever it was, her friendship for him was not to be doubted, and, on his part, he never attempted to disguise his admiration of her.

A woman is often a much keener observer of men than she is given credit for. A man is frequently disposed to judge another man by his mental talents and his peculiarities of temper—or blatant self-advertisement. A woman's first thought is for that vague, but comprehensive trait "manliness. She drives straight home for the peg upon which to hang her judgment. That is why in feminine regard the bookworm goes to the wall to make room for the athlete. Possibly Jacky and Mrs. Abbot had probed beneath "Lord" Bill's superficial weariness and discovered there a nature worthy of their regard. They were both, in their several ways, fond of this scion of a noble house.

"It is all very well for you good people to sit there and lecture—or, at least, say 'things,'" "Lord" Bill went on. "A man must have excitement. Life becomes a burden to the man who lives the humdrum existence of ranch life. For the first few years it is all very well. He can find a certain excitement in learning the business. The 'round-ups' and branding and re-branding of cattle, these things are fascinating—for a time. Breaking the wild and woolly broncho is thrilling and he needs no other tonic; but when one has gone through all this and he finds that no Broncho—or, for that matter, any other horse—ever foaled cannot be ridden, it loses its charm and becomes boring. On the prairie there are only two things left for him to do—drink or gamble. The first is impossible. It is low, degrading. Besides it only appeals to certain senses, and does not give one that 'hair-curling' thrill which makes life tolerable. Consequently the wily pasteboard is brought forth—and we live again."

"Stuff," remarked Mrs. Abbot, uncompromisingly.

"Bill, you make me laugh," exclaimed Jacky, smiling up into his face. "Your arguments are so characteristic of you. I believe it is nothing but sheer indolence that makes you sit down night after night and hand over your dollars to that—that Lablache. How much have you lost to him this week?"

"Lord" Bill glanced quizzically down at the girl.

"I have purchased seven evenings' excitement at a fairly reasonable price."

"Which means?"

The girl leant forward and in her eyes was a look of anxiety. She meant to have the truth.

"I have enjoyed myself."

"But the price?"

"Ah—here comes your partner for the next dance," "Lord" Bill went on, still smiling. "The band has struck up."

At that moment a broad-shouldered man, with a complexion speaking loudly of the prairie, came up to claim the girl.

"Hallo, Pickles," said Bill, quietly turning upon the newcomer and ignoring Jacky's question. "Thought you said you weren't coming in to-night?"

"Neither was I," the man addressed as "Pickles" retorted, "but Miss Jacky promised me two dances," he went on, in strong Irish brogue; "that settled it. How d'ye do, Mrs. Abbot? Come along, Miss Jacky, we're losing half our dance."

The girl took the proffered arm and was about to move off. She turned and spoke to "Lord" Bill over her shoulder.

"How much?"

Bill shrugged his shoulders in a deprecating fashion. The same gentle smile hovered round his sleepy eyes.

"Three thousand dollars."

Jacky glided off into the already dancing throng.

For a moment the Hon. Bunning-Ford and Mrs. Abbot watched the girl as she glided in and out amongst the dancers, then, with a sigh, the old lady turned to her companion. Her kindly

wrinkled old face wore a sad expression and a half tender look was in her eyes as they rested upon the man's face. When she spoke, however, her tone was purely conversational.

"Are you not going to dance?"

"No," abstractedly. "I think I've had enough."

"Then come and sit by me and help to cheer an old woman up."

"Lord" Bill smiled as he seated himself upon the lounge.

"I don't think there is much necessity for my cheering influence, Aunt Margaret. Amongst your many other charming qualities cheerfulness is not the least. Doesn't Jacky look lovely to-night?"

"To-night?—always."

"Yes, of course—but Jacky always seems to surpass herself under excitement. One would scarcely expect it, knowing her as we do. But she is as wildly delighted with dancing as any miss fresh from school."

"And why not? It is little pleasure that comes into her life. An orphan—barely twenty-two—with the entire responsibility of her uncle's ranch upon her shoulders. Living in a very hornet's nest of blacklegs and—and—"

"Gamblers," put in the man, quietly.

"Yes," Aunt Margaret went on defiantly, "gamblers. With the certain knowledge that the home she struggles for, through no fault of her own, is passing into the hands of a man she hates and despises—"

"And who by the way is in love with her." "Lord" Bill's mouth was curiously pursed.

"What pleasure can she have?" exclaimed Mrs. Abbot, vehemently. "Sometimes, much as I am attached to John, I feel as if I should like to—to bang him!"

"Poor old John!" Bill's bantering tone nettled the old lady, but she said no more. Her anger against those she loved could not last long.

"'Poker' John loves his niece," the man went on, as his companion remained silent. "There is nothing in the world he would not do for her, if it lay within his power."

"Then let him leave poker alone. His gambling is breaking her heart."

The angry light was again in the old lady's eyes. Her companion did not answer for a moment. His lips had assumed that curious pursing. When he spoke it was with, great decision.

"Impossible, my dear lady—utterly impossible. Can the Foss River help freezing in winter? Can Jacky help talking prairie slang? Can Lablache help grubbing for money? Can you help caring for all of our worthless selves who belong to the Foss River Settlement? Nothing can alter these things. John would play poker on the lid of his own coffin, while the undertakers were winding his shroud about him—if they'd lend him a pack of cards."

"I believe you encourage him in it," said the old lady, mollified, but still sticking to her guns. "There is little to choose between you."

The man shrugged his indolent shoulders. This dear old lady's loyalty to Jacky, and, for that matter, to all her friends, pleased while it amused him.

"Maybe." Then abruptly, "Let's talk of something else."

At that moment an elderly man was seen edging his way through the dancers. He came directly over to Mrs. Abbot.

"It's getting late, Margaret," he said, pausing before her. "I am told it is rather gusty outside. The weather prophets think we may have a blizzard on us before morning."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," put in the Hon. Bunning-Ford. "The sun-dogs have been showing for the last two days. I'll see what Jacky says, and then hunt out old John."

"Yes, for goodness' sake don't let us get caught in a blizzard," exclaimed Mrs. Abbot, fearfully. "If there is one thing I'm afraid of it is one of those terrible storms. We have thirty-five miles to go."

The new-comer, Dr. Abbot, smiled at his wife's terrified look, but, as he turned to urge Bill to hurry, there was a slightly anxious look on his face.

"Hurry up, old man. I'll go and see about our sleigh." Then in an undertone, "You can exaggerate a little to persuade them, for the storm *is* coming on and we must get away at once."

A moment or two later "Lord" Bill and Jacky were making their way to the smoking-room. On the stairs they met "Poker" John. He was returning to the ballroom.

"We were just coming to look for you, uncle," exclaimed Jacky. "They tell us it is blowing outside."

"Just what I was coming to tell you, my dear. We must be going. Where are the doctor and Aunt Margaret?"

"Getting ready," said Bill, quietly. "Have a good game?"

The old man smiled. His bronzed face indicated extreme satisfaction.

"Not half bad, boy—not half bad. Relieved Lablache of five hundred dollars in the last jackpot. Held four deuces. He opened with full on aces."

"Poker" John seemed to have forgotten the past heavy losses, and spoke gleefully of the paltry five hundred he had just scooped in.

The girl looked relieved, and even the undemonstrative "Lord" Bill allowed a scarcely audible sigh to escape him. Jacky returned at once to the exigencies of the moment.

"Then, uncle, dear, let us hurry up. I guess none of us want to be caught in a blizzard. Say, Bill, take me to the cloak-room, right away."

CHAPTER II - THE BLIZZARD: ITS CONSEQUENCES

On the whole, Canada can boast of one of the most perfect health-giving climates in the world, despite the two extremes of heat and cold of which it is composed. But even so, the Canadian climate is cursed by an evil which every now and again breaks loose from the bonds which fetter it, and rages from east to west, carrying death and destruction in its wake. I speak of the terrible—the raging Blizzard!

To appreciate the panic-like haste with which the Foss River Settlement party left the ballroom, one must have lived a winter in the west of Canada. The reader who sits snugly by his or her fireside, and who has never experienced a Canadian winter, can have no conception of one of those dread storms, the very name of which had drawn words of terror from one who had lived the greater part of her life in the eastern shadow of the Rockies. Hers was no timid, womanly fear for ordinary inclemency of weather, but a deep-rooted dread of a life-and-death struggle in a merciless storm, than which, in no part of the world, can there be found a more fearful. Whence it comes—and why, surely no one may say. A meteorological expert may endeavor to account for it, but his argument is unconvincing and gains no credence from the dweller on the prairies. And why? Because the storm does not come from above—neither does it come from a specified direction. And only in the winter does such a wind blow. The wind buffets from every direction at once. No snow falls from above and yet a blinding gray wall of snow, swept up from the white-clothed ground, encompasses the dazed traveller. His arm outstretched in daylight and he cannot see the tips of his heavy fur mitts. Bitter cold, a hundred times intensified by the merciless force of the wind, and he is lost and freezing—slowly freezing to death.

As the sleigh dashed through the outskirts of Calford, on its way to the south, there was not much doubt in the minds of any of its occupants as to the prospects of the storm. The gusty, patchy wind, the sudden sweeps of hissing, cutting snow, as it slithered up in a gray dust in the moonlight, and lashed, with stinging force, into their faces, was a sure herald of the coming "blizzard."

Bunning-Ford and Jacky occupied the front seat of the sleigh. The former was driving the spanking team of blacks of which old "Poker" John was justly proud. The sleigh was open, as in Canada all such sleighs are. Mrs. Abbot and the doctor sat in a seat with their backs to Jacky and her companion, and old John Allandale faced the wind in the back seat, alone. Thirty-five miles the horses had to cover before the storm thoroughly established itself, and "Lord" Bill was not a slow driver.

The figures of the travellers were hardly distinguishable so enwrapped were they in beaver caps, buffalo coats and robes. Jacky, as she sat silently beside her companion, might have been taken for an inanimate bundle of furs, so lost was she within the ample folds of her buffalo. But for the occasional turn of her head, as she measured with her eyes the rising of the storm, she gave no sign of life.

"Lord" Bill seemed indifferent. His eyes were fixed upon the road ahead and his hands, encased in fur mitts, were on the "lines" with a tenacious grip. The horses needed no urging. They were high-mettled and cold. The gushing quiver of their nostrils, as they drank in the crisp, night air, had a comforting sound for the occupants of the sleigh. Weather permitting, those beautiful "blacks" would do the distance in under three hours.

The sleigh bells jangled musically in response to the high steps of the horses as they sped over the hard, snow-covered trail. They were climbing the long slope which was to take them out of the valley wherein was Calford situate. Presently Jack's face appeared from amidst the folds of the muffler which kept her storm collar fast round her neck and ears.

"It's gaining on us, Billy."

"Yes, I know."

He understood her remark. He knew she referred to the storm. His lips were curiously pursed. A knack he had when stirred out of himself.

"We shan't do it."

The girl spoke with conviction.

"No."

"Guess we'd better hit the trail for Norton's. Soldier Joe'll be glad to welcome us."

"Lord" Bill did not answer. He merely chirruped at the horses. The willing beasts increased their pace and the sleigh sped along with that intoxicating smoothness only to be felt when travelling with double "bobs" on a perfect trail.

The gray wind of the approaching blizzard was becoming fiercer. The moon was already enveloped in a dense haze. The snow was driving like fine sand in the faces of the travellers.

"I think we'll give it an hour, Bill. After that I guess it'll be too thick," pursued the girl. "What d'you think, can we make Norton's in that time—it's a good sixteen miles?"

"I'll put 'em at it," was her companion's curt response.

Neither spoke for a minute. Then "Lord" Bill bent his head suddenly forward. The night was getting blacker and it was with difficulty that he could keep his eyes from blinking under the lash of the whipping snow.

"What is it?" asked Jacky, ever on the alert with the instinct of the prairie.

"Some one just ahead of us. The track is badly broken in places. Sit tight, I'm going to touch 'em up."

He flicked the whip over the horses' backs, and, a moment later, the sleigh was flying along at a dangerous pace. The horses had broken into a gallop.

"Lord" Bill seemed to liven up under the influence of speed. The wind was howling now, and conversation was impossible, except in short, jerky sentences. They were on the high level of the prairie and were getting the full benefit of the open sweep of country.

"Cold?" Bill almost shouted.

"No," came the quiet response.

"Straight, down-hill trail. I'm going to let 'em have their heads."

Both of these people knew every inch of the road they were travelling. There was no fear in their hearts.

"Put 'em along, then."

The horses raced along. The deadly gray wind had obscured all light. The lights of the sleigh alone showed the tracks. It was a wild night and every moment it seemed to become worse. Suddenly the man spoke again.

"I wish we hadn't got the others with us, Jacky."

"Why?"

"Because I could put 'em along faster, as it is—" His sentence remained unfinished, the sleigh bumped and lifted on to one runner. It was within an ace of overturning. There was no need to finish his sentence.

"Yes, I understand, Bill. Don't take too many chances. Ease 'em up—some. They're not as young as we are—not the horses. The others."

"Lord" Bill laughed. Jacky was so cool. The word fear was not in her vocabulary. This sort of a journey was nothing new to her. She had experienced it all before. Possibly, however, her total lack of fear was due to her knowledge of the man who, to use her own way of expressing things, "was at the business end of the lines." "Lord" Bill was at once the finest and the most fearless teamster for miles around. Under the cloak of indolent indifference he concealed a spirit of fearlessness and even recklessness which few accredited to him.

For some time the two remained silent. The minutes sped rapidly and half an hour passed. All about was pitch black now. The wind was tearing and shrieking from every direction at once. The sleigh seemed to be the center of its attack. The blinding clouds of snow, as they swept up from the ground, were becoming denser and denser and offered a fierce resistance to the racing horses. Another few minutes and the two people on the front seat knew that progress would be impossible. As it was, "Lord" Bill was driving more by instinct than by what he could see. The trail was obscured, as were all landmarks. He could no longer see the horses' heads.

"We've passed the school-house," said Jacky, at last.

"Yes, I know."

A strange knowledge or instinct is that of the prairie man or woman. Neither had seen the school-house or anything to indicate it. And yet they knew they had passed it.

"Half a mile to Trout Creek. Two miles to Norton's. Can you do it, Bill?"

Quietly as the words were spoken, there was a world of meaning in the question. To lose their way now would be worse, infinitely, than to lose oneself in one of the sandy deserts of Africa. Death was in that biting wind and in the blinding snow. Once lost, and, in two or three hours, all would be over.

"Yes," came the monosyllabic reply. "Lord" Bill's lips were pursed tightly. Every now and then he dashed the snow and breath icicles from his eyelashes. The horses were almost hidden from his view.

They were descending a steep gradient and they now knew that they were upon Trout Creek. At the creek Bill pulled up. It was the first stop since leaving Calford. Jacky and he jumped down. Each knew what the other was about to do without speaking. Jacky, reins in hand, went round the horses; "Lord" Bill was searching for the trail which turned off from the main road up the creek to Norton's. Presently he came back.

"Animals all right?"

"Fit as fiddles," the girl replied.

"Right—jump up!"

There was no assisting this girl to her seat. No "by your leave" or European politeness. Simply the word of one man who knows his business to another. Both were on their "native heath."

Bill checked the horses' impetuosity and walked them slowly until he came to the turning. Once on the right road, however, he let them have their heads.

"It's all right, Jacky," as the horses bounded forward.

A few minutes later the sleigh drew up at Norton's, but so dark was it and so dense the snow fog, that only those two keen watchers on the front seat were able to discern the outline of the house.

"Poker" John and the doctor assisted the old lady to alight whilst Jacky and "Lord" Bill unhitched the horses. In spite of the cold the sweat was pouring from the animals' sides. In answer to a violent summons on the storm door a light appeared in the window and "soldier" Joe Norton opened the door.

For an instant he stood in the doorway peering doubtfully out into the storm. A goodly picture he made as he stood lantern in hand, his rugged old face gazing inquiringly at his visitors.

"Hurry up, Joe, let us in," exclaimed Allandale. "We are nearly frozen to death."

"Why, bless my soul!—bless my soul! Come in! Come in!" the old man exclaimed hastily as he recognized John Allandale's voice. "You out, and on a night like this. Bless my soul! Come in! Down, Husky, down!" to a bob-tail sheep-dog which bounded forward and barked savagely.

"Hold on, Joe," said "Poker" John. "Let the ladies go in, we must see to the horses."

"It's all right, uncle," said Jacky, "we've unhitched 'em. Bill's taken 'em right away to the stables."

The whole party passed into Joe Norton's sitting-room, where the old farmer at once set about kindling, with the aid of some coal-oil, a fire in the great box-stove. While his host was busy John took the lantern and went to "Lord" Bill's assistance in the stables.

The stove lighted, Joe Norton turned to his guests.

"Bless me, and to think of you, Mrs. Abbot, and Miss Jacky, too. I must fetch the o'd 'ooman. Hi, Molly, Molly, bestir yourself, old girl. Come on down, an' help the ladies. They've come for shelter out o' the blizzard—good luck to it."

"Oh, no, don't disturb her, Joe," exclaimed Mrs. Abbot; "it's really too bad, at this unearthly hour. Besides, we shall be quite comfortable here by the stove."

"No doubt—no doubt," said the old man, cheerfully, "but that's not my way—not my way. Any of you froze," he went on ungrammatically, "'cause if so, out you go and thaw it out in the snow."

"I guess there's no one frozen," said Jacky, smiling into the old man's face. "We're too old birds for that. Ah, here's Mrs. Norton."

Another warm greeting and the two ladies were hustled off to the only spare bedroom the Nortons boasted. By this time "Lord" Bill and "Poker" John had returned from the stables. While the ladies were removing their furs, which were sodden with the melting snow, the farmer's wife was preparing a rough but ample meal of warm provender in the kitchen. Such is hospitality in the Far North-West.

When the supper was prepared the travellers sat down to the substantial fare. None were hungry—be it remembered that it was three o'clock in the morning—but each felt that some pretense in that direction must be made, or the kindly couple would think their welcome was insufficient.

"An' what made you venture on the trail on such a night?" asked old Norton, as he poured out a joram of hot whiskey for each of the men. "A moral cert, you wouldn't strike Foss River in such a storm."

"We thought it would have held off longer," said Dr. Abbot. "It was no use getting cooped up in

town for two or three days. You know what these blizzards are. You may have to do with us yourself during the next forty-eight hours."

"It's too sharp to last, Doc," put in Jacky, as she helped herself to some soup. Her face was glowing after her exposure to the elements. She looked very beautiful and not one whit worse for the drive.

"Sharp enough—sharp enough," murmured old Norton, as if for something to say.

"Sharp enough to bring some one else to your hospitable abode, Joe," interrupted "Lord" Bill, quietly; "I hear sleigh bells. The wind's howling, but their tone is familiar."

They were all listening now. "Poker" John was the first to speak.

"It's—" and he paused.

Before he could complete his sentence Jacky filled up the missing words.

"Lablache—for a dollar."

There was a moment's silence in that rough homely little kitchen. The expression of the faces of those around the board indexed a general thought.

Lablache, if it were he, would not receive the cordial welcome which had been meted out to the others. Norton broke the silence.

"Dang it! That's what I ses, dang it! You'll pardon me, ladies, but my feelings get the better of me at times. I don't like him. Lablache—I hates him," and he strode out of the room, his old face aflame with annoyance, to discharge the hospitable duties of the prairie.

As the door closed behind him Dr. Abbot laughed constrainedly.

"Lablache doesn't seem popular—here."

No one answered his remark. Then "Poker" John looked over at the other men.

"We must go and help to put his horses away."

There was no suggestion in his words, merely a statement of plain facts. "Lord" Bill nodded and the three men rose and went to the door.

As they disappeared Jacky turned to Mrs. Norton and Aunt Margaret.

"If that's Lablache—I'm off to bed."

Her tone was one of uncompromising decision. Mrs. Abbot was less assured.

"Do you think it polite—wise?"

"Come along, aunt. Never mind about politeness or wisdom. What do you say, Mrs. Norton?"

"As you like, Miss Jacky. I must stay up, or—"

"Yes—the men can entertain him."

Just then Lablache's voice was heard outside. It was a peculiar, guttural, gasping voice. Aunt Margaret looked doubtfully from Jacky to Mrs. Norton. The latter nodded smilingly. Then following Jacky's lead she passed up the staircase which led from the kitchen to the rooms above. A moment later the door opened and Lablache and the other men entered.

"They've gone to bed," said Mrs. Norton, in answer to "Poker" John's look of inquiry.

"Tired, no doubt," put in Lablache, drily.

"And not without reason, I guess," retorted "Poker" John, sharply. He had not failed to note the other's tone.

Lablache laughed quietly, but his keen, restless eyes shot an unpleasant glance at the speaker from beneath their heavy lids.

He was a burly man. In bulk he was of much the same proportions as old John Allandale. But while John was big with the weight of muscle and frame, Lablache was flabby with fat. In face he was the antithesis of the other. Whilst "Poker" John was the picture of florid tanning—While his face, although perhaps a trifle weak in its lower formation, was bold, honest, and redounding with kindly nature, Lablache's was bilious-looking and heavy with obesity. Whatever character was there, it was lost in the heavy folds of flesh with which it was wreathed. His jowl was ponderous, and his little mouth was tightly compressed, while his deep-sunken, bilious eyes peered from between heavy, lashless lids.

Such was Verner Lablache, the wealthiest man of the Foss River Settlement. He owned a large store in the place, selling farming machinery to the settlers and ranchers about. His business was always done on credit, for which he charged exorbitant rates of interest, accepting only first mortgages upon crops and stock as security. Besides this he represented several of the Calford private banks, which many people said were really owned by him, and there was no one more ready to lend money—on the best of security and the highest rate of interest—than he. Should the

borrower fail to pay, he was always suavely ready to renew the loan at increased interest—provided the security was sound. And, in the end, every ounce of his pound of flesh, plus not less than fifty per cent. interest, would come back to him. After Verner Lablache had done with him, the unfortunate rancher who borrowed generally disappeared from the neighborhood. Sometimes this man's victims were never heard of again. Sometimes they were discovered doing the "chores" round some obscure farmer's house. Anyway, ranch, crops, stock—everything the man ever had—would have passed into the hands of the money-lender, Lablache.

Hard-headed dealer—money-grubber—as Lablache was, he had a weakness. To look at him—to know him—no one would have thought it, but he had. And at least two of those present were aware of his secret. He was in love with Jacky. That is to say, he coveted her—desired her. When Lablache desired anything in that little world of his, he generally secured it to himself, but, in this matter, he had hitherto been thwarted. His desire had increased proportionately. He was annoyed to think that Jacky had retired at his coming. He was in no way blind to the reason of her sudden departure, but beyond his first remark he was not the man to advertise his chagrin. He could afford to wait.

"You'll take a bite o' supper, Mr. Lablache?" said old Norton, in a tone of inquiry.

"Supper?—no, thanks, Norton. But if you've a drop of something hot I can do with that."

"We've gener'ly got somethin' o' that about," replied the old man. "Whiskey or rum?"

"Whisky, man, whisky. I've got liver enough already without touching rum." Then he turned to "Poker" John.

"It's a devilish night, John, devilish. I started before you. Thought I could make the river in time. I was completely lost on the other side of the creek. I fancy the storm worked up from that direction."

He lumped into a chair close beside the stove. The others had already seated themselves.

"We didn't chance it. Bill drove us straight here," said "Poker" John.

"Guess Bill knew something—he generally does," as an afterthought.

"I know a blizzard when I see it," said Bunning-Ford, indifferently.

Lablache sipped his whisky. A silence fell on that gathering of refugees. Mrs. Norton had cleared the supper things.

"Well, if you gents'll excuse me I'll go back to bed. Old Joe'll look after you," she said abruptly. "Good-night to you all."

She disappeared up the staircase. The men remained silent for a moment or two. They were getting drowsy. Suddenly Lablache set his glass down and looked at his watch.

"Four o'clock, gentlemen. I suppose, Joe, there are no beds for us." The old farmer shook his head. "What say, John—Doc—a little game until breakfast?"

John Allandale's face lit up. His sobriquet was no idle One. He lived for poker—he loved it. And Lablache knew it. Old John turned to the others. His right cheek twitched as he waited the decision. "Doc" Abbot smiled approval; "Lord" Bill shrugged indifferently. The old gambler rose to his feet.

"That's all right, then. The kitchen table is good enough for us. Come along, gentlemen."

"I'll slide off to bed, I guess," said Norton, thankful to escape a night's vigil. "Good-night, gentlemen."

Then the remaining four sat down to play.

The far-reaching consequences of that game were undreamt of by the players, except, perhaps, by Lablache. His story of the reason of his return to Norton's farm was only partially true. He had returned in the hopes of this meeting; he had anticipated this game.

CHAPTER III - A BIG GAME OF POKER

"What about cards?" said Lablache, as the four men sat down to the table.

"Doc will oblige, no doubt," Bunning-Ford replied quietly. "He generally carries the 'pernicious pasteboards' about with him."

"The man who travels in the West without them," said Dr. Abbot, producing a couple of new packs from his pocket, "either does not know his country or is a victim of superstition."

No one seemed inclined to refuse the doctor's statement, or enter into a discussion upon the matter. Instead, each drew out a small memorandum block and pencil—a sure indication of a "big game."

"Limit?" asked the doctor.

Lablache shrugged his shoulders, affectionately shuffling the cards the while. He kept his eyes averted.

"What do the others say?"

There was a challenge in Lablache's tone. Bunning-Ford flushed slightly at the cheek-bones. That peculiar pursing was at his lips.

"Anything goes with me. The higher the game the greater the excitement," he said, shooting a keen glance at the pasty face of the money-lender.

Old John was irritated. His ruddy face gleamed in the light of the lamp. The nervous twitching of the cheek indicated his frame of mind. Lablache smiled to himself behind the wood expression of his face.

"Twenty dollars call for fifty. Limit the bet to three thousand dollars. Is that big enough for you, Lablache? Let us have a regulation 'ante.' No 'straddling.'"

There was a moment's silence. "Poker" John had proposed the biggest game they had yet played. He would have suggested no limit, but this he knew would be all in favor of Lablache, whose resources were vast.

John glanced over from the money-lender to the doctor. The doctor and Bunning-Ford were the most to be considered. Their resources were very limited. The old man knew that the doctor was one of those careful players who was not likely to allow himself to suffer by the height of the stakes. There was no bluffing the doctor. "Lord" Bill was able to take care of himself.

"That's good enough for me," said Bunning-Ford. "Let it go at that."

Outwardly Lablache was indifferent; inwardly he experienced a sense of supreme satisfaction at the height of the stakes.

The four men relapsed into silence as they cut for the deal. It was an education in the game to observe each man as he, metaphorically speaking, donned his mask of impassive reserve. As the game progressed any one of those four men might have been a graven image as far as the expression of countenance went. No word was spoken beyond "Raise you so and so"—"See you that." So keen, so ardent was the game that the stake might have been one of life and death. No money passed. Just slips of paper; and yet any one of those fragments represented a small fortune.

The first few hands resulted in but desultory betting. Sums of money changed hands but there was very little in it. Lablache was the principal loser. Three "pots" in succession were taken by John Allandale, but their aggregate did not amount to half the limit. A little luck fell to Bunning-Ford. He once raised Lablache to the limit. The money-lender "saw" him and lost. Bill promptly scooped in three thousand dollars. The doctor was cautious. He had lost and won nothing. Then a change came over the game. To use a card-player's expression, the cards were beginning to "run."

"Lord" Bill dealt. Lablache was upon his right and next to him the doctor.

The money-lender picked up his cards, and partially opening them glanced keenly at the index numerals. His stolid face remained unchanged. The doctor glanced at his and "came in." "Poker" John "came in." The dealer remained out. The doctor drew two cards; "Poker" John, one; Lablache drew one. The veteran rancher held four nines. "Lord" Bill gathered up the "deadwood," and, propping his face upon his hands, watched the betting.

It was the doctor's bet; he cautiously dropped out. He had an inkling of the way things were going. "Poker" John opened the ball with five hundred dollars. He had a good thing and he did not want to frighten his opponent by a plunge. He would leave it to Lablache to start raising. The money-lender raised him one thousand. Old John sniffed with the appreciation of an old war-horse at the scent of battle. The nervous, twitching cheek remained unmoved. The old gambler in him rose uppermost.

He leisurely saw the thousand, and raised another five hundred. Lablache allowed his fishy eyes to flash in the direction of his opponent. A moment after he raised another thousand. The gamble was becoming interesting. The two onlookers were consumed with the lust of play. They forgot that in the result they would not be participants. Old John's face lost something of its impassivity as he in turn raised to the limit. Lablache eased his great body in his chair. His little mouth was very tightly clenched. His breathing, at times stertorous, was like the breathing of an asthmatical pig. He saw, and again raised to the limit. There was now over twelve thousand dollars in the pool.

It was old John's turn. The doctor and "Lord" Bill waited anxiously. The old rancher was reputed very wealthy. They felt assured that he would not back down after having gone so far. In their hearts they both wished to see him relieve Lablache of a lot of money.

They need have had no fears. Whatever his faults "Poker" John was a "dead game sport." He dashed a slip of paper into the pool. The keen eyes watching read "four thousand dollars" scrawled upon it. He had again raised to the limit. It was now Lablache's turn to accept or refuse

the challenge. The onlookers were not so sure of the money-lender. Would he accept or not?

A curious thought was in the mind of that monument of flesh. He knew for certain that he held the winning cards. How he knew it would be impossible to say. And yet he hesitated. Perhaps he knew the limits of John Allandale's resources, perhaps he felt, for the present, there was sufficient in the pool; perhaps, even, he had ulterior motives. Whatever the cause, as he passed a slip of paper into the pool merely seeing his opponent, his face gave no outward sign of what was passing in the brain behind it.

Old John laid down his hand.

"Four nines," he said quietly.

"Not good enough," retorted Lablache; "four kings." And he spread his cards out upon the table before him and swept up the pile of papers which represented his win.

A sigh, as of relief to pent-up feelings, escaped the two men who had watched the gamble. Old John said not a word and his face betrayed no thought or regret that might have been in his mind at the loss of such a large amount of money. He merely glanced over at the money-lender.

"Your deal, Lablache," he said quietly.

Lablache took the cards and a fresh deal went round. Now the game became one-sided. With that one large pull the money-lender's luck seemed to have set in. Seemingly he could do no wrong. If he drew to "three of a kind," he invariably filled; if to a "pair," he generally secured a third; once, indeed, he drew to jack, queen, king of a suit and completed a "royal flush." His luck was phenomenal. The other men's luck seemed "dead out." Bunning-Ford and the doctor could get no hands at all, and thus they were saved heavy losses. Occasionally, even, the doctor raked in a few "antes." But John Allandale could do nothing right. He was always drawing tolerable cards—just good enough to lose with. Until, by the time daylight came, he had lost so heavily that his two friends were eagerly seeking an excuse to break up the game.

At last "Lord" Bill effected this purpose, but at considerable loss to himself. He had a fairly good hand, but not, as he knew, sufficiently good to win with. Lablache and he were left in. The money-lender had in one plunge raised the bet to the "limit." Bill knew that he ought to drop out, but, instead of so doing, he saw his opponent. He lost the "pot."

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said, quietly rising from the table, "my losses are sufficient for one night. I have finished. It is daylight and the storm is 'letting up' somewhat."

He turned as he spoke, and, glancing at the staircase, saw Jacky standing at the top of it. How long she had been standing there he did not know. He felt certain, although she gave no sign, that she had heard what he had just said.

"Poker" John saw her too.

"Why, Jacky, what means this early rising?" said the old man kindly. "Too tired last night to sleep?"

"No, uncle. Guess I slept all right. The wind's dropping fast. I take it it'll be blowing great guns again before long. This is our chance to make the ranch." She had been an observer of the finish of the game. She had heard Bill's remarks on his loss, and yet not by a single word did she betray her knowledge. Inwardly she railed at herself for having gone to bed. She wondered how it had fared with her uncle.

Bunning-Ford left the room. Somehow he felt that he must get away from the steady gaze of those gray eyes. He knew how Jacky dreaded, for her uncle's sake, the game they had just been playing. He wondered, as he went to test the weather, what she would have thought had she known the stakes, or the extent of her uncle's losses. He hoped she was not aware of these facts.

"You look tired, Uncle John," said the girl, solicitously, as she came down the stairs. She purposely ignored Lablache. "Have you had no sleep?"

"Poker" John laughed a little uneasily.

"Sleep, child? We old birds of the prairie can do with very little of that. It's only pretty faces that want sleep, and I'm thinking you ought still to be in your bed."

"Miss Jacky is ever on the alert to take advantage of the elements," put in Lablache, heavily. "She seems to understand these things better than any of us."

The girl was forced to notice the money-lender. She did so reluctantly, however.

"So you, too, sought shelter from the storm beneath old man Norton's hospitable roof. You are dead right, Mr. Lablache; we who live on the prairie need to be ever on the alert. One never knows what each hour may bring forth."

The girl was still in her ball-dress. Lablache's fishy eyes noticed her charming appearance. The strong, beautiful face sent a thrill of delight over him as he watched it—the delicate rounded shoulders made him suck in his heavy breath like one who anticipates a delicate dish. Jacky turned from him in plainly-expressed disgust.

Her uncle was watching her with a gaze half uneasy and wholly tender. She was the delight of his

old age, the center of all his affections, this motherless child of his dead brother. His cheek twitched painfully as he thought of the huge amount of his losings to Lablache. He shivered perceptibly as he rose from his seat and went over to the cooking stove.

"I believe you people have let the stove out," the girl exclaimed, as she noted her uncle's movement. She had no intention of mentioning the game they had been playing. She feared to hear the facts. Instinct told her that her uncle had lost again. "Yes, I declare you have," as she knelt before the grate and raked away at the ashes.

Suddenly she turned to the money-lender.

"Here, you, fetch me some wood and coal-oil. Men can never be trusted."

Jacky was no respecter of persons. When she ordered there were few men on the prairie who would refuse to obey. Lablache heaved his great bulk from before the table and got on to his feet. His bilious eyes were struggling to smile. The effect was horrible. Then he moved across the room to where a stack of kindling stood.

"Hurry up. I guess if we depended much on you we'd freeze."

And Lablache, the hardest, most unscrupulous man for miles around, endeavored to obey with the alacrity of any sheep-dog.

In spite of himself John Allandale could not refrain from smiling at the grotesque picture the monumental Lablache made as he lumbered towards the stack of kindling.

When "Lord" Bill returned Lablache was bending over the stove beside the girl.

"I've thrown the harness on the horses—watered and fed 'em," he said, taking in the situation at a glance. "Say, Doc," turning to Abbot, "better rouse your good lady."

"She'll be down in a tick," said Jacky, over her shoulder. "Here, doctor, you might get a kettle of water—and Bill, see if you can find some bacon or stuff. And you, uncle, came and sit by the stove—you're cold."

Strange is the power and fascination of woman. A look—a glance—a simple word and we men hasten to minister to her requirements. Half an hour ago and all these men were playing for fortunes—dealing in thousands of dollars on the turn of a card, the passion for besting his neighbor uppermost in each man's mind. Now they were humbly doing one girl's bidding with a zest unsurpassed by the devotion to their recent gamble.

She treated them indiscriminately. Old or young, there was no difference. Bunning-Ford she liked—Dr. Abbot she liked—Lablache she hated and despised, still she allotted them their tasks with perfect impartiality. Only her old uncle she treated differently. That dear, degenerate old man she loved with an affection which knew no bounds. He was her all in the world. Whatever his sins—whatever his faults, she loved him.

CHAPTER IV - AT THE FOSS RIVER RANCH

Spring is already upon the prairie. The fur coat has already been exchanged for the pea-jacket. No longer is the fur cap crushed down upon the head and drawn over the ears until little more than the oval of the face is exposed to the elements; it is still worn occasionally, but now it rests upon the head with the jaunty cant of an ordinary headgear.

The rough coated broncho no longer stands "tucked up" with the cold, with its hind-quarters towards the wind. Now he stands grazing on the patches of grass which the melting snow has placed at his disposal. The cattle, too, hurry to and fro as each day extends their field of fodder. When spring sets in in the great North-West it is with no show of reluctance that grim winter yields its claims and makes way for its gracious and all-conquering foe. Spring is upon everything with all the characteristic suddenness of the Canadian climate. A week—a little seven days—and where all before had been cheerless wastes of snow and ice, we have the promise of summer with us. The snow disappears as with the sweep of a "chinook" in winter. The brown, saturated grass is tinged with the bright emerald hue of new-born pasture. The bared trees don that yellowish tinge which tells of breaking leaves. Rivers begin to flow. Their icy coatings, melting in the growing warmth of the sun, quickly returning once more to their natural element.

With the advent of spring comes a rush of duties to those whose interest are centered in the breeding of cattle. The Foss River Settlement is already teeming with life. For the settlement is the center of the great spring "round-up." Here are assembling the "cow-punchers" from all the outlying ranches, gathering under the command of a captain (generally a man elected for his vast experience on the prairie) and making their preparations to scour the prairie east and west, north and south, to the very limits of the far-reaching plains which spread their rolling pastures at the eastern base of the Rockies. Every head of cattle which is found will be brought into the Foss River Settlement and thence will be distributed to its lawful owners. This is but the beginning of the work, for the task of branding calves and re-branding cattle whose brands have become obscured during the long winter months is a process of no small magnitude for those who number their stocks by tens of thousands.

At John Allandale's ranch all is orderly bustle. There is no confusion. Under Jacky's administration the work goes on with a simple directness which would astonish the uninitiated. There are the corrals to repair and to be put in order. Sheds and out-buildings to be whitewashed. Branding apparatus to be set in working order, fencing to be repaired, preparations for seeding to commence; a thousand and one things to be seen to; and all of which must be finished before the first "bands" of cattle are rounded up into the settlement.

It is nearly a month since we saw this daughter of the prairie garbed in the latest mode, attending the Polo Ball at Calford, and widely different is her appearance now from what it was at the time of our introduction to her.

She is returning from an inspection of the wire fencing of the home pastures. She is riding her favorite horse, Nigger, up the gentle slope which leads to her uncle's house. There is nothing of the woman of fashion about her now—and, perhaps, it is a matter not to be regretted.

She sits her horse with the easy grace of a childhood's experience. Her habit, if such it can be called, is a "dungaree" skirt of a hardly recognizable blue, so washed out is it, surmounted by a beautifully beaded buckskin shirt. Loosely encircling her waist, and resting upon her hips, is a cartridge belt, upon which is slung the holster of a heavy revolver, a weapon without which she never moves abroad. Her head is crowned by a Stetson hat, secured in true prairie fashion by a strap which passes under her hair at the back, while her beautiful hair itself falls in heavy ringlets over her shoulders, and waves untrammelled in the fresh spring breeze as her somewhat unruly charger gallops up the hill towards the ranch.

The great black horse was heading for the stable. Jacky leant over to one side and swung him sharply towards the house. At the veranda she pulled him up short. High mettled, headstrong as the animal was, he knew his mistress. Tricks which he would often attempt to practice upon other people were useless here—doubtless she had taught him that such was the case.

The girl sprang, unaided, to the ground and hitched her picket rope to a tying-post. For a moment she stood on the great veranda which ran down the whole length of the house front. It was a one-storied, bungalow-shaped house, built with a high pitch to the roof and entirely constructed of the finest red pine-wood. Six French windows opened on to the veranda. The outlook was westerly, and, contrary to the usual custom, the ranch buildings were not overlooked by it. The corrals and stables were in the background.

She was about to turn in at one of the windows when she suddenly observed Nigger's ears cocked, and his head turned away towards the shimmering peaks of the distant mountains. The movement fixed her attention instantly. It was the instinct of one who lives in a country where the eyes and ears of a horse are often keener and more far-reaching than those of its human masters. The horse was gazing with statuesque fixedness across a waste of partially-melted snow. A stretch of ten miles lay flat and smooth as a billiard-table at the foot of the rise upon which the house was built. And far out across this the beast was gazing.

Jacky shaded her eyes with her hand and followed the direction of the horse's gaze. For a moment or two she saw nothing but the dazzling glare of the snow in the bright spring sunlight. Then her eyes became accustomed to the brilliancy, and far in the distance, she beheld an animal peacefully moving along from patch to patch of bare grass, evidently in search of fodder.

"A horse," she muttered, under her breath. "Whose?"

She could find no answer to her monosyllabic inquiry. She realized at once that to whomsoever it belonged its owner would never recover it, for it was grazing on the far side of the great "Muskeg," that mighty bottomless mire which extends for forty miles north and south and whose narrowest breadth is a span of ten miles. She was looking across it now, and innocent enough that level plain of terror appeared at that moment. And yet it was the curse of the ranching district, for, annually, hundreds of cattle met an untimely death in its cruel, absorbing bosom.

She turned away for the purpose of fetching a pair of field-glasses. She was anxious to identify the horse. She passed along the veranda towards the furthest window. It was the window of her uncle's office. Just as she was nearing it she heard the sound of voices coming from within. She paused, and an ominous pucker drew her brows together. Her beautiful dark face clouded. She had no wish to play the part of an eavesdropper, but she had recognized the voices of her uncle and Lablache. She had also heard the mention of her own name. What woman, or, for that matter, man, can refrain from listening when they hear two people talking about them. The window was open; Jacky paused—and listened.

Lablache's thick voice lolled heavily upon the brisk air.

"She is a good girl. But don't you think you are considering her future from a rather selfish point of view, John?"

"Selfish?" The old man laughed in his hearty manner "Maybe you're right, though. I never thought of that. You see I'm getting old now. I can't get around like I used to. Bless me, she's two-an'-twenty. Three-and-twenty years since my brother Dick—God rest his soul!—married that half-breed girl, Josie. Yes, I guess you're right, she's bound to marry soon."

Jacky smiled a curious dark smile. Something told her why Lablache and her uncle were discussing her future.

"Why, of course she is," said Lablache, "and when that happy event is accomplished I hope it will not be with any improvident—harum-scarum man like—like—"

"The Hon. Bunning-Ford I suppose you would say, eh?"

There was a somewhat sharp tone in the old man's voice which Jacky was not slow to detect.

"Well," went on Lablache, with one of those deep whistling breaths which made him so like an ancient pug, "since you mention him, for want of a better specimen of improvidence, his name will do."

"So I thought—so I thought," laughed the old man. But his words rang strangely. "Most people think," he went on, "that when I die Jacky will be rich. But she won't."

"No," replied Lablache, emphatically.

There was a world of meaning in his tone.

"However, I guess we can let her hunt around for herself when she wants a husband. Jacky's a girl with a head. A sight better head than I've got on my old shoulders. When she chooses a husband, and comes and tells me of it, she shall have my blessing and anything else I have to give. I'm not going to interfere with that girl's matrimonial affairs, sir, not for any one. That child, bless her heart, is like my own child to me. If she wants the moon, and there's nothing else to stop her having it but my consent, why, I guess that moon's as good as fenced in with triple-barbed wire an' registered in her name in the Government Land Office."

"And in the meantime you are going to make that same child work for her daily bread like any 'hired man,' and keep company with any scoun—"

"Hi, stop there, Lablache! Stop there," thundered "Poker" John, and Jacky heard a thud as of a fist falling upon the table. "You've taken the unwarrantable liberty of poking your nose into my affairs, and, because of our old acquaintance, I have allowed it. But now let me tell you this is no d—d business of yours. There's no make with Jacky. What she does, she does of her own accord."

At that moment the girl in question walked abruptly in from the veranda. She had heard enough.

"Ah, uncle," she said, smiling tenderly up into the old man's face, "talking of me, I guess. You shouted my name just as I was coming along. Say, I want the field-glasses. Where are they?"

Then she turned on Lablache as if she had only just become aware of his presence.

"What, Mr. Lablache, you here? And so early, too. Guess this isn't like you. How is your store—that temple of wealth and high interest—to get on without you? How are the 'improvident'—'harum-scarums' to live if you are not present to minister to their wants—upon the best of security?" Without waiting for a reply the girl picked up the glasses she was in search of and darted out, leaving Lablache glaring his bilious-eyed rage after her.

"Poker" John stood for a moment a picture of blank surprise; then he burst into a loud guffaw at the discomfited money-lender. Jacky heard the laugh and smiled. Then she passed out of earshot and concentrated her attention upon the distant speck of animal life.

The girl stood for some moments surveying the creature as it moved leisurely along, its nose well down amongst the roots of the tawny grass, seeking out the tender green shoots of the new-born pasture. Then she closed her glasses and her thoughts wandered to other matters.

The gorgeous landscape was, for a moment, utterly lost upon her. The snowy peaks of the Rockies, stretching far as the eye could see away to the north and south, like some giant fortification set up to defend the rolling pastures of the prairies from the ceaseless attack of the stormy Pacific Ocean, were far from her thoughts. Her eyes, it is true, were resting on the level flat of the muskeg, beyond the grove of slender pines which lined the approach to the house, but she was not thinking of that. No, recollection was struggling back through two years of a busy life, to a time when, for a brief space, she had watched over the welfare of another than her uncle, when the dark native blood which flowed plentifully in her veins had asserted itself, and a nature which was hers had refused to remain buried beneath a superficial European training. She was thinking of a man who had formed a secret part of her life for a few short years, when she had allowed her heart to dictate a course for her actions which no other motive but that of love could have brought about. She was thinking of Peter Retief, a pretty scoundrel, a renowned "bad man," a man of wild and reckless daring. He had been the terror of the countryside. A cattle-thief who feared neither man nor devil; a man who for twelve months and more had carried, his life in his hands, the sworn enemy of law and order, but who, in his worst moments, had never been known to injure a poor man or a woman. The wild blood of the half-breed that was in her had been stirred, as only a woman's blood can be, by his reckless dealings, his courage, effrontery, and withal his wondrous kindness of disposition. She was thinking of this man now, this man whom she knew to be numbered amongst the countless victims of that dreadful mire. And what had conjured this thought? A horse—a horse peacefully grazing far out across the mire in the direction of the distant hills which she knew had once been this desperado's home.

Her train of recollection suddenly became broken, and a sigh escaped her as the sound of her uncle's voice fell upon her ears. She did not move, however, for she knew that Lablache was with

him, and this man she hated with the fiery hatred only to be found in the half-breeds of any native race.

"I'm sorry, John, we can't agree on the point," Lablache was saying in his wheezy voice, as the two men stood at the other end of the veranda, "but I'm quite determined upon the matter myself. The land intersects mine and cuts me clean off from the railway siding, and I am forced to take my cattle a circle of nearly fifteen miles to ship them. If he would only be reasonable and allow a passage I would say nothing. I will force him to sell."

"If you can," put in the rancher. "I reckon you've got chilled steel to deal with when you endeavor to 'force' old Joe Norton to sell the finest wheat land in the country."

At this point in the conversation three men came round from the back of the house. They were "cow" hands belonging to the ranch. They approached Jacky with the easy assurance of men who were as much companions as servants of their mistress. All three, however, touched their wide-brimmed hats in unmistakable respect. They were clad in buckskin shirts and leather "chaps," and each had his revolver upon his hip. The girl lost the rest of the conversation between her uncle and Lablache, for her attention was turned to the men.

"Well?" she asked shortly, as the men stood before her.

One of the men, a tall, lank specimen of the dark-skinned prairie half-breed, acted as spokesman.

He ejected a squirt of tobacco juice from his great, dirty mouth before he spoke. Then with a curious backward jerk of the head he blurted out a stream of Western jargon.

"Say, missie," he exclaimed in a high-pitched nasal voice, "it ain't no use in talkin', ye kent put no tenderfoot t' boss the round-up. There's them all-fired Donoghue lot jest sent right in t' say, 'cause, I s'pose, they reckon as they're the high muck-i-muck o' this location, that that tarnation Sim Lory, thar head man, is to cap' the round-up. Why, he ain't cast a blamed foot on the prairie sence he's been hyar. An' I'll swear he don't know the horn o' his saddle from a monkey stick. Et ain't right, missie, an' us fellers t' work under him an' all."

His address came to an abrupt end, and he gave emphasis to his words by a prolonged expectoration. Jacky, her eyes sparkling with anger, was quick to reply.

"Look you here, Silas, just go right off and throw your saddle on your pony—"

"Guess it's right thar, missie," the man interrupted.

"Then sling off as fast as your plug can lay foot to the ground, and give John Allandale's compliments to Jim Donoghue and say, if they don't send a capable man, since they've been appointed to find the 'captain,' he'll complain to the Association and insist on the penalty being enforced. What, do they take us for a lot of 'gophers'? Sim Lory, indeed; why, he's not fit to prise weeds with a two tine hay fork."

The men went off hurriedly. Their mistress's swift methods of dealing with matters pleased them. Silas was more than pleased to be able to get a "slant" (to use his own expression) at his old enemy, Sim Lory. As the men departed "Poker" John came and stood beside his niece.

"What's that about Sim Lory, Jacky?"

"They've sent him to run this 'round-up.'"

"And?"

"Oh, I just told them it wouldn't do," indifferently.

Old John smiled.

"In those words?"

"Well, no, uncle," the girl said with a responsive smile. "But they needed a 'jinning' up. I sent the message in your name."

The old man shook his head, but his indulgent smile remained.

"You'll be getting me into serious trouble with that impetuosity of yours, Jacky," he said absently. "But there—I daresay you know best."

His words were characteristic of him. He left the entire control of the ranch to this girl of two-and-twenty, relying implicitly upon her judgment in all things. It was a strange thing to do, for he was still a vigorous man. To look at him was to make oneself wonder at the reason. But the girl accepted the responsibility without question. There was a subtle sympathy between uncle and niece. Sometimes Jacky would gaze up into his handsome old face and something in the twitching cheek, the curiously-shaped mouth, hidden beneath the gray mustache, would cause her to turn away with a sigh, and, with stimulated resolution, hurl herself into the arduous labors of managing the ranch. What she read in that dear, honest face she loved so well she kept locked in her own secret heart, and never, by word or act, did she allow herself to betray it. She was absolute mistress of the Foss River Ranch and she knew it. Old "Poker" John, like the morphine "fiend," merely continued to keep up his reputation and the more fully deserve his sobriquet. His mind, his character, his whole being was being slowly but surely absorbed in the lust of gambling.

The girl laid her hand upon the old man's arm.

"Uncle—what was Lablache talking to you about? I mean when I came for the field-glasses."

"Poker" John was gazing abstractedly into the dense growth of pines which fringed the house. He pulled himself together, but his eyes had in them a far-away look.

"Many things," he replied evasively.

"Yes, I know, dear, but," bending her face while she removed one of her buckskin gauntlets from her hand, "I mean about me. You two were-discussing me, I know."

She turned her keen gray eyes upon her relative as she finished speaking. The old man turned away. He felt that those eyes were reading his very soul. They made him uncomfortable.

"Oh, he said I ought not to let you associate with certain people."

"Why?" The sharp question came with the directness of a pistol-shot.

"Well, he seemed to think that you might think of marrying."

"Ah, and—"

"He seemed to fancy that you, being impetuous, might make a mistake and fall—"

"In love with the wrong man. Yes, I understand; and from his point of view, if ever I do marry it will undoubtedly be the wrong man."

And the girl finished up with a mirthless laugh.

They stood for some moments in silence. They were both thinking. The noise from the corrals behind the house reached them. The steady drip, drip of the water from the melting snow upon the roof of the house sounded loudly as it fell on the sodden ground beneath.

"Uncle, did it ever strike you that that greasy money-lender wants to marry me himself?"

The question startled John Allandale more than anything else could have done. He turned sharply round and faced his niece.

"Marry you, Jacky?" he repeated. "I never thought of it."

"It isn't to be supposed that you would have done so."

There was the faintest tinge of bitterness in the girl's answer.

"And do you really think that he wants to marry you?"

"I don't know quite. Perhaps I am wrong, uncle, and my imagination has run away with me. Yes, I sometimes think he wants to marry me."

They both relapsed into silence. Then her uncle spoke again.

"Jacky, what you have just said has made something plain to me which I could not understand before. He came and gave me—unsolicited, mind—"a little eagerly, "a detailed account of Bunning-Ford's circumstances, and—"

"Endeavored to bully you into sending him about his business. Poor old Bill! And what was his account of him?"

The girl's eyes were glowing with quickly-roused passion, but she kept them turned from her uncle's face.

"He told me that the boy had heavy mortgages on his land and stock. He told me that if he were to realize to-morrow there would be little or nothing for himself. Everything would go to some firm in Calford. In short, that he has gambled his ranch away."

"And he told this to you, uncle, dear." Then the girl paused and looked far out across the great muskeg. In her abrupt fashion she turned again to the old man. "Uncle," she went on, "tell me truly, do you owe anything to Lablache? Has he any hold upon you?"

There was a world of anxiety in her voice as she spoke. John Allandale tried to follow her thought before he answered. He seemed to grasp something of her meaning, for in a moment his eyes took on an expression of pain. Then his words came slowly, as from one who is not sure of what he is saying.

"I owe him some—money—yes—but—"

"Poker?"

The question was jerked viciously from the girl's lips.

"Yes."

Jacky turned slowly away until her eyes rested upon the distant, grazing horse. A strange restlessness seemed to be upon her. She was fidgeting with the gauntlet which she had just removed. Then slowly her right hand passed round to her hip, where it rested upon the butt of

her revolver. There was a tight drawnness about her lips and her keen gray eyes looked as though gazing into space.

"How much?" she said at last, breaking the heavy silence which had followed upon her uncle's admission. Then before he could answer she went on deliberately: "But there—I guess it don't cut any figure. Lablache shall be paid, and I take it his bill of interest won't amount to more than we can pay if we're put to it. Poor old Bill!"

CHAPTER V - THE "STRAY" BEYOND THE MUSKEG

The Foss River Settlement nestles in one of those shallow hollows—scarcely a valley and which yet must be designated by such a term—in which the Canadian North-West abounds.

We are speaking now of the wilder and less-inhabited parts of the great country, where grain-growing is only incidental, and the prevailing industry is stock-raising. Where the land gradually rises towards the maze-like foothills before the mighty crags of the Rockies themselves be reached. A part where yet is to be heard of the romantic crimes of the cattle-raiders; a part to where civilization has already turned its face, but where civilization has yet to mature. In such a country is situate the Foss River Settlement.

The settlement itself is like dozens of others of its kind. There is the school-house, standing by itself, apart from other buildings, as if in proud distinction for its classic vocation. There is the church, or rather chapel, where every denomination holds its services. A saloon, where four per cent. beer and prohibition whiskey of the worst description is openly sold over the bar; where you can buy poker "chips" to any amount, and can sit down and play from daylight till dark, from dark to daylight. A blacksmith and wheelwright; a baker; a carpenter; a doctor who is also a druggist; a store where one can buy every article of dry goods at exorbitant prices—and on credit; and then, besides all this, well beyond the township limit there is a half-breed settlement, a place which even to this day is a necessary evil and a constant thorn in the side of that smart, efficient force—the North-West Mounted Police.

Lablache's store stands in the center of the settlement, facing on to the market-place—the latter a vague, undefined space of waste ground on which vendors of produce are wont to draw up their wagons. The store is a massive building of great extent. Its proportions rise superior to its surroundings, as if to indicate in a measure its owner's worldly status in the district. It is built entirely of stone, and roofed with slate—the only building of such construction in the settlement.

A wonderful center of business is Lablache's store—the chief one for a radius of fifty miles. Nearly the whole building is given up to the stocking of goods, and only at the back of the building is to be found a small office which answers the multifarious purposes of office, parlor, dining-room, smoking-room—in short, every necessity of its owner, except bedroom, which occupies a mere recess partitioned off by thin matchwood boarding.

Wealthy as Lablache was known to be he spent little or no money upon himself beyond just sufficient to purchase the bare necessities of life. He had few requirements which could not be satisfied under the headings of tobacco and food—both of which he indulged himself freely. The saloon provided the latter, and as for the former, trade price was best suited to his inclinations, and so he drew upon his stock. He was a curious man, was Verner Lablache—a man who understood the golden value of silence. He never even spoke of his nationality. Foss River was content to call him curious—some people preferred other words to express their opinion.

Lablache had known John Allandale for years. Who, in Foss River, had he not known for years? Lablache would have liked to call old John his friend, but somehow "Poker" John had never responded to the money-lender's advances. Lablache showed no resentment. If he cared at all he was careful to keep his feelings hidden. One thing is certain, however, he allowed himself to think long and often of old John—and his household. Often, when in the deepest stress of his far-reaching work, he would heave his great bulk back in his chair and allow those fishy, lashless, sphinx-like eyes of his to gaze out of his window in the direction of the Foss River Ranch. His window faced in the direction of John's house, which was plainly visible on the slope which bounded the southern side of the settlement.

And so it came about a few days later, in one of these digressions of thought, that the money-lender, gazing out towards the ranch, beheld a horseman riding slowly up to the veranda of the Allandale's house. There was nothing uncommon in the incident, but the sight riveted his attention, and an evil light came into his usually expressionless eyes. He recognized the horseman as the Hon. Bunning-Ford.

Lablache swung round on his revolving chair, and, in doing so, kicked over a paper-basket. The rapidity of his movement was hardly to be expected in one of his bulk. His thin eyebrows drew together in an ugly frown.

"What does he want?" he muttered, under his heavy breath.

He hazarded no answer to his own question. It was answered for him. He saw the figure of a woman step out on to the veranda.

The money-lender rose swiftly to his feet and took a pair of field-glasses from their case. Adjusting them he gazed long and earnestly at the house on the hill.

Jacky was talking to "Lord" Bill. She was habited in her dungaree skirt and buckskin bodice. Presently Bill dismounted and passed into the house.

Lablache shut his glasses with a snap and turned away from the window. For some time he stood gazing straight before him and a swift torrent of thought flowed through his active brain. Then, with the directness of one whose mind is made up, he went over to a small safe which stood in a corner of the room. From this he took an account book. The cover bore the legend "Private." He laid it upon the table, and, for some moments, bent over it as he scanned its pages.

He paused at an account headed John Allandale. The figures of this account were very large, totalling into six figures. The balance against the rancher was enormous. Lablache gave a satisfied grunt as he turned over to another account.

"Safe—safe enough. Safe as the Day of Doom," he said slowly. His mouth worked with a cruel smile.

He paused at the account of Bunning-Ford.

"Twenty thousand dollars—um," the look of satisfaction was changed. He looked less pleased, but none the less cruel. "Not enough—let me see. His place is worth fifty thousand dollars. Stock another thirty thousand. I hold thirty-five thousand on first mortgage for the Calford Trust and Loan Co." He smiled significantly. "This bill of sale for twenty thousand is in my own name. Total, fifty-five thousand. Sell him up and there would still be a margin. No, not yet, my friend."

He closed the book and put it away. Then he walked to the window. Bunning-Ford's horse was still standing outside the house.

"He must be dealt with soon," he muttered.

And in those words was concentrated a world of hate and cruel purpose.

Who shall say of what a man's disposition is composed? Who shall penetrate those complex feelings which go to make a man what his secret consciousness knows himself to be? Not even the man himself can tell the why and wherefore of his passions and motives. It is a matter beyond the human ken. It is a matter which neither science nor learning can tell us of. Verner Lablache was possessed of all that prosperity could give him. He was wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice, and no pleasure which money could buy was beyond his reach. He knew, only too well, that when the moment came, and he wished it, he could set out for any of the great centers of fashion and society, and there purchase for himself a wife who would fulfill the requirements of the most fastidious. In his own arrogant mind he went further, and protested that he could choose whom he would and she would be his. But this method he set aside as too simple, and, instead, had decided to select for his wife a girl whom he had watched grow up to womanhood from the first day that she had opened her great, wondering eyes upon the world. And thus far he had been thwarted. All his wealth went for nothing. The whim of this girl he had chosen was more powerful in this matter than was gold—the gold he loved. But Lablache was not the man to sit down and admit of defeat; he meant to marry Joaquina Allandale willy-nilly. Love was impossible to such a man as he. He had conceived an absorbing passion for her, it is true, but love—as it is generally understood—no. He was not a young man—the victim of a passion, fierce but transient. He was matured in all respects—in mind and body. His passion was lasting, if impure, and he meant to take to himself the girl-wife. Nothing should stand in his way.

He turned back to his desk, but not to work.

In the meantime the object of his forcible attentions was holding an interesting *tête-à-tête* with the man against whom he fostered an evil purpose.

Jacky was seated at a table in the pleasant sitting-room of her uncle's house. Spread out before her were several open stock books, from which she was endeavoring to estimate the probable number of "beeves" which the early spring would produce. This was a task which she always liked to do herself before the round-up was complete, so as the easier to sort the animals into their various pastures when they should come in. Her visitor was standing with his back to the stove, in typical Canadian fashion. He was, clad in a pair of well-worn chaps drawn over a pair of moleskin trousers, and wore a gray tweed coat and waistcoat over a soft cotton shirt, of the "collar attached" type. As he stood there the stoop of his shoulders was very pronounced. His fair hair was carefully brushed, and although his face was slightly weather-stained, still, it was quite easy to imagine the distinguished figure he would be, clad in all the solemn pomp of broadcloth and the silk glaze of fashionable society in the neighborhood of Bond Street.

The girl was not looking at her books. She was looking up and smiling at a remark her companion had just made.

"And so your friend, Pat Nabob, is going up into the mountains after gold. Does he know anything about prospecting?"

"I think so—he's had some experience."

Jacky became serious. She rose and turned to the window, which commanded a perfect view of the distant peaks of the Rockies, towering high above the broad, level expanse of the great

muskeg. With her back still turned to him she fired an abrupt question.

"Say, Bill, guess 'Pickles' has some other reason for this mad scheme. What is it? You can't tell me he's going just for love of the adventure of the thing. Now, let's hear the truth."

Unobserved by the girl, her companion shrugged his shoulders.

"If you want his reason you'd better ask him, Jacky. I can only surmise."

"So can I." Jacky turned sharply. "I'll tell you why he's going, Bill, and you can bet your last cent I'm right. Lablache is at the bottom of it. He's at the bottom of everything that causes people to leave Foss River. He's a blood-sucker."

Bunning-Ford nodded. He was rarely expansive. Moreover, he knew he could add nothing to what the girl had said. She expressed his sentiments fully. There was a pause. Jacky was keenly eyeing the tall thin figure at the stove.

"Why did you come to tell me of this?" she asked at last.

"Thought you'd like to know. You like 'Pickles.'"

"Yes—Bill, you are thinking of going with him."

Her companion laughed uneasily. This girl was very keen.

"I didn't say so."

"No, but still you are thinking of doing so. See here, Bill, tell me all about it."

Bill coughed. Then he turned, and stooping, shook the ashes from the stove and opened the damper.

"Beastly cold in here," he remarked inconsequently.

"Yes—but, out with it."

Bill stood up and turned his indolent eyes upon his interrogator.

"I wasn't thinking of going—to the mountains."

"Where then?"

"To the Yukon."

"Ah!"

In spite of herself the girl could not help the exclamation.

"Why?" she went on a moment later.

"Well, if you must have it, I shan't be able to last out this summer—unless a stroke of luck falls to my share."

"Financially?"

"Financially."

"Lablache?"

"Lablache—and the Calford Trust Co."

"The same thing," with conviction.

"Exactly—the same thing."

"And you stand?"

"If I meet the interest on my mortgages it will take away every head of fat cattle I can scrape together, and then I cannot pay Lablache other debts which fall due in two weeks' time." He quietly drew out his tobacco-pouch and rolled a cigarette. He seemed quite indifferent to his difficulties. "If I realize on the ranch now there'll be something left for me. If I go on, by the end of the summer there won't be."

"I suppose you mean that you will be deeper in debt."

He smiled in his own peculiarly lazy fashion as he held a lighted match to his cigarette.

"Just so. I shall owe Lablache more," he said, between spasmodic draws at his tobacco.

"Lablache has wonderful luck at cards."

"Yes," shortly.

Jacky returned to the table and sat down. She turned the pages of a stock book idly. She was thinking and the expression of her dark, determined little face indicated the unpleasant nature of her thoughts. Presently she looked up and encountered the steady gaze of her companion. They were great friends—these two. In that glance each read in the other's mind something of a mutual thought. Jacky, with womanly readiness, put part of it into words.

"No one ever seems to win against him, Bill. Guess he makes a steady income out of poker."

The man nodded and gulped down a deep inhalation from his cigarette.

"Wonderful luck," the girl went on.

"Some people call it 'luck,'" put in Bill, quietly, but with a curious purse of the lips.

"What do you call it?" sharply.

Bunning-Ford refused to commit himself. He contented himself with blowing the ash from his cigarette and crossing over to the window, where he stood looking out. He had come there that afternoon with a half-formed intention of telling this girl something which every girl must hope to hear sooner or later in her life. He had come there with the intention of ending, one way or the other, a friendship—*camaraderie*—whatever you please to call it, by telling this hardy girl of the prairie the old, old story over again. He loved this woman with an intensity that very few would have credited him with. Who could associate lazy, good-natured, careless "Lord" Bill with serious love? Certainly not his friends. And yet such was the case, and for that reason had he come. The affairs of Pat Nabob were but a subterfuge. And now he found it impossible to pronounce the words he had so carefully thought out. Jacky was not the woman to approach easily with sentiment, she was so "deucedly practical." So Bill said to himself. It was useless to speculate upon her feelings. This girl never allowed anything approaching sentiment to appear upon the surface. She knew better than to do so. She had the grave responsibility of her uncle's ranch upon her shoulders, therefore all men must be kept at arm's length. She was in every sense a woman, passionate, loyal, loving. But in addition nature had endowed her with a spirit which rose superior to feminine attributes and feelings. The blood in her veins—her life on the prairie—her tender care and solicitude for her uncle, of whose failings and weaknesses she was painfully aware, had caused her to put from her all thoughts of love and marriage. Her life must be devoted to him, and while he lived she was determined that no thought of self should interfere with her self-imposed duty.

At last "Lord" Bill broke the silence which had fallen upon the room after the girl's unanswered question. His remark seemed irrelevant and inconsequent.

"There's a horse on the other side of the muskeg. Who's is it?"

Jacky was at his side in an instant. So suddenly had she bounded from the table, that her companion turned, with that lazy glance of his, and looked keenly at her. He failed to understand her excitement. She had snatched up a pair of field-glasses and had already leveled them at the distant object.

She looked long and earnestly across the miry waste. Then she turned to her companion with a strange look in her beautiful gray eyes.

"Bill, I've seen that horse before. Four days ago. I've looked for it ever since, but couldn't see it. I'm going to round it up."

"Eh? How?"

Bill was looking out across the muskeg again.

"Guess I'm going right across there this evening," the girl said quietly.

"Across the muskeg?" Her companion was roused out of himself. His usually lazy gray eyes were gleaming brightly. "Impossible!"

"Not at all, Bill," she replied, with an easy smile. "I know the path."

"But I thought there was only one man who ever knew that mythical path, and—he is dead."

"Quite right, Bill—only one *man*."

"Then the old stories—"

There was a peculiar expression on the man's face. The girl interrupted him with a gay laugh.

"Bother the 'old stories.' I'm going across there this evening after tea—coming?"

Bunning-Ford looked across at the clock—the hands pointed to half-past one. He was silent for a minute. Then he said,—

"I'll be with you at four if—if you'll tell me all about—"

"Peter Retief—yes, I'll tell you as we go, Bill. What are you going to do until then?"

"I'm going down to the saloon to meet 'Pickles,' your pet aversion, Pedro Mancha, and we're going to find a fourth."

"Ah, poker?"

"Yes, poker."

"I'm sorry, Bill. But be here at four sharp and I'll tell you all about it. See here, boy, 'mum's' the word."

The craving of the Hon. Bunning-Ford's life was excitement. His temperament bordered on the lethargic. He felt that unless he could obtain excitement life was utterly unbearable. He had sought it all over the world before he had adopted the life of a rancher. Here in the West of Canada he had found something of what he sought. There was the big game shooting in the mountains, and the pursuit of the "grizzly" is the most wildly enthralled chase in the world. There was the taming and "breaking" of the wild and furious "broncho"—the most exemplary "bucking" horse in the world. There was the "round-up" and handling of cattle which never failed to give unlimited excitement. And then, at all times, was the inevitable poker, that king of all excitements among card games. The West of Canada had pleased "Lord" Bill as did no other country, and so he had invested the remains of his younger son's portion in stock.

He had asked for excitement and Canada had responded generously. Bill had found more than excitement, he had found love; and had found a wealth of real friendship rarely equaled in the busy cities of civilization.

In the midst of all these things which, seeking, he had found, came this suggestion from a girl. The muskeg—the cruel, relentless muskeg, that mire, dreaded and shunned by white men and natives alike. It could be crossed by a secret, path. The thought pleased him. And none knew of this path except a man who was dead and this girl he loved. There was a strange excitement in the thought of such a journey.

"Lord" Bill, ignoring his stirrup, vaulted into his saddle, and, as he swung his horse round and headed towards the settlement, he wondered what the day would bring forth.

"Confound the cards," he muttered, as he rode away.

And it was the first time in his life that he had reluctantly contemplated a gamble.

Had he only known it, a turning-point in his life was rapidly approaching—a turning-point which would lead to events which, if told as about to occur in the nineteenth century, would surely bring down derision upon the head of the teller. And yet would the derided one have right on his side.

CHAPTER VI

"WAYS THAT ARE DARK"

It was less than a quarter of a mile from the Allandaes' house to the saloon—a den of reeking atmosphere and fouler spirits.

The saloon at Foss River was no better and no worse than hundreds of others in the North-West at the time of which we write. It was a fairly large wooden building standing at the opposite end of the open space which answered the purpose of a market-place, and facing Lablache's store. Inside, it was gloomy, and the air invariably reeked of stale tobacco and drink. The bar was large, and at one end stood a piano kept for the purpose of "sing-songs"—nightly occurrences when the execrable whisky had done its work. Passing through the bar one finds a large dining-room on one side of a passage, and, on the other, a number of smaller rooms devoted to the use of those who wished to play poker.

It was towards this place that the Hon. Bunning-Ford was riding in the leisurely manner of one to whom time is no object.

His thoughts were far from matters pertaining to his destination, and he would gladly have welcomed anything which could have interfered with his projected game. For the moment poker had lost its charm.

This man was at no time given to vacillation. All his methods were, as a rule, very direct. Underneath his easy nonchalance he was of a very decided nature. His thin face at times could suddenly become very keen. His true character was hidden by the cultivated lazy expression of his eyes. Bunning-Ford was one of those men who are at their best in emergency. At all other times life was a thing which it was impossible for him to take seriously. He valued money as little as he valued anything in the world. Poker he looked upon as a means to an end. He had no religious principles, but firmly believed in doing as he would be done by. Honesty and truth he loved, because to him they were clean. It mattered nothing to him what his surroundings might be, for, though living in them, he was not of them. He would as soon sit down to play cards with three known murderers as play in the best club in London, and he would treat them honestly and expect the same in return—but a loaded revolver would be slung upon his hip and the holster would be open and handy.

As he neared the saloon he recognized the figures of two men walking in the direction of the saloon. They were the doctor and John Allandale. He rode towards them.

"Hallo, Bill, whither bound?" said the old rancher, as the younger man came up. "Going to join us in the parlor of Smith's fragrant hostelry? The spider is already there weaving the web in which he hopes to ensnare us."

Bunning-Ford shook his head.

"Who's the spider—Lablache?"

"Yes, we're going to play. It's the first time for some days. Guess we've all been too busy with the round-up. Won't you really join us?"

"Can't. I've promised Mancha and 'Pickles' revenge for a game we played the other night, when I happened to relieve them of a few dollars."

"Sensible man—Lablache is too consistent," put in the doctor, quietly.

"Nonsense," said "Poker" John, optimistically. "You're always carping about the man's luck. We must break it soon."

"Yes, we've suggested that before."

Bill spoke with meaning and finished up with a purse of the lips.

They were near the saloon.

"How long are you going to play?" he went on quietly.

"Right through the evening," replied "Poker" John, with keen satisfaction. "And you?"

"Only until four o'clock. I am going to take tea up at your place."

The old man offered no comment and Bill dismounted and tied the horse to a post, and the three men entered the stuffy bar. The room was half full of people. They were mostly cow-boys or men connected with the various ranches about the neighborhood. Words of greeting hailed the newcomers on all sides, but old John, who led the way, took little or no notice of those whom he recognized. The lust of gambling was upon him, and, as a dipsomaniac craves for drink, so he was longing to feel the smooth surface of pasteboard between his fingers. While Bunning-Ford stopped to exchange a word with some of those he met, the other two men went straight up to the bar. Smith himself, a grizzled old man, with a tobacco-stained gray moustache and beard, and the possessor of a pair of narrow, wicked-looking eyes, was serving out whisky to a couple of worse-looking half-breeds. It was noticeable that every man present wore at his waist either a revolver or a long sheath knife. Even the proprietor was fully armed. The half-breeds wore knives.

"Poker" John was apparently a man of distinction here. Possibly the knowledge that he played a big game elicited for him a sort of indifferent respect. Anyway, the half-breeds moved to allow him to approach the bar.

"Lablache here?" asked the rancher, eagerly.

"He is," replied Mr. Smith, in a drawling voice, as he pushed the two whiskies across to the waiting half-breeds. "Been here half an hour. Jest pass right through, mister. Maybe you'll find him located in number two."

There was no doubt that John B. Smith hailed from America. Although the Canadian is not devoid of the American accent there is not much doubt of nationality when one hears the real thing.

"Good; come on, Doc. No, thanks, Smith," as the man behind the bar reached towards a bottle with a white seal. "We'll have something later on. Number two on the right, I think you said."

The two men passed on into the back part of the premises.

"Guess dollars'll be flyin' fore the night's out," said Smith, addressing any who cared to listen, and indicating "Poker" John with a jerk of the head in the direction of the door through which the two men had just passed. "Make the banks hum when they raise the 'bid.' Guess ther' ain't many o' ther' likes roun' these parts. Rye or Scotch?" to "Lord" Bill and three other men who came up at that moment. Mancha and "Pickles" were with him, and a fourth player—the deposed captain of the "round-up," Sim Lory.

"Scotch, you old heathen, of course," replied Bill, with a tolerant laugh. "You don't expect us to drink fire-water. If you kept decent Rye it would be different. We're going to have a flutter. Any room?"

"Number two, I guess. Chock-a-block in the others. Tolerable run on poker these times. All the round-up hands been gettin' advances, I take it. Say when."

The four men said "when" in due course, and each watered his own whisky. The proprietor went on, with a quick twinkle of his beady eyes,—

"Ther's Mr. Allandale an' Lablache and company in number two. Nobody else, I guess. I've a notion you'll find plenty of room. Chips, no? All right; goin' to play a tidy game? Good!"

The four men, having swallowed their drink, followed in the footsteps of the others.

There was something very brisk and business-like about this gambling-hell. Early settlers doubtless remember in the days of "prohibition," when four per cent. beer was supposed to be the only beverage of the country, and before rigid legislation, backed by the armed force of the North-West Mounted Police, swept these frightful pollutions from the fair face of the prairie, how they thrived on the encouragement of gambling and the sale of contraband spirits. The West is a

cleaner country now, thanks to the untiring efforts of the police.

In number two "Poker" John and his companions were already getting to work when Bill and his friends entered. Beyond a casual remark they seemed to take little notice of each other. One and all were eager to begin the play.

A deep silence quickly fell upon the room. It was the silence of suppressed excitement. A silence only broken by monosyllabic and almost whispered betting and "raising" as the games proceeded. An hour passed thus. At the table where Lablache and John Allandale were playing the usual luck prevailed. The money-lender seemed unable to do wrong, and at the other table Bunning-Ford was faring correspondingly badly. Pedro Mancha, the Mexican, a man of obscure past and who lived no one quite knew how, but who always appeared to find the necessary to gamble with, was the favored one of dame Fortune. Already he had heaped before him a pile of "bills" and I.O.U.'s most of which bore "Lord" Bill's signature. Looking on at either table, no one from outward signs could have said which way the luck was going. Only the scribbings of the pencils upon the memo pads and the gradual accumulation of the precious slips of paper before Lablache at one table and the wild-eyed, dark-skinned Mexican at the other, told the story of the ruin which was surely being accomplished.

At length, with a loser's privilege, Bunning-Ford, after glancing at his watch, rose from the table. His lean face was in no way disturbed. He seemed quite indifferent to his losses.

"I'll quit you, Pedro," he said, smiling lazily down at the Mexican. "You're a bit too hot for me today."

The dark-skinned man smiled a vague, non-committing smile and displayed a double row of immaculate teeth.

"Good. You shall have your revenge. Doubtless you would like some of these papers back," he said, as he swept them leisurely into his pocket-book, and then sugar-bagging a cigarette paper he poured a few grains of granulated tobacco into it.

"Yes, I daresay I shall relieve you of some later on," replied Bill, quietly. Then he turned to the other table and stood watching the play.

He glanced anxiously at the bare table in front of the old rancher. Even Dr. Abbot was well stocked with slips of paper. Then his gaze fell upon the money-lender, behind whose huge back he was standing.

He moved slightly to one side. It is an unwritten law amongst poker players, in a public place in the west of the American continent, that no onlooker should stand immediately behind any player. He moved to Lablache's right. The money-lender was dealing. "Lord" Bill lit a cigarette.

The cards were dealt round. Then the draw. Then Lablache laid the pack down. Bunning-Ford had noted these things mechanically. Then something caught his attention. It was his very indifference which caused his sudden attention. Had he been following the game with his usual keenness he would only have been thinking of the betting.

Lablache was writing upon his memo, pad, which was a gorgeous effort in silver mounting. One of those oblong blocks with a broad band of burnished silver at the binding of the perforated leaves. He knew that this was the pad the money-lender always used; anyway, it was similar in all respects to his usual memorandum pads.

How it was his attention had become fixed upon that pad he could not have told, but now an inspiration came to him. His face remained unchanged in its expression, but those lazy eyes of his gleamed wickedly as he leisurely puffed at his cigarette.

The bet went round. Lablache raised and raised again. Eventually the rancher "saw" him. The other took the pool. No word was spoken, but "Lord" Bill gritted his teeth and viciously pitched his cigarette to the other end of the room.

During the next two deals he allowed his attention to wander. Lablache dropped out one hand, and, in the next, he merely "filled" his "ante" and allowed the doctor to take in the pool. John Allandale's face was serious. The nervous twitching of the cheek was still, but the drawn lines around his mouth were in no way hidden by his gray mustache, nor did the eager light which burned luridly in his eyes for one moment deceive the onlooker as to the anxiety of mind which his features masked.

Now it was Lablache's deal. "Lord" Bill concentrated his attention upon the dealer. The money-lender was left-handed. He held the pack in his right, and, in dealing, he was slow and slightly clumsy. The object of Bunning-Ford's attention quickly became apparent. Each card as it left the pack was passed over the burnished silver of the dealer's memorandum pad. It was smartly done, and Lablache was assisted by the fact that the piece of metal was inclined towards him. There was no necessity to look down deliberately to see the reflection of each card as it passed on its way to its recipient, a glance—just the glance necessary when dealing cards—and the money-lender, by a slight effort of memory, knew every hand that was out. Lablache was cheating.

To say that "Lord" Bill was astonished would be wrong. He was not. He had long suspected it. The steady run of luck which Lablache had persisted in was too phenomenal. It was enough to set the densest thinking. Now everything was plain. Standing where he was, Bill had almost been

able to read the index numerals himself. He gave no sign of his discovery. Apparently the matter was of no consequence to him, for he merely lit a fresh cigarette and walked towards the door. He turned as he was about to pass out.

"What time shall I tell Jacky to expect you home, John?" he said quietly, addressing the old rancher.

Lablache looked up with a swift, malevolent glance, but he said nothing. Old John turned a drawn face to the speaker.

"Supper, I guess," he said in a thick voice, husky from long silence. "And tell Smith to send me in a bottle of 'white seal' and some glasses."

"Right you are." Then "Lord" Bill passed out. "Poker without whisky is bad," he muttered as he made his way back to the bar, "but poker and whisky together can only be the beginning of the end. We'll see. Poor old John!"

CHAPTER VII - ACROSS THE GREAT MUSKEG

It was on the stroke of four o'clock when Bunning-Ford left the saloon. He had said that he would be at the ranch at four, and usually he liked to be punctual. He was late now, however, and made no effort to make up time. Instead, he allowed his horse to walk leisurely in the direction of the Allandales' house. He wanted time to think before he again met Jacky.

He was confronted by a problem which taxed all his wit. It was perhaps a fortunate thing that his was not a hasty temperament. He well knew the usual method of dealing with men who cheated at cards in those Western wilds. Each man carried his own law in his holster. He had realized instantly that Lablache was not a case for the usual treatment. Pistol law would have defeated its own ends. Such means would not recover the terrible losses of "Poker" John, neither would he recover thereby his own lost property. No, he congratulated himself upon the restraint he had exercised when he had checked his natural impulse to expose the money-lender. Now, however, the case looked more complicated, and, for the moment, he could see no possible means of solving the difficulty. Lablache must be made to disgorge—but how? John Allandale must be stopped playing and further contributing to Lablache's ill-gotten gains. Again—but how?

Bill was roused out of his usual apathetic indifference. The moment had arrived when he must set aside the old indolent carelessness. He was stirred to the core. A duty had been suddenly forced upon him. A duty to himself and also a duty to those he loved. Lablache had consistently robbed him, and also the uncle of the girl he loved. Now, how to restore that property and prevent the villain's further depredations?

Again and again he asked himself the question as he allowed his horse to mouche, with slovenly step, over the sodden prairie; but no answer presented itself. His thin, eagle face was puckered with perplexity. The sleepy eyes gleamed vengefully from between his half-closed eyelids as he gazed across the sunlit prairie. His aquiline nose, always bearing a resemblance to an eagle's beak, was rendered even more like that aristocratic proboscis by reason of the down-drawn tip, consequent upon the odd pursing of his tightly-compressed lips. For the moment "Lord" Bill was at a loss. And, oddly enough, he began to wonder if, after all, silence had been his best course.

He was still struggling in the direst perplexity when he drew up at the veranda of the ranch. Dismounting, he hitched his picket rope to the tying-post and entered the sitting-room by the open French window. Tea was set upon the table and Jacky was seated before the stove.

"Late, Bill, late! Guess that 'plug' of yours is a rapid beast, judging by the pace you came up the hill."

For the moment Bunning-Ford's face had resumed its wonted air of lazy good-nature.

"Glad you took the trouble to watch for me, Jacky," he retorted quickly, with an attempt at his usual lightness of manner. "I appreciate the honor."

"Nothing of the sort. I was looking for uncle. The mail brought a letter from Calford. Dawson, the cattle buyer of the Western Railway Company, wants to see him. The Home Government are buying largely. He is commissioned to purchase 30,000 head of prime beeves. Come along, tea's ready."

Bill seated himself at the table and Jacky poured out the tea. She was dressed for the saddle.

"Where is Dawson now?" asked Bill.

"Calford. Guess he'll wait right there for uncle."

Suddenly a look of relief passed across the man's face.

"This is Wednesday. At six o'clock the mail-cart goes back to town. Send some one down to the *saloon* at once, and John will be able to go in to-night."

As Bill spoke his eyes encountered a direct and steady glance from the girl. There was much

meaning in that mute exchange. For answer Jacky rose and rang a bell sharply.

"Send a hand down to the settlement to find my uncle. Ask him to come up at once. There is an important letter awaiting him," she said, to the old servant who answered the summons.

"Bill, what's up?" she went on, when the retainer had departed.

"Lots. Look here, Jacky, we mustn't be long over tea. We must both be out of the house when your uncle returns. He may not want to go into town to-night. Anyway, I don't want to give him the chance of asking any questions until we have had a long talk. He's losing to Lablache again."

"Ah! I don't want anything to eat. Whenever you are ready, Bill, I am."

Bunning-Ford drank his tea and rose from the table. The girl followed his example.

There was something very strong and resolute in the brisk, ready-for-emergency ways of this girl. There was nothing of the ultra-feminine dependence and weakness of her sex about her. And yet her hardness detracted in no way from her womanly charm; rather was that complex abstract enhanced by her wonderful self-reliance. There are those who decry independence in women, but surely only such must come from those whose nature is largely composed of hectoring selfishness. There was a resolute set of the mouth as Jacky sent word to the stables to have her horse brought round. She asked no questions of her companion, as, waiting for compliance with her orders, she drew on her stout buckskin gauntlets. She understood this man well enough to be aware that his suggestion was based upon necessity. "Lord" Bill rarely interfered with anything or anybody, but when such an occasion arose his words carried a deal of weight with those who knew him.

A few minutes later and they were both riding slowly down the avenue of pines leading from the house. The direction in which they were moving was away from the settlement, down towards where the great level flat of the muskeg began. At the end of the avenue they turned directly to the southeast, leaving the township behind them. The prairie was soft and springy. There was still a keen touch of winter in the fresh spring air. The afternoon sun was shining coldly athwart the direction of their route.

Jacky led the way, and, as they drew clear of the bush, and the house and settlement were hidden from view behind them, she urged her horse into a good swinging lope. Thus they progressed in silence. The far-reaching deadly mire on their right, looking innocent enough in the shadow of the snow-clad peaks beyond, the ranch well behind them in the hollow of the Foss River Valley, whilst, on their left, the mighty prairie rolled away upwards to the higher level of the surrounding country.

In this way they covered nearly a mile, then the girl drew up beside a small clump of weedy bush.

"Are you ready for the plunge, Bill?" she asked, as her companion drew up beside her. "The path's not more than four feet wide. Does your 'plug' shy any?"

"He's all right. You lead right on. Where you can travel I've a notion I'm not likely to funk. But I don't see the path."

"I guess you don't. Never did nature keep her secret better than in the setting out of this one road across her woeful man-trap. You can't see the path, but I guess it's an open book to me, and its pages ain't Hebrew either. Say, Bill, there's been many a good prairie man looking for this path, but"—with a slight accent of exultation—"they've never found it. Come on. Old Nigger knows it; many a time has he trodden its soft and shaking surface. Good old horse!" and she patted the black neck of her charger as she turned his head towards the distant hills and urged him forward with a "chirrup."

Far across the muskeg the distant peaks of the mountain range glistened in the afternoon sun like diamond-studded sugar loaves. So high were the clouds that every portion of the mighty summits was clearly outlined. The great ramparts of the prairie are a magnificent sight on a clear day. Flat and smooth as any billiard-table stretched this silent, mysterious muskeg, already green and fair to the eye, an alluring pasture to the unwary. An experienced eye might have judged it too green—too alluring. Could a more perfect trap be devised by evil human ingenuity than this? Think for one instant of a bottomless pit of liquid soil, absorbing in its peculiar density. Think of all the horrors of a quicksand, which, embracing, sucks down into its cruel bosom the despairing victim of its insatiable greed. Think of a thin, solid crust, spread like icing upon a cake and concealing the soft, spongy matter beneath, covering every portion of the cruel plain; a crust which yields a crop of luxurious, enticing grass of the most perfect emerald hue; a crust firm in itself and dry looking, and yet not strong enough to bear the weight of a good-sized terrier. And what imagination can possibly conceive a more cruel—more perfect trap for man or beast? Woe to the creature which trusts its weight upon that treacherous crust. For one fleeting instant it will sway beneath the tread, then, in the flash of a thought, it will break, and once the surface gives no human power can save the victim. Down, down into the depths must the poor wretch be plunged, with scarce time to offer a prayer to God for the poor soul which so swiftly passes to its doom. Such is the muskeg; and surely more terrible is it than is that horror of the navigator—the quicksands.

The girl led the way without as much as a passing thought for the dangers which surrounded her. Truly had her companion said "I don't see the path," for no path was to be seen. But Jacky had learned her lesson well—and learned it from one who read the prairie as the Bedouin reads the

desert. The path was there and with a wondrous assurance she followed its course.

The travelers moved silently along. No word was spoken; each was wrapped in thought. Now and again a stray prairie chicken would fly up from their path with a whirr, and speed across the mire, calling to its mate as it went. The drowsy chirrup of frogs went on unceasingly around, and already the ubiquitous mosquito was on the prowl for human gore.

The upstanding horses now walked with down-drooped heads, with sniffing noses low towards the ground, ears cocked, and with alert, careful tread, as if fully alive to the danger of their perilous road. The silence of that ride teemed with a thrill of danger. Half an hour passed and then the girl gathered up her reins and urged her willing horse into a canter.

"Come on, Bill, the path is more solid now, and wider. The worst part is on the far side," she called back over her shoulder.

Her companion followed her unquestioningly.

The sun was already dipping towards the distant peaks and already a shadowy haze was rising upon the eastern prairie. The chill of winter grew keener as the sun slowly sank.

Two-thirds of the journey were covered and Jacky, holding up a warning hand, drew up her horse. Her companion came to a stand beside her.

"The path divides in three here," said the girl, glancing keenly down at the fresh green grass. "Two of the branches are blind and end abruptly further on. Guess we must avoid 'em," she went on shortly, "unless we are anxious to punctuate our earthly career. This is the one we must take," turning her horse to the left path. "Keep your eye peeled and stick to Nigger's footprints."

The man did as he was bid, marvelling the while at the strange knowledge of his companion. He had no fear; he only wondered. The trim, graceful figure on the horse ahead of him occupied all his thoughts. He watched her as, with quiet assurance she guided her horse. He had known Jacky for years. He had watched her grow to womanhood, but although her up-bringing must of necessity have taught her an independence and courage given to few women, he had never dreamt of the strength of the sturdy nature she was now displaying. Again his thoughts went to the tales of the gossips of the settlement, and the strange figure of the daring cattle-thief loomed up over his mental horizon. He rode, and as he rode he wondered. The end of this journey would be a fitting place for the explanations which must take place between them.

At length the shaking path came to an end and the mire was crossed. A signal from the girl brought her companion to her side.

"We have crossed it," she said, glancing up at the sun, and indicating the muskeg with a backward jerk of her head. "Now for the horse."

"What about your promise to tell me about Peter Retief?"

"Guess being the narrator you must let me take my time."

She smiled up into her companion's eagle face.

"The horse is a mile or so further up towards the foothills. Come along."

They galloped side by side over the moist, springy grass—moist with the recently-melted snow. "Lord" Bill was content to wait her pleasure. Suddenly the man brought his horse up with a severe "yank."

"What's up?" The girl's beautiful eyes were fixed upon the ground with a peculiar instinct. Bill pointed to the ground on the side furthest from his companion.

"Look!"

Jacky gazed at the spot indicated.

"The tracks of the horse," she said sharply.

She was on the ground in an instant and inspecting the hoof-prints eagerly, with that careful study acquired by experience.

"Well?" said the other, as she turned back to her horse.

"Recent." Then in an impressive tone which her companion failed to understand, "That horse has been shod. The shoes are off—all except a tiny bit on his off fore. We must track it."

They now separated and rode keeping the hoof-prints between them. The marks were quite fresh and so plain in the soft ground that they were able to ride at a good pace. The clear-cut indentations led away from the mire up the gently-sloping ground. Suddenly they struck upon a path that was little more than a cattle-track, and instantly became mingled with other hoof-marks, older and going both ways. Hitherto the girl had ridden with her eyes closely watching the tracks, but now she suddenly raised her sweet, weather-tanned face to her companion, and, with a light of the wildest excitement in her eyes, she pointed along the path and set her horse at a gallop.

"Come on! I know," she cried, "right on into the hills."

Bill followed willingly enough, but he failed to understand his companion's excitement. After all they were merely bent upon "roping" a stray horse. The girl galloped on at breakneck speed; the heavy black ringlets of hair were swept like an outspread fan from under the broad brim of her Stetson hat, her buckskin bodice ballooning in the wind as rider and horse charged along, utterly indifferent to the nature of the country they were traveling—indifferent to everything except the mad pursuit of an unseen quarry. Now they were on the summit of some eminence whence they could see for miles the confusion of hills, like innumerable bee-hives set close together upon an endless plain; now down, tearing through a deep hollow, and racing towards another abrupt ascent. With every hill passed the country became less green and more and more rugged. "Lord" Bill struggled hard to keep the girl in view as she raced on—on through the labyrinth of seemingly endless hillocks. But at last he drew up on the summit of a high cone-like rise and realized that he had lost her.

For a moment he gazed around with that peculiar, all-observing keenness which is given to those whose lives are spent in countries where human habitation is sparse—where the work of man is lost in the immensity of Nature's effort. He could see no sign of the girl. And yet he knew she could not be far away. His instincts told him to search for her horse tracks. He was sure she had passed that way. While yet he was thinking, she suddenly reappeared over the brow of a further hill. She halted at the summit, and, seeing him, waved a summons. Her gesticulations were excited and he hastened to obey. Down into the intervening valley his horse plunged with headlong recklessness. At the bottom there was a hard, beaten track. Almost unconsciously he allowed his beast to adopt it. It wound round and upwards, at the base of the hill on which Jacky was waiting for him. He passed the bend, then, with a desperate, backward heave of the body, he "yanked" his horse short up, throwing the eager animal on to its haunches.

He had pulled up on what, at first appeared to be the brink of a precipice, and what in reality was a declivity, down which only the slow and sure foot of a steer or broncho might safely tread. He sat aghast at his narrow escape. Then, turning at the sound of a voice behind him, he found that Jacky had come down from the hill above.

"See, Bill," she cried, as she drew abreast of his hard-breathing horse, "there he is! Down there, peacefully, grazing."

Her excitement was intense, and the hand with which she pointed shook like an aspen. Her agitation was incomprehensible to the man. He looked down. Hitherto he had seen little beyond the brink at which he had come to such a sudden stand. But now, as he gazed down, he beheld a deep dark-shadowed valley, far-reaching and sombre. From their present position its full extent was beyond the range of vision, but sufficient was to be seen to realize that here was one of those vast hiding-places only to be found in lands where Nature's fanciful mood has induced the mighty upheaval of the world's greatest mountain ranges. On the far side of the deep, sombre vale a towering craig rose wall-like, sheer up, overshadowing the soft, green pasture deep down at the bottom of the yawning gulch. Dense patches of dark, relentless pinewoods lined its base, and, over all, in spite of the broad daylight, a peculiar shadow, as of evening, added mystery to the haunting view.

It was some seconds before the man was able to distinguish the tiny object which had roused the girl to such unaccountable excitement. When he did, however, he beheld a golden chestnut horse quietly grazing as it made its way leisurely towards the ribbon-like stream which flowed in the bosom of the mysterious valley. "Lord" Bill's voice was quite emotionless when he spoke.

"Ah, a chestnut!" he said quietly. "Well, our quest is vain. He is beyond our reach."

For a moment the girl looked at him in indignant surprise. Then her mood changed and she nearly laughed outright. She had forgotten that this man as yet knew nothing of what had all along been in her thoughts. As yet he knew nothing of the secret of this hollow. To her it meant a world of recollection—a world of stirring adventure and awful hazard. When first she had seen that horse, grazing within sight of her uncle's house, her interest had been aroused—suspicions had been sent teeming through her brain. Her thoughts had flown to the man whom she had once known, and who was now dead. She had believed his horse had died with him. And now the strange apparition had yielded up its secret. The beast had been traced to the old, familiar haunt, and what had been only suspicion had suddenly become a startling reality.

"Ah, I forgot," she replied, "you don't understand. That is Golden Eagle. Can't you see, he has the fragments of his saddle still tied round his body. To think of it—and after two years."

Her companion still seemed dense.

"Golden Eagle?" he repeated questioningly. "Golden Eagle?" The name seemed familiar but he failed to comprehend.

"Yes, yes," the girl broke out impatiently. "Golden Eagle—Peter Retief's horse. The grandest beast that ever stepped the prairie. See, he is keeping watch over his master's old hiding-place—faithful—faithful to the memory of the dead."

"And this is—is the haunt of Peter Retief," Bill exclaimed, his interest centering chiefly upon the yawning valley before him.

"Yes—follow me closely, and we'll get right along down. Say, Bill, we must round up that animal."

For a fleeting space the man looked dubious, then, with lips pursed, and a quiet look of resolution

in his sleepy eyes, he followed in his companion's wake. The grandeur—the solitude—the mystery and associations, conveyed by the girl's words, of the place were upon him. These things had set him thinking.

The tortuous course of that perilous descent occupied their full attention, but, at length, they reached the valley in safety. Now, indeed, was a wonderful scene disclosed. Far as the eye could reach the great hollow extended. Deep and narrow; deep in the heart of the hills which towered upon either side to heights, for the most part, inaccessible, precipitous. It was a wondrous gulch, hidden and unsuspected in the foothills, and protected by those amazing wilds, in which the ignorant or unwary must infallibly be lost. It was a perfect pasture, a perfect hiding-place, watered by a broad running stream; sheltered from all cold and storm. No wonder then that the celebrated outlaw, Peter Retief, had chosen it for his haunt and the harborage of his ill-gotten stock.

With characteristic method the two set about "roping" the magnificent crested horse they had come to capture. They soon found that he was wild—timid as a hare. Their task looked as though it would be one of some difficulty.

At first Golden Eagle raced recklessly from point to point. And so long as this lasted his would-be captors could do little but endeavor to "head" him from one to the other, in the hope of getting him within range of the rope. Then he seemed suddenly to change his mind, and, with a quick double, gallop towards the side of the great chasm. A cry of delight escaped the girl as she saw this. The horse was making for the mouth of a small cavern which had been boarded over, and, judging by the door and window in the woodwork, had evidently been used as a dwelling or a stable. It was the same instinct which led him to this place that had caused the horse to remain for two years the solitary tenant of the valley. The girl understood, and drew her companion's attention. The capture at once became easy. Keeping clear of the cave they cautiously herded their quarry towards it. Golden Eagle was docile enough until he reached the, to him, familiar door. Then, when he found that his pursuers still continued to press in upon him, he took alarm, and, throwing up his head, with a wild, defiant snort he made a bolt for the open.

Instantly two lariats whirled through the air towards the crested neck. One missed its mark, but the other fell, true as a gun-shot over the small, thoroughbred head. It was Jacky's rope which had found its mark. A hitch round the horn of her saddle, and her horse threw himself back with her forefeet braced, and faced the captive. Then the rope tightened with a jerk which taxed its rawhide strands to their utmost. Instantly Golden Eagle, after two years' freedom, stood still; he knew that once more he must return to captivity.

CHAPTER VIII - TOLD IN BAD MAN'S HOLLOW

Jacky held her treasure fast. The choking grip of the running noose quieted Golden Eagle into perfect docility. Bunning-Ford was off his horse in a moment. Approaching the primitive dwelling he forced open the crazy door. It was a patchwork affair and swung back on a pair of hinges which lamented loudly as the accumulation of rust were disturbed. The interior was essentially suggestive of the half-breed, and his guess at its purpose had been a shrewd one. Part storehouse for forage, part bedroom, and part stable, it presented a squalid appearance. The portion devoted to stable-room was far in the back; the curious apparatus which constituted the bed was placed under the window.

The man propped the door open, and then went to relieve the girl from the strain of holding her captive. Seizing the lariat he gripped it tightly and proceeded to pass slowly, hand over hand, towards the beautiful, wild-eyed chestnut. Golden Eagle seemed to understand, for, presently, the tension of the rope relaxed. For a moment the animal looked fearfully around and snorted, then, as "Lord" Bill determinedly attempted to lead him, he threw himself backward. His rebellion lasted but for an instant, for, presently, drooping his proud head as though in token of submission, he followed his captor quietly into the stable which had always been his.

The girl dismounted, and, shortly after, "Lord" Bill rejoined her.

"Well?" she asked, her questioning eyes turned in the direction of the cave.

"He's snug enough," Bill replied quietly, glancing at his watch. He looked up at the chilly sky, then he seated himself on the edge of a boulder which reposed beside the entrance to the stable. "We've just got two hours and a half before dark," he added slowly. "That means an hour in which to talk." Then he quietly prepared to roll a cigarette. "Now, Jacky, let's have your yarn first; after that you shall hear mine."

He leisurely proceeded to pick over the tobacco before rolling it in the paper. He was usually particular about his smoke. He centered his attention upon the matter now, purposely, so as to give his companion a chance to tell her story freely. He anticipated that what she had to tell would affect her nearly. But his surmise of the direction in which she would be affected proved totally incorrect. Her first words told him this.

She hesitated only for the fraction of a second, then she plunged into her story with a directness which was always hers.

"This is Bad Man's Hollow—he—he was my half-brother."

So the stories of the gossips were not true. Bill gave a comprehensive nod, but offered no comment. Her statement appeared to him to need none. It explained itself; she was speaking of Peter Retief.

"Mother was a widow when she married father—widow with one son. Mother was a half-breed."

An impressive silence ensued. For a moment a black shadow swept across the valley. It was a dense flight of geese winging their way back to the north, as the warm sun melted the snow and furnished them with well-watered feeding-grounds. The frogs were chirruping loudly down at the edge of the stream which trickled its way ever southwards. She went on.

"Mother and Peter settled at Foss River at different times. They never hit it off. No one knew that there was any relationship between them up at the camp. Mother lived in her own shack. Peter located himself elsewhere. Guess it's only five years since I learned these things. Peter was fifteen years older than I. I take it they made him 'bad' from the start. Poor Peter!—still, he was my half-brother."

She conveyed a world of explanation in her last sentence. There was a tender, far-away look in her great, sorrowful eyes as she told her jerky story. "Lord" Bill allowed himself a side-long glance in her direction, then he turned his eyes towards the south end of the valley and something very like a sigh escaped him. She had struck a sympathetic chord in his heart. He longed to comfort her.

"There's no use in reckoning up Peter's acts. You know 'em as well as I do, Bill. He was slick—was Peter," she went on, with an inflection of satisfaction. She was returning to a lighter manner as she contemplated the cattle-thief's successes. "Cattle, mail-trains, mail-carts—nothing came amiss to him. In his own line Peter was a Jo-dandy." Her face flushed as she proceeded. The half-breed blood in her was stirred in all its passionate strength. "But he'd never have slipped the coyote sheriffs or the slick red-coats so long as he did without my help. Say, Bill," leaning forward eagerly and peering into his face with her beautiful glowing eyes, "for three years I just—just lived! Poor Peter! Guess I'm reckoned kind of handy 'round a bunch of steers. There aren't many who can hustle me. You know that. All the boys on the round-up know that. And why? Because I learnt the business from Peter—and Peter taught me to shoot quick and straight. Those three years taught me a deal, and I take it those things didn't happen for nothing," with a moody introspective gaze. "Those years taught me how to look after myself—and my uncle. Say, Bill, what I'm telling you may sicken you some. I can't help that. Peter was my brother and blood's thicker than water. I wasn't going to let him be hunted down by a lot of bloodthirsty coyotes who were no better than he. I wasn't going to let my mother's flesh feed the crows from the end of a lariat. I helped Peter to steer clear of the law—lynch at that—and if he fell at last, a victim to the sucking muck of the muskeg, it was God's judgment and not man's—that's good enough for me. I'd do it all again, I guess, if—if Peter were alive."

"Peter had some shooting on the account against him," said Bill, without raising his eyes from the contemplation of his cigarette. The girl smiled. The smile hovered for a moment round her mouth and eyes, and then passed, leaving her sweet, dark face bathed in the shadow of regret. She understood the drift of his remark but in no way resented it.

"No, Bill, I steered clear of that. I'd have shot to save Peter, but it never came to that. Whatever shooting Peter did was done on his—lonely. I jibbed at a frolic that meant—shooting. Peter never let me dirty my hands to that extent. Guess I just helped him and kept him posted. If I'd had law, they'd have called me accessory after the fact."

"Lord" Bill pondered. His lazy eyes were half-closed. He looked indifferent but his thoughts were flowing fast. This girl's story had given a fillup to a wild plan which had almost unconsciously found place in his active brain. Now he raised his eyes to her face and was astonished at the setness of its expression. She reminded him of those women in history whose deeds had, at various periods, shaken the foundations of empires. There was a deep, smouldering fire in her eyes, for which only the native blood in her veins could account. Her beautiful face was clouded beneath a somber shadow which is so often accredited as a presage of tragedy. Surely her expression was one of a great, passionate nature, of a soul capable of a wondrous love, or a wondrous—hate. She had seated herself upon the ground with the careless abandon of one used to such a resting-place. Her trim riding-boots were displayed from beneath the hem of her coarse dungaree habit. Her Stetson hat was pushed back on her head, leaving the broad low forehead exposed. Her black waving hair streamed about her face, a perfect framing for the Van Dyke coloring of her skin. She was very beautiful.

The man shifted his position.

"Tell me," he went on, gazing over towards where a flock of wild ducks had suddenly settled upon a reedy swamp, and were noisily revelling in the water, "did your uncle know anything about this?"

"Not a soul on God's earth knew. Did you ever suspect anything?"

Bill shook his head.

"Not a thing. I was as well posted on the subject of Peter as any one. Sometimes I thought it curious that old John's stock and my own were never interfered with. But I had no suspicion of

the truth. Peter's relationship to your mother—did the Breeds in the settlement know anything of it?"

"No—I alone knew."

"Ah!"

The girl looked curiously into her companion's face. The tone of his exclamation startled her. She wondered towards what end his questions were leading. His face was inscrutable; she gained no inspiration from it. There was a short pause. She wondered anxiously how her story had affected him in regard to herself. After all, she was only a woman—a woman of strong affections and deep feelings. Her hardihood, her mannish self-reliance, were but outer coverings, the result of the surroundings of her daily life. She feared lest he should turn from her in utter loathing.

The Hon. Bunning-Ford had no such thoughts, however. Twenty-four hours ago her story might have startled him. But now it was different. His was as wild and reckless a nature as her own. Law and order were matters which he regarded in the light of personal inclinations. He had seen too much of the early life on the prairie to be horrified by the part this courageous girl had taken in her blood-relative's interests. Under other circumstances "Lord" Bill might well have developed into a "bad man" himself. As it was, his sympathies were always with those whose daring led them into ways of danger and risk of personal safety.

"How far does this valley extend?" he asked abruptly, stepping over as though to obtain a view of the southern extremity of the mysterious hollow.

"Guess we reckoned it 300 miles. Dead straight into the heart of the mountains, then out again sharply into the foot-hills thirty miles south of the border. It comes to an end in Montana."

"And Peter disposed of his stock that way—all by himself?" he asked, returning to his seat upon the boulder.

"All by himself," the girl repeated, again wondering at the drift of his questions. "My help only extended as far as this place. Peter used to fatten his stock right here and then run them down into Montana. Down there no one knew where he came from, and so wonderfully is this place hidden that he was never traced. There is only one approach to it, and that's across the keg. In winter that can be crossed anywhere, but no sane persons would trust themselves in the foothills at that time of year. For the rest it can only be crossed by the secret path. This valley is a perfectly-hidden natural road for illicit traffic."

"Wonderful." The man permitted a smile to spread over his thin, eagle face. "Peter's supposed to have made a pile of money."

"Yes, I guess Peter sunk a pile of dollars. He hid his bills right here in the valley," Jacky replied, smiling back into the indolent face before her. Then her face became serious again. "The secret of its hiding-place died with him—it's buried deep down in the reeking keg."

"And you're sure he died in the 'reeking keg'?" There was a sharp intonation in the question. The matter seemed to be of importance in the story.

Jacky half started at the eagerness with which the question was put. She paused for an instant before replying.

"I believe he died there," she said at length, like one weighing her words well, "but it was never clearly proved. Most people think that he simply cleared out of the country. I picked up his hat close beside the path, and the crust of the keg had been broken. Yes, I believe he died in the muskeg. Had he lived I should have known."

"But how comes it that Golden Eagle is still alive? Surely Peter would never have crossed the keg on foot"

The girl looked perplexed for a moment. But her conviction was plainly evident.

"No—he wouldn't have walked. Peter drank some."

"I see."

"Once I saved him from taking the wrong track at the point where the path forks. He'd been drinking then. Yes," with a quiet assurance, "I think he died in the keg."

Her companion seemed to have come to the end of his cross-examination. He suddenly rose from his seat. The chattering of the ducks in the distance caused him to turn his head. Then he turned again to the girl before him. The indolence had gone from his eyes. His face was set, and the firm pursing of his lips spoke of a determination arrived at. He gazed down at the recumbent figure upon the ground. There was something in his gaze which made the girl lower her eyes and look far out down the valley.

"This brother of yours—he was tall and thin?"

The girl nodded.

"Am I right in my recollection of him when I say that he was possessed of a dark, dark face, lantern jaws, thin—and high, prominent cheek-bones?"

"That's so."

She faced him inquiringly as she answered his eager questions.

"Ah!"

He quickly turned again in the direction of the noisy water-fowl. Their rollicking gambols sounded joyously on the brooding atmosphere of the place. The wintry chill in the air was fast ousting the balmy breath of spring. It was a warning of the lateness of the hour.

"Now listen to me," he went on presently, turning again from the contemplation of his weird surroundings. "I lost all that was left to me from the wreck of my little ranch this afternoon—no, not to Lablache," as the girl was about to pronounce the hated name, "but," with a wintry smile, "to another friend of yours, Pedro Mancha. I also discovered, this afternoon, the source of Lablache's phenomenal—luck. He has systematically robbed both your uncle and myself—" He broke off with a bitter laugh.

"My God!"

The girl had sprung to her feet in her agitation. And a rage indescribable flamed into her face. The fury there expressed appalled him, and he stood for a moment waiting for it to abate. What terrible depths had he delved into? The hidden fires of a passionate nature are more easily kept under than checked in their blasting career when once the restraining will power is removed. For an instant it seemed that she must choke. Then she hurled her feelings into one brief, hissing sentence.

"Lablache—I hate him!"

And the man realized that he must continue his story.

"Yes, we lost our money not fairly, but by—cheating. I am ruined, and your uncle—" Bill shrugged.

"My uncle—God help him!"

"I do not know the full extent of his losses, Jacky—except that they have probably trebled mine."

"But I know to what extent the hound has robbed him," Jacky answered in a tone of such bitter hatred as to cause her companion to glance uneasily at the passionate young face before him. "I know, only too well. And right thoroughly has Lablache done his work. Say, Bill, do you know that that skunk holds mortgages on our ranch for two hundred thousand dollars? And every bill of it is for poker. For twenty years, right through, he has steadily sucked the old man's blood. Slick? Say a six-year-old steer don't know more about a branding-iron than does Verner Lablache about his business. For every dollar uncle's lost he's made him sign a mortgage. Every bit of paper has the old man had to redeem in that way. What he's done lately—I mean uncle—I can't say. But Lablache held those mortgages nearly a year ago."

"Whew—" "Lord" Bill whistled under his breath. "Gee-whittaker. It's worse than I thought. 'Poker' John's losses during the last winter, to my knowledge, must have amounted to nearly six figures—the devil!"

"Ruin, ruin, ruin!"

The girl for a moment allowed womanly feeling to overcome her, for, as her companion added his last item to the vast sum which she had quoted, she saw, in all its horrible nakedness, the truth of her uncle's position. Then she suddenly forced back the tears which had struggled into her eyes, and, with indomitable courage, faced the catastrophe.

"But can't we fight him—can't we give him—"

"Law? I'm afraid not," Bill interrupted. "Once a mortgage is signed the debt is no longer a gambling debt. Law is of no use to us, especially here on the prairie. There is only one law which can save us. Lablache must disgorge."

"Yes—yes! For every dollar he has stolen let him pay ten."

The passionate fire in her eyes burned more steadily now. It was the fire which is unquenchable—the fire of a lasting hate, vengeful, terrible. Then her tone dropped to a contemplative soliloquy.

"But how?" she murmured, looking away towards the stream in the heart of the valley, as though in search of inspiration.

Bunning-Ford smiled as he heard the half-whispered question. But his smile was not pleasant to look upon. All the latent recklessness which might have made of him a good soldier or a great scoundrel was roused in him. He was passing the boundary which divides the old Adam, which is in every man, from the veneer of early training. He was mutely—unconsciously—calling to his aid the savage instincts which the best of men are not without. His face expressed something of what was passing within his active brain, and the girl before him, as she turned and watched the working features, usually so placid—indifferent, knew that she was to see a side of his character always suspected by her but never before made apparent. His thoughts at last found vent in words of almost painful intensity.

"How?" he said, repeating the question as though it had been addressed to himself. "He shall pay—pay! Everlastingly pay! So long as I have life—and liberty, he shall pay!"

Then as if anticipating a request for explanation he told her the means by which Lablache had consistently cheated. The girl listened, speechless with amazement. She hung upon his every word. At the conclusion of his story she put an abrupt question.

"And you gave no sign? He doesn't suspect that you know?"

"He suspects nothing."

"Good. You are real smart, Bill. Yes, shooting's no good. This is no case for shooting. What do you propose? I see you mean business."

The man was still smiling but his smile had suddenly changed to one of kindly humor.

"First of all Jacky," he said, taking a step towards her, "I can do nothing without your help. I propose that you share this task with me. No, no, I don't mean in that way," as she commenced to assure him of her assistance. "What I mean is that—that I love you, dear. I want you to give me the right to protect—your uncle."

He finished up with his hands stretched out towards her. Golden Eagle stirred in his stable, and the two heard him whinny as if in approval. Then as the girl made no answer Bill went on: "Jacky, I am a ruined man. I have nothing, but I love you better than life itself. We now have a common purpose in life. Let us work together."

His voice sank to a tender whisper. He loved this motherless girl who was fighting the battle of life single-handed against overwhelming odds, with all the strength of his nature. He had loved her ever since she had reached woman's estate. In asking for a return of his affections now he fully realized the cruelty of his course. He knew that the future—his future—was to be given up to the pursuit of a terrible revenge. And he knew that, in linking herself with him, she would perforce be dragged into whatever wrong-doing his contemplated revenge might lead him. And yet he dared not pause. It all seemed so plain—so natural—that they should journey through the crooked, paths of the future together. Was she not equally determined upon a terrible revenge?

He waited in patience for his answer. Suddenly she looked up into his face and gently placed her hands in his. Her answer came with simple directness.

"Do you really, Bill? I am glad—yes, glad right through. I love you, too. Say, you're sure you don't think badly of me because—because I'm Peter's sister?"

There was a smiling, half-tearful look in her eyes—those expressive eyes which, but a moment before, had burnt with a vengeful fire—as she asked the question. After all her nature was wondrously simple.

"Why should I, dear?" he replied, bending and kissing the gauntleted hands which rested so lovingly in his. "My life has scarcely been a Garden of Eden before the Fall. And I don't suppose my future, even should I escape the laws of man, is likely to be most creditable. Your past is your own—I have no right nor wish to criticise. Henceforth we are united in a common cause. Our hand is turned against one whose power in this part of the country is almost absolute. When we have wrested his property from him, to the uttermost farthing, we will cry quits—"

"And on the day that sees Lablache's downfall, Bill, I will become your wife."

There was a pause. Then Bill drew her towards him and they sealed the compact with one long embrace. They were roused to the matters of the moment by another whinny from Golden Eagle, who was chafing at his forced imprisonment.

The two stood back from one another, hand in hand, and smiled as they listened to the tuneful plaint. Then the man unfolded a wonderful plan to this girl whom he loved. Her willing ears drank in the details like one whose heart is set with a great purpose. They also talked of their love in their own practical way. There was little display of sentiment. They understood without that. Their future was not alluring, unless something of the man's strange plan appealed to the wild nature of the prairie which, by association, has somehow become affiliated with theirs. In that quiet, evening-lit valley these two people arranged to set aside the laws of man and deal out justice as they understood it. An eye for an eye—a tooth for a tooth; fortune favoring, a cent, per cent, interest in each case. The laws of the prairie, in those days always uncertain, were more often governed by human passions than the calm equity of unbiased jurymen. And who shall say that their idea of justice was wrong? Two "wrongs," it has been said, do not make one "right." But surely it is not a human policy when smote upon one cheek to turn the other for a similar chastisement.

"Then we leave Golden Eagle where he is," said Jacky, as she remounted her horse and they prepared to return home.

"Yes. I will see to him," Bill replied, urging his horse into a canter towards the winding ascent which was to take them home.

The ducks frolicking in their watery playground chattered and flapped their heavy wings. The frogs in their reedy beds croaked and chirruped without ceasing. And who shall say how much they had heard, or had seen, or knew of that compact sealed in Bad Man's Hollow?

CHAPTER IX - LABLACHE'S "COUP"

Lablache was seated in a comfortable basket chair in his little back office. He preferred a basket chair—he knew its value. He had tried other chairs of a less yielding nature, but they were useless to support his weight; he had broken too many, and they were expensive—there is nothing more durable than a strong basket chair. Lablache appreciated strength combined with durability, especially when the initial outlay was reduced to a minimum.

His slippers feet were posted on the lower part of the self-feeding stove and he gazed down, deep in thought, at the lurid glow of the fire shining through the mica sides of the firebox.

A clock was ticking away with that peculiar, vibrating aggressiveness which characterizes the cheap American "alarm." The bare wood of the desk aggravated the sound, and, in the stillness of the little room, the noise pounded exasperatingly on the ear-drums. From time to time he turned his great head, and his lashless eyes peered over at the paper dial of the clock. Once or twice he stirred with a suggestion of impatience. At times his heavy breathing became louder and shorter, and he seemed about to give expression to some irritable thought.

At last his bulk heaved and he removed his feet from the stove. Then he slowly raised himself from the depths of the yielding chair. His slippers feet shuffled over the floor as he moved towards the window. The blind was down, but he drew it aside and wiped the steam from the glass pane with his soft, fat hand. The night was black—he could see nothing of the outside world. It was nearly an hour since he had left the saloon where he had been playing poker with John Allandale. He appeared to be waiting for some one, and he wanted to go to bed.

Once more he returned to his complaining chair and lowered himself into it. The minutes slipped by. Lablache did not want to smoke; he felt that he must do something to soothe his impatience, so he chewed at the quicks of his finger-nails.

Presently there came a tap at the window. The money-lender ponderously rose, and, cautiously opening the door, admitted the dark, unkempt form of Pedro Mancha. There was no greeting; neither spoke until Lablache had again secured the door. Then the money-lender turned his fishy eyes and mask-like face to the newcomer. He did not suggest that his visitor should sit down. He merely looked with his cold, cruel eyes, and spoke.

"Well?—been drinking."

The latter part of his remark was an assertion. He knew the Mexican well. The fellow had an expressive countenance, unlike most of his race, and the least sign of drink was painfully apparent upon it. The man was not drunk but his wild eyes testified to his recent libations.

"Guess you've hit it right thar," he retorted indifferently.

It was noticeable that this man had adopted the high-pitched, keen tone and pronounced accent of the typical "South-Westerner." In truth he was a border Mexican; a type of man closely allied to the "greaser." He was a perfect scoundrel, who had doubtless departed from his native land for the benefit of that fair but swarming hornet's nest.

"It's a pity when you have business on hand you can't leave that 'stuff' alone."

Lablache made no effort to conceal his contempt. He even allowed his mask-like face to emphasize his words.

"You're almighty pertickler, mister. You ask for dirty work to be done, an' when that dirty work's done, gorf-darn-it you croak like a flannel-mouthed temperance lecturer. Guess I came hyar to talk straight biz. Jest leave the temperance track, an' hit the main trail."

Pedro's face was not pretty to look upon. The ring of white round the pupils of his eyes gave an impression of insanity or animal ferocity. The latter was his chief characteristic. His face was thin and scored with scars, mainly long and narrow. These, in a measure, testified to his past. His mouth, half hidden beneath a straggling mustache, was his worst feature. One can only liken it to a blubber-lipped gash, lined inside with two rows of yellow fangs, all in a more or less bad state of decay.

The two men eyed one another steadily for a moment. Lablache could in no way terrorize this desperado. Like all his kind this man was ready to sell his services to any master, provided the forthcoming price of such services was sufficiently exorbitant. He was equally ready to play his employer up should any one else offer a higher price. But Lablache, when dealing with such men, took no chances. He rarely employed this sort of man, preferring to do his own dirty work, but when he did, he knew it was policy to be liberal. Pedro served him well as a rule, consequently the Mexican was enabled to ruffle it with the best in the settlement, whilst people wondered where he got his money from. Somehow they never thought of Lablache being the source of this man's means; the money-lender was not fond of parting.

"You are right, I am particular. When I pay for work to be done I don't want gassing over a bar. I know what you are when the whisky is in you."

Lablache stood with his great back to the fire watching his man from beneath his heavy lids. Bad

as he was himself the presence of this man filled him with loathing. Possibly deep down, somewhere in that organ he was pleased to consider his heart, he had a faint glimmer of respect for an honest man. The Mexican laughed harshly.

"Guess all you know of me, mister, wouldn't make a pile o' literature. But say, what's the game to-night?"

Lablache was gnawing his fingers.

"How much did you take from the Honorable?" he asked sharply.

"You told me to lift his boodle. Time was short—he wouldn't play for long."

"I'm aware of that. How much?"

Lablache's tone was abrupt and peremptory. Mancha was trying to estimate what he should be paid for his work.

"See hyar, I guess we ain't struck no deal yet. What do you propose to pay me?"

The Mexican was sharp but he was no match for his employer. He fancied he saw a good deal over this night's work.

"You played on paper, I know," said the money-lender, quietly. He was quite unmoved by the other's display of cunning. It pleased him rather than otherwise. He knew he held all the cards in his hands—he generally did in dealing with men of this stamp. "To you, the amounts he lost are not worth the paper they are written on. You could never realize them. He couldn't meet 'em."

Lablache leisurely took a pinch of snuff from his snuff-box. He coughed and sneezed voluminously. His indifferent coolness, his air of patronage, aggravated the Mexican while it alarmed him. The deal he anticipated began to assume lesser proportions.

"Which means, I take it, you've a notion you'd like the feel of those same papers."

Mancha had come to drive a bargain. He was aware that the I.O.U.'s he held would take some time to realize on, in the proper quarter, but, at the same time, he was quite aware of the fact that Bunning-Ford would ultimately meet them.

Lablache shrugged his shoulders with apparent indifference—he meant to have them.

"What do you want for the debts? I am prepared to buy—at a reasonable figure."

The Mexican propped himself comfortably upon the corner of the desk.

"Say, guess we're talkin' biz, now. His 'lordship' is due to ante up the trifle of seven thousand dollars—"

The fellow was rummaging in an inside pocket for the slips of paper. His eyes never left his companion's face. The amount startled Lablache, but he did not move a muscle.

"You did your work well, Pedro," he said, allowing himself, for the first time in this conversation, to recognize that the Mexican had a name. He warmed towards a man who was capable of doing another down for such a sum in such a short space of time. "I'll treat you well. Two thousand spot cash, and you hand over the I.O.U.'s. What say? Is it a go?"

"Be damned to you. Two thousand for a certain seven? Not me. Say, what d'ye do with the skin when you eat a bananny? Sole your boots with it? Gee-whiz! You do fling your bills around."

The Mexican laughed derisively as he jammed the papers back into his pocket. But he knew that he would have to sell at the other's price.

Lablache moved heavily towards his desk. Selecting a book he opened it at a certain page.

"You can keep them if you like. But you may as well understand your position. What's Bunning-Ford worth? What's his ranch worth?"

The other suggested a figure much below the real value.

"It's worth more than that. Fifty thousand if it's worth a cent," Lablache said expansively. "I don't want to do you, my friend, but as you said we're talking business now. Here is his account with me, you see," pointing to the entries. "I hold thirty-five thousand on first mortgage and twenty thousand on bill of sale. In all fifty-five thousand, and his interest twelve months in arrears. Now, you refuse to part with those papers at my price, and I'll sell him up. You will then get not one cent of your money."

The money-lender permitted himself to smile a grim, cold smile. He had been careful to make no mention of Bunning-Ford's further assets. He had quite forgotten to speak of a certain band of cattle which he knew his intended victim to possess. It was a well-known thing that Lablache knew more of the financial affairs of the people of the settlement than any one else; doubtless the Mexican thought only of "Lord" Bill's ranch. Mancha shifted his position uneasily. But there was a cunning look on his face as he retorted swiftly,—

"You're a'mighty hasty to lay your hands on his reckoning. How's it that you're ready to part two thou' for 'em?"

There was a moment's silence as the two men eyed each other. It seemed as if each were endeavoring to fathom the other's thoughts. Then the money-lender spoke, and his voice conveyed a concentration of hate that bit upon the air with an incisiveness which startled his companion.

"Because I intend to crush him as I would a rattlesnake. Because I wish to ruin him so that he will be left in my debt. So that I can hound him from this place by holding that debt over his head. It is worth two thousand to me to possess that power. Now, will you part?"

This explanation appealed to the worst side of the Mexican's nature. This hatred was after his own heart. Lablache was aware that such would be the case. That is why he made it. He was accustomed to play upon the feelings of people with whom he dealt—as well as their pocket. Pedro Mancha grinned complacently. He thought he understood his employer.

"Hand over the bills. Guess I'll part. The price is slim, but it's not a bad deal."

Lablache oozed over to the safe. He opened it, keeping one heavy eye upon his companion. He took no chances—he trusted no one, especially Pedro Mancha. Presently he returned with a roll of notes. It contained the exact amount. The Mexican watched him hungrily as he counted out the green-backed bills. His lips moistened beneath his mustache—his eyes looked wilder than ever. Lablache understood his customer thoroughly. A loaded revolver was in his own coat pocket. It is probable that the brown-faced desperado knew this.

At last the money-lender held out the money. He held out both hands, one to give and the other to receive. Pedro passed him the I.O.U.'s and took the bills. One swift glance assured Lablache that the coveted papers were all there. Then he pointed to the door.

"Our transaction is over. Go!"

He had had enough of his companion. He had no hesitation in thus peremptorily dismissing him.

"You're in a pesky hurry to get rid of me. See hyar, pard, you'd best be civil. Your dealin's ain't a sight cleaner than mine."

"I'm waiting." Lablache's tone was coldly commanding. His lashless eyes gazed steadily into the other's face. Something the Mexican saw in them impelled him towards the door. He moved backwards, keeping his face turned towards the money-lender. At this moment Lablache was at his best. His was a dominating personality. There was no cowardice in his nature—at least no physical cowardice. Doubtless, had it come to a struggle where agility was required, he would have fallen an easy prey to his lithe companion; but with him, somehow, it never did come to a struggle. He had a way with him that chilled any such thought that a would-be assailant might have. Will and unflinching courage are splendid assets. And, amongst others, this man possessed both.

Mancha slunk back to the door, and, fumbling at the lock, opened it and passed out. Lablache instantly whipped out a revolver, and, stepping heavily on one side, advanced to the door, paused and listened. He was well under cover. The door was open. He was behind it. He knew better than to expose himself in the light for Mancha to make a target of him from without. Then he kicked the door to. Making a complete circuit of the walls of the office he came to the opposite side of the door, where he swiftly locked and bolted it. Then he drew an iron shutter across the light panelling and secured it.

"Good," he muttered, as, sucking in a heavy breath, he returned to the stove and turned his back to it. "It's as well to understand Mexican nature."

Then he lounged into his basket chair and rubbed his fleshy hands reflectively. There was a triumphant look upon his repulsive features.

"Quite right, friend Pedro, it's not a bad deal," he said to himself, blinking at the red light of the fire. "Not half bad. Seven thousand dollars for two thousand dollars, and every cent of it realizable." He shook with inward mirth. "The Hon. William Bunning-Ford will now have to disgorge every stick of his estate. Good, good!"

Then he relapsed into deep thought. Presently he roused himself from his reverie and prepared for bed.

"But I'll give him a chance. Yes, I'll give him a chance," he muttered, as, after undergoing the simple operation of removing his coat, he stretched himself upon his bed and drew the blankets about him. "If he'll consent to renounce any claim, fancied or otherwise, he may have to Joaquina Allandale's regard I'll refrain from selling him up. Yes, Verner Lablache will forego his money—for a time."

The great bed shook as the monumental money-lender suppressed a chuckle. Then he turned over, and his stertorous inhalations soon suggested that the great man slept.

Shylock, the Jew, determined on having his pound of flesh. But a woman outwitted him.

It was almost dark when Jacky returned to the ranch. She had left "Lord" Bill at the brink of the great keg, whence he had returned to his own place. Her first thought, on entering the house, was for the letter which she had left for her uncle. It was gone. She glanced round the room uncertainly. Then she stood gazing into the stove, while she idly drummed with her gauntleted fingers upon the back of a chair. She had as yet removed neither her Stetson hat nor her gauntlets.

Her strong, dark face was unusually varying in its expression. Possibly her thoughts were thus indexed. Now, as she stood watching the play of the fire, her great, deep eyes would darken with a grave, almost anxious expression; again they would smile with a world of untold happiness in their depths. Again they would change, in a flash, to a hard, cold gleam of hatred and unyielding purpose; then slowly, a tender expression, such as that of a mother for Her new-born babe, would creep into them and shine down into the depths of the fire with a world of sweet sympathy. But through all there was a tight compression of the lips, which spoke of the earnest purpose which governed her thoughts; a slight pucker of the brows, which surely told of a great concentration of mind.

Presently she roused herself, and, walking to where a table-bell stood, rang sharply upon it. Her summons was almost immediately answered by the entry of a servant.

Jacky turned as the door opened, and fired an abrupt question.

"Has Uncle John been in, Mamie?"

The girl's face had resumed its usual strong, kindly expression. Whatever was hidden behind that calm exterior, she had no intention of giving a chance observer any clew to it.

"No, miss," the servant replied, in that awestruck tone which domestics are apt to use when sharply interrogated. She was an intelligent-looking girl. Her dark skin and coarse black hair pronounced her a half-breed. Her mistress had said "blood is thicker than water." All the domestics under Jacky's charge hailed from the half-breed camp.

"Was my message delivered to him?"

Unconcernedly as she spoke she waited with some anxiety for the answer.

"Oh, yes, miss. Silas delivered it himself. The master was in company with Mr. Lablache and the doctor, miss," added the girl, discreetly.

"And what did he say?"

"He sent Silas for the letter, miss."

"He didn't say what time he would return, I suppose?"

"No, miss—" She hesitated and fumbled at the door handle.

"Well?" as the girl showed by her attitude that there was something she had left unsaid.

Jacky's question rang acutely in the quiet room.

"Silas—" began the girl, with a deprecating air of unbelief—"you know what strange notions he takes—he said—"

The girl stopped in confusion under the steady gaze of her mistress.

"Speak up, girl," exclaimed Jacky, impatiently. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing, miss," the girl blurted out desperately. "Only Silas said as the master didn't seem well like."

"Ah! That will do." Then, as the girl still stood at the door, "You can go."

The dismissal was peremptory, and the half-breed had no choice but to depart. She had hoped to have heard something interesting, but her mistress was never given to being communicative with servants.

When the door had closed behind the half-breed Jacky turned again towards the stove. Again she was plunged in deep thought. This time there could be no mistake as to its tenor. Her heart was racked with an anxiety which was not altogether new to it. The sweet face was pale and her eyelids flickered ominously. The servant's veiled meaning was quite plain to her. Brave, hardy as this girl of the prairie was, the fear that was ever in her heart had suddenly assumed the proportions of a crushing reality. She loved her uncle with an affection that was almost maternal. It was the love of a strong, resolute nature for one of a kindly but weak disposition. She loved the gray-headed old man, whose affection had made her life one long, long day of happiness, with a tenderness which no recently-acquired faults of his could alienate. He—and now another—was her world. A world in which it was her joy to dwell. And now—now; what of the present? Racked by losses brought about through the agency of his all-absorbing passion, the weak old man was slowly but surely taking to drowning his consciousness of the appalling calamity which he had consistently set to work to bring about, and which in his lucid moments he saw looming heavily over his house, in drink. She had watched him with the never-failing eye of love, and had seen, to her horror, the signs she so dreaded. She could face disaster stoically, she could face danger unflinchingly, but this moral wrecking of the old man, who had been more to her than a father,

was more than she could bear. Two great tears welled up into her beautiful, somber eyes and slowly rolled down her cheeks. She bowed like a willow bending to the force of the storm.

Her weakness was only momentary, however; her courage, bred from the wildness of her life surroundings, rose superior to her feminine weakness. She dashed her gloved hands across her eyes and wiped the tears away. She felt that she must be doing—not weeping. Had not she sealed a solemn compact with her lover? She must to work without delay.

She glanced round the room. Her gaze was that of one who wishes to reassure herself. It was as if the old life had gone from her and she was about to embark on a career new—foreign to her. A career in which she could see no future—only the present. She felt like one taking a long farewell to a life which had been fraught with nothing but delight. The expression of her face told of the pain of the parting. With a heavy sigh she passed out of the room—out into the chill night air, where even the welcome sounds of the croaking frogs and the lowing cattle were not. Where nothing was to cheer her for the work which in the future must be hers. Something of that solemn night entered her soul. The gloom of disaster was upon her.

It was only a short distance to Dr. Abbot's house. The darkness of the night was no hindrance to the girl. Hither she made her way with the light, springing step of one whose mind is made up to a definite purpose.

She found Mrs. Abbot in. The little sitting-room in the doctor's house was delightfully homelike and comfortable. There was nothing pretentious about it—just solid comfort. And the great radiating stove in the center of it smelt invitingly warm to the girl as she came in out of the raw night air. Mrs. Abbot was alternating between a basket of sewing and a well-worn, cheap-edition novel. The old lady was waiting with patience, the outcome of experience, for the return of her lord to his supper.

"Well, 'Aunt' Margaret," said Jacky, entering with the confidence of an assured welcome, "I've come over for a good gossip. There's nobody at home—up there," with a nod in the direction of the ranch.

"My dear child, I'm so pleased," exclaimed Mrs. Abbot, coming forward from her rather rigid seat, and kissing the girl on both cheeks with old-fashioned cordiality. "Come and sit by the stove—yes, take that hideous hat off, which, by the way, I never could understand your wearing. Now, when John and I were first en—"

"Yes, yes, dear. I know what you're going to say," interrupted the girl, smiling in spite of the dull aching at her heart. She knew how this sweet old lady lived in the past, and she also knew how, to a sympathetic ear, she loved to pour out the delights of memory from a heart overflowing with a strong affection for the man of her choice. Jacky had come here to talk of other matters, and she knew that when "Aunt" Margaret liked she could be very shrewd and practical.

Something in the half-wistful smile of her companion brought the old lady quickly back from the realms of recollection, and a pair of keen, kindly eyes met the steady gray-black orbs of the girl.

"Ah, Jacky, my child, we of the frivolous sex are always being forced into considering the mundane matters of everyday life here at Foss River. What is it, dear? I can see by your face that you are worrying over something."

The girl threw herself into an easy chair, drawn up to the glowing stove with careful forethought by the old lady. Mrs. Abbot reseated herself in the straight-backed chair she usually affected. She carefully put her book on one side and took up some darning, assiduously inserting the needle but without further attempt at work. It was something to fix her attention on whilst talking. Old Mrs. Abbot always liked to be able to occupy her hands when talking seriously. And Jacky's face told her that this was a moment for serious conversation.

"Where's the Doc?" the girl asked without preamble. She knew, of course, but she used the question by way of making a beginning.

The old lady imperceptibly straightened her back. She now anticipated the reason of her companion's coming. She glanced over the top of a pair of gold *pince-nez*, which she had just settled comfortably upon the bridge of her pretty, broad nose.

"He's down at the saloon playing poker. Why, dear?"

Her question was so innocent, but Jacky was not for a moment deceived by its tone. The girl smiled plaintively into the fire. There was no necessity for her to disguise her feelings before "Aunt" Margaret, she knew. But her loyal nature shrank from flaunting her uncle's weaknesses before even this kindly soul. She kept her fencing attitude a little longer, however.

"Who is he playing with?" Jacky raised a pair of inquiring gray eyes to her companion's face.

"Your uncle and—Lablache."

The shrewd old eyes watched the girl's face keenly. But Jacky gave no sign.

"Will you send for him, 'Aunt' Margaret?" said the girl, quietly. "Without letting him know that I am here," she added, as an afterthought.

"Certainly, dear," the old lady replied, rising with alacrity. "Just wait a moment while I send word. Keewis hasn't gone to his teepee yet. I set him to clean some knives just now. He can go. These

Indians are better messengers than they are domestics." Mrs. Abbot bustled out of the room.

She returned a moment later, and, drawing her chair beside that of the girl, seated herself and rested one soft white hand on those of her companion, which were reposing clasped in the lap of her dungaree skirt.

"Now, tell me, dear—tell me all about it—I know, it is your uncle."

The sympathy of her tone could never have been conveyed in mere words. This woman's heart expressed its kindness in voice and eyes. There was no resisting her, and Jacky made no effort to do so.

For one instant there flashed into the girl's face a look of utter distress. She had come purposely to talk plainly to the woman whom she had lovingly dubbed "Aunt Margaret," but she found it very hard when it came to the point. She cast about in her mind for a beginning, then abandoned the quest and blurted out lamely the very thing from which she most shrank.

"Say, auntie, you've observed uncle lately—I mean how strange he is? You've noticed how often, now, he is—is not himself?"

"Whisky," said the old lady, uncompromisingly. "Yes, dear, I have. It is quite the usual thing to smell' old man Smith's vile liquor when John Allandale is about. I'm glad you've spoken. I did not like to say anything to you about it. John's on a bad trail."

"Yes, and a trail with a long, downhill gradient," replied Jacky, with a rueful little smile. "Say, aunt," she went on, springing suddenly to her feet and confronting the old lady's mildly-astonished gaze, "isn't there anything we can do to stop him? What is it? This poker and whisky are ruining him body and soul. Is the whisky the result of his losses? Or is the madness for a gamble the result of the liquor?"

"Neither the one—nor the other, my dear. It is—Lablache."

The older woman bent over her darning, and the needle passed, rippling, round a "potato" in the sock which was in her lap. Her eyes were studiously fixed upon the work.

"Lablache—Lablache! It is always Lablache, whichever way I turn. Gee—but the whole country reeks of him. I tell you right here, aunt, that man's worse than scurvy in our ranching world. Everybody and everything in Foss River seems to be in his grip."

"Excepting a certain young woman who refuses to be ensnared."

The words were spoken quite casually. But Jacky started. Their meaning was driven straight home. She looked down upon the bent, gray head as if trying to penetrate to the thought that was passing within. There was a moment's impressive silence. The clock ticked loudly in the silence of the room. A light wind was whistling rather shrilly outside, round the angles of the house.

"Go on, auntie," said the girl, slowly. "You haven't said enough—yet. I guess you're thinking mighty—deeply."

Mrs. Abbot looked up from her work. She was smiling, but behind that smile there was a strange gravity in the expression of her eyes.

"There is nothing more to say at present." Then she added, in a tone from which all seriousness had vanished, "Hasn't Lablache ever asked you to marry him?"

A light was beginning to dawn upon the girl.

"Yes—why?"

"I thought so." It was now Mrs. Abbot's turn to rise and confront her companion. And she did so with the calm manner of one who is assured that what she is about to say cannot be refuted. Her kindly face had lost nothing of its sweet expression, only there was something in it which seemed to be asking a mute question, whilst her words conveyed the statement of a case as she knew it. "You dear, foolish people. Can you not see what is going on before your very eyes, or must a stupid old woman like myself explain what is patent to the veriest fool in the settlement? Lablache is the source of your uncle's trouble, and, incidentally, you are the incentive. I have watched—I have little else to do in Foss River—you all for years past, and there is little that I could not tell you about any of you, as far as the world sees you. Lablache has been a source of a world of thought to me. The business side of him is patent to everybody. He is hard, flinty, tyrannical—even unscrupulous. I am telling you nothing new, I know. But there is another side to his character which some of you seem to ignore. He is capable of strong passions—ay, very strong passions. He has conceived a passion for you. I will call it by no other name in such an unholly brute as Lablache. He wishes to marry *you—he means to marry you.*"

The silver-haired old lady had worked herself up to an unusual vehemence. She paused after accentuating her last words. Jacky, taking advantage of the break, dropped in a question.

"But—how does this affect my uncle?"

"Aunt" Margaret sniffed disdainfully and resettled the glasses which, in the agitation of the moment, had slipped from her nose.

"Of course it affects your uncle," she continued more quietly. "Now listen and I will explain."

Once more these two seated themselves and "Aunt" Margaret again plunged into her story.

"Sometimes I catch myself speculating as to how it comes about that you have inspired this passion in such a man as Lablache," she began, glancing into the somberly beautiful face beside her. "I should have expected that mass of flesh and money—he always reminds me of a jelly-fish, my dear—ugh!—to have wished to take to himself one of your gaudy butterflies from New York or London for a wife; not a simple child of the prairie who is more than half a wild—wild savage." She smiled lovingly into the girl's face. "You see these coarse money-grubbers always prefer their pills well gilded, and, as a rule, their matrimonial pills need a lot of gilding to bring them up to the standard of what they think a wife should be. However, it was not long before it became plain to me that he wished to marry you. He may be a master of finance; he may disguise his feelings—if he has any—in business, so that the shrewdest observer can discover no vulnerable point in his armor of dissimulation. But when it comes to matters pertaining to—to—love—quite the wrong word in his case, my dear—these men are as babes; worse, they are fools. When Lablache makes up his mind to a purpose he generally accomplishes his end—"

"In business," suggested Jacky, moodily.

"Just so—in business, my dear. In matters matrimonial it may be different. But I doubt his failure in that," went on Mrs. Abbot, with a decided snap of her expressive mouth. "He will try by fair means or foul, and, if I know anything of him, he will never relinquish his purpose. He asked you to marry him—and of course you refused, quite natural and right. He will not risk another refusal from you—these people consider themselves very sensitive, my dear—so he will attempt to accomplish his end by other means—means much more congenial to him, the—the beast. There now, I've said it, my dear. The doctor tells me that he is quite the most skilful player at poker that he has ever come across."

"I guess that's so," said the girl, with a dark, ironical smile.

"And that his luck is phenomenal," the old lady went on, without appearing to notice the interruption. "Very well. Your uncle, the old fool—excuse me, my dear—has done nothing but gamble all his life. The doctor says that he believes John has never been known to win more than about once in a month's play, no matter with whom he plays. You know—we all know—that for years he has been in the habit of raising loans from this monumental cuttle-fish to settle his losses. And you can trust that individual to see that these loans are well secured. John Allandale is reputed very rich, but the doctor assures me that were Lablache to foreclose his mortgages a very, very big slice of your uncle's worldly goods would be taken to meet his debts.

"Now comes the last stage of the affair," she went on, with a sage little shake of the head. "How long ago is it since Lablache proposed to you? But there, you need not tell me. It was a little less than a year ago—wasn't it?"

Her companion nodded her head. She wondered how "Aunt" Margaret had guessed it. She had never told a soul herself. The shrewd little old lady was filling her with wonder. The careful manner in which she had pieced facts together and argued them out with herself revealed to her a cleverness and observation she would never, in spite of the kindly soul's counsels, have given her credit for.

"Yes, I knew I was right," said Mrs. Abbot, complacently. "Just about the time when Lablache began seriously to play poker—about the time when his phenomenal luck set in, to the detriment of your uncle. Yes, I am well posted," as the girl raised her eyebrows in surprise. "The doctor tells me a great deal—especially about your uncle, dear. I always like to know what is going on. And now to bring my long explanation to an end. Don't you see how Lablache intends to marry you? Your uncle's losses this winter have been so terribly heavy—and all to Lablache. Lablache holds the whip hand of him. A request from Lablache becomes a command—or the crash."

"But how about the Doc," asked Jacky, quickly. "He plays with them—mostly?"

Mrs. Abbot shrugged her shoulders.

"The doctor can take care of himself. He's cautious, and besides—Lablache has no wish to win his money."

"But surely he must lose? Say, auntie, dear, it's not possible to play against Lablache's luck without losing—some."

"Well, dear, I can't say I know much of the game," with some perplexity, "but the doctor assures me that Lablache never hits him hard. Often and often when the 'pot' rests between them Lablache will throw down his hand—which goes to show that he does not want to take his money."

"An' I reckon goes to show that he's bucking dead against Uncle John, only. Yes, I see."

The little gray head again bent over the darning, which had lain almost untouched in her lap during her long recital. Now she resolutely drew the darning yarn through the soft wool of the sock and re-inserted the needle. The girl beside her bent an eager face before her, and, resting her chin upon her hands, propped her elbows on her knees.

"Yes, auntie, I know," Jacky went on thoughtfully. "Lablache means to put this marriage with me right through. I see it all. But say," bringing one of her brown hands down forcibly upon that of

her companion, which was concealed in the foot of the woolen sock, and gripping it with nervous strength, "I guess he's reckoned without his bride. I'm not going to marry Lablache, auntie, dear, and you can bet your bottom dollar I'm not going to let him ruin uncle. All I want to do is to stop uncle drinking. That is what scares me most."

"My child, Lablache is the cause of that. The same as he is the cause of all troubles in Foss River. Your uncle realizes the consequences of the terrible losses he has incurred. He knows, only too well, that he is utterly in the money-lender's power. He knows he must go on playing, vainly endeavoring to recover himself, and with each fresh loss he drinks deeper to smother his fears and conscience. It is the result of the weakness of his nature—a weakness which I have always known would sooner or later lead to his undoing. Jacky, girl, I fear you will one day have to marry Lablache or your uncle's ruin will be certainly accomplished."

Mrs. Abbot's face was very serious now. She pitied from the bottom of her heart this motherless girl who had come to her, in spite of her courage and almost mannish independence, for that sympathy and advice which, at certain moments, the strongest woman cannot do without. She knew that all she had said was right, and even if her story could do no material good it would at least have the effect of putting the girl on her guard. In spite of her shrewdness Mrs. Abbot could never quite fathom her *protégée*. And even now, as she gazed into the girl's face, she was wondering how—in what manner—the narration of her own observations would influence the other's future actions. The thick blood of the half-breed slowly rose into Jacky's face, until the dark skin was suffused with a heavy, passionate flush. Slowly, too, the somber eyes lit—glowed—until the dazzling fire of anger shone in their depths. Then she spoke; not passionately, but with a hard, cruel delivery which sent a shiver thrilling through her companion's body and left her shuddering.

"'Aunt' Margaret, I swear by all that's holy that I'll never marry that scum. Say, I'd rather follow a round-up camp and share a greaser's blankets than wear all the diamonds Lablache could buy. An' as for uncle; say, the day that sees him ruined'll see Lablache's filthy brains spoiling God's pure air."

"Child, child," replied the old lady, in alarm, "don't take oaths, the rashness—the folly of which you cannot comprehend. For goodness' sake don't entertain such wicked thoughts. Lablache is a villain, but—"

She broke off and turned towards the door, which, at that moment, opened to admit the genial doctor.

"Ah," she went on, with a sudden change of manner back to that of her usual cheerful self, "I thought you men were going to make a night of it. Jacky came to share my solitude."

"Good evening, Jacky," said the doctor. "Yes, we were going to make a night of it, Margaret. Your summons broke up the party, and for John's sake—" He checked himself, and glanced curiously at the recurrent form of the girl, who was now lounging back in her chair gazing into the stove. "What did you want me for?"

Jacky rose abruptly from her seat and picked up her hat.

"'Aunt' Margaret didn't really want you, Doc. It was I who asked her to send for you. I want to see uncle."

"Ah!"

The doctor permitted himself the ejaculation.

"Good-night, you two dear people," the girl went on, with a forced attempt at cheerfulness. "I guess uncle'll be home by now, so I'll be off."

"Yes, he left the saloon with me," said Doctor Abbot, shaking hands and walking towards the door. "You'll just about catch him."

The girl kissed the old lady and passed out. The doctor stood for a moment on his doorstep gazing after her.

"Poor child—poor child!" he murmured. "Yes, she'll find him—I saw him home myself," And he broke off with an expressive shrug.

CHAPTER XI - THE CAMPAIGN OPENS

The summit of a hill, however insignificant its altitude, is always an inspiring vantage point from which to survey the surrounding world. There is a briskness of atmosphere on a hilltop which is inspiriting to the most jaded of faculties; there is a sparkling vitality in the breath of the morning air which must ever make life a joy and the world seem an inexpressible delight in which it is the acme of happiness to dwell.

The exigencies of prairie life demand the habit of early rising, and more often does the tiny human atom, which claims for its home the vast tracts of natural pasture, gaze upon the sloth of

the orb of day than does that glorious sphere smile down upon a sleeping world.

Far as the eye can reach stretch the mighty wastes of waving grass—the undulating plains of ravishing verdure. What breadth of thought must thus be inspired in one who gazes out across the boundless expanse at the glories of a perfect sunrise? How insignificant becomes the petty affairs of man when gazing upon the majesty of God's handiwork. How utterly inconceivable becomes the association of evil with such transcendently beautiful creation? Surely no evil was intended to lurk in the shadow of so much simple splendor.

And yet does the ghastly specter of crime haunt the perfect plains, the majestic valleys, the noiseless, inspiring pine woods, the glistening, snow-capped hills. And so it must remain as long as the battle of life continues undecided—so long as the struggle for existence endures.

The Hon. Bunning-Ford rose while yet the daylight was struggling to overcome the shades of night. He stood upon the tiny veranda which fronted his minute house, smoking his early morning cigarette. He was waiting for his coffee—that stimulating beverage which few who have lived in the wilds of the West can do without—and idly luxuriating in the wondrous charm of scene which was spread out before him. "Lord" Bill was not a man of great poetic mind, but he appreciated his adopted country—"God's country," as he was wont to call it—as can only those who have lived in it. The prairie had become part of his very existence, and he loved to contemplate the varying lights and colors which moved athwart the fresh spring-clad plains as the sun rose above the eastern horizon.

The air was chill, but withal invigorating, as he watched the steely blue of the daylit sky slowly give place to the rosy tint of sunrise. Slowly at first—then faster—great waves of golden light seemed to leap from the top of one green rising ground to another; the gray white of the snowy western mountains passed from one dead shade to another, until, at last, they gleamed like alabaster from afar with a diamond brilliancy almost painful to the eye. Thus the sun rose like some mighty caldron of fire mounting into the cloudless azure of a perfect sky, showering unctuous rays of light and heat upon the chilled life that was of its own creating.

Bill was still lost in thought, gazing out upon the perfect scene from the vantage point of the hill upon which his "shack" stood, when round the corner of the house came a half-breed, bearing a large tin pannikin of steaming coffee. He took the pannikin from the man and propped himself against a post which helped to support the roof of the veranda.

"Are the boys out yet?" he asked the waiting Breed, and nodding towards the corrals, which reposed at the foot of the hill and were overlooked by the house.

"I guess," the fellow replied laconically. Then, as an afterthought, "They're getting breakfast, anyhow."

"Say, when they've finished their grub you can tell 'em to turn to and lime out the sheds. I'm going in to the settlement to-day. If I'm not back to-night let them go right on with the job to-morrow."

The man signified his understanding of the instructions with a grunt. This cook of "Lord" Bill's was not a man of words. His vocation had induced an irascibility of temper which took the form of silence. His was an incipient misanthropy.

Bill returned the empty pannikin and strolled down towards the corrals and sheds. The great barn lay well away from where the cattle congregated. This ranch was very different from that of the Allandales of Foss River. It was some miles away from the settlement. Its surroundings were far more open. Timber backed the house, it is true, but in front was the broad expanse of the open plains. It was an excellent position, and, governed by a thrifty hand, would undoubtedly have thrived and ultimately vied with the more elaborate establishment over which Jacky held sway. As it was, however, Bill cared little for prosperity and money-making, and though he did not neglect his property he did not attempt to extend its present limits.

The milch cows were slowly mouching from the corrals as he neared the sheds. A diminutive herder was urging them along with shrill, piping shrieks—vicious but ineffective. Far more to the purpose were the efforts to a well-trained, bob-tailed sheep dog who was awaking echoes on the brisk morning air with the full-toned note of his bark.

"Lord" Bill found one or two hands quietly enjoying their after-breakfast smoke, but the majority had not as yet left the kitchen. Outside the barn two men were busily soft-soaping their saddles and bridles, whilst a third, seated on an upturned box, was wiping out his revolver with a coal-oil rag. Bill passed them by with a nod and greeting, and went into the stable. The horses were feeding, but as yet the stalls had not been cleaned out. He returned and gave some instructions to one of the men. Then he walked slowly back to the house. Usually he would have stayed down there to see the work of the day carried out; now, however, he was preoccupied. On this particular morning he took but little interest in the place; he knew only too well how soon it must pass from his possession.

Half-way up the hill he paused and turned his sleepy eyes towards the south. At a considerable distance a vehicle was approaching at a spanking pace. It was a buckboard, one of those sturdy conveyances built especially for light prairie transport. As yet it was not sufficiently near for him to distinguish its occupant, but the speed and cut of the horses seemed familiar to him. He continued on towards the house, and seated himself leisurely on the veranda, and, rolling himself

another cigarette, calmly watched the on-coming conveyance.

It was the habit of this man never to be prodigal in the display of energy. He usually sat when there was no need for standing; he always considered speech to be golden, but silence, to his way of thinking, was priceless. And like most men of such opinion he cultivated thought and observation.

He propped his back against the veranda post, and, taking a deep inhalation from his cigarette, gazed long and earnestly, with half-closed eyes, down the winding southern trail.

His curiosity, if such a feeling might have been attributed to him, was soon set at rest, for, as the horses raced up the hill towards him, he had no difficulty in recognizing the bulky proportions of his visitor. Seeing the driver of the buckboard making for the house, two of the "hands" had hastened up the hill to take the horses. Lablache, for it was the fleshy money-lender, slid, as agilely as his great bulk would permit him, from the vehicle, and the two men took charge of the horses. Bill was not altogether cordial. It was not his way to be so to anybody but his friends.

"How are you?" he said with a nod, but without rising from his recumbent attitude. "Goin' to stay long?"

His latter question sounded churlish, but Lablache understood his meaning. It was of the horses the rancher was thinking.

"An hour, maybe," replied Lablache, breathing heavily as a result of his climb out of the buckboard.

"Right Take 'em away, boys. Remove the harness and give 'em a good rub down. Don't water or feed 'em till they're cool. They're spanking 'plugs,' Lablache," he added, as he watched the horses being led down to the barn. "Come inside. Had breakfast?" rising and knocking the dust from the seat of his moleskin trousers.

"Yes, I had breakfast before daylight, thanks," Lablache said, glancing quickly down at the empty corrals, where his horses were about to undergo a rubbing down. "I came out to have a business chat with you. Shall we go in-doors?"

"Most certainly."

There was an expressive curtness in the two words. Bill permitted himself a brief survey of the great man's back as the latter turned towards the front door. And although his half-closed lids hid the expression of his eyes, the pursing of the lips and the fluctuating muscles of his jaw spoke of unpleasant thoughts passing through his mind. A business talk with Lablache, under the circumstances, could not afford the rancher much pleasure. He followed the money-lender into the sitting-room.

The apartment was very bare, mannish, and scarcely the acme of neatness. A desk, a deck chair, a bench and a couple of old-fashioned windsor chairs; a small table, on which breakfast things were set, an old saddle, a rack of guns and rifles, a few trophies of the chase in the shape of skins and antelope heads comprised the furniture and decorations of the room. And too, in that slightly uncouth collection, something of the character of the proprietor was revealed.

Bunning-Ford was essentially careless of comfort. And surely he was nothing if not a keen and ardent sportsman.

"Sit down." Bill indicated the chairs with a wave of the arm. Lablache dubiously eyed the deck chair, then selected one of the unyielding Windsor chairs as more safe for the burden of his precious body, tested it, and sat down, emitting a gasp of breath like an escape of steam from a safety-valve. The younger man propped himself on the corner of his desk.

Lablache looked furtively into his companion's face. Then he turned his eyes in the direction of the window. Bill said nothing, his face was calm. He intended the money-lender to speak first. The latter seemed indisposed to do so. His lashless eyes gazed steadily out at the prairie beyond. "Lord" Bill's persistent silence at length forced the other into speech. His words came slowly and were frequently punctuated with deep breaths.

"Your ranch—everything you possess is held on first mortgage."

"Not all." Bunning-Ford's answer came swiftly. The abruptness of the other's announcement nettled him. The tone of the words conveyed a challenge which the younger man was not slow to accept.

Lablache shrugged his shoulders with deliberation until his fleshy jowl creased against the woolen folds of his shirt front.

"It comes to the same thing," he said; "what I—what is not mortgaged is held in bonds. The balance, practically all of it, you owe under signature to Pedro Mancha. It is because of that—latest—debt I am here."

"Ah!"

Bill rolled a fresh cigarette and lit it. He guessed something of what was coming—but not all.

"Mancha will force you to meet your liabilities to him. Your interest is shortly due to the Calford

Loan Co. You cannot meet both."

Lablache gazed unblinkingly into the other's face. He was thoroughly enjoying himself.

Bill was staring pensively at his cigarette. One leg swung pendulum fashion beside the desk. His indebtedness troubled him not a jot. He was trying to fathom the object of this prelude. Lablache, he knew, had not come purposely to make these plain statements. He blew a cloud of smoke down his nostrils with much appreciation. Then he heaved a sigh as though his troubles were too great for him to bear.

"Right—dead right, first time."

The lazy eyes appeared to be staring into space. In reality they were watching the doughy countenance before him. "What do you propose to do?" Lablache asked, ignoring the other's flippant tone.

Bill shrugged.

"Debts of honor must be met first," he said quietly. "Mancha must be paid in full. I shall take care of that. For the rest, I have no doubt your business knowledge will prompt you as to what course the Calford Loan Co. and yourself had best adopt."

Lablache was slightly taken aback at the cool indifference of this man. He scarcely knew how to deal with him. He had driven out this morning intending to coerce, or, at least, strike a hard bargain. But the object of his attentions was, to say the least of it, difficult.

He moved uneasily and crossed his legs.

"There is only one course open to your creditors. It is a harsh method and one which goes devilishly against the grain. But—"

"Pray don't apologize, Mr. Lablache," broke in the other, smiling sardonically. "I am fully aware of the tender condition of your feelings. I only trust that in this matter you will carry out your—er—painful duty without worrying me with the detail of the necessary routine. I shall settle Mancha's debt at once and then you are welcome to the confounded lot."

Bill moved from his position and walked towards the door. The significance of his action was well marked. Lablache, however, had no intention of going yet. He moved heavily round upon his chair so as to face his man.

"One moment—er—Ford. You are a trifle precipitate. I was going on to say, when you interrupted me, that if you cared to meet me half-way I have a proposition to make which might solve your difficulty. It is an unusual one, I admit, but," with a meaning smile, "I rather fancy that the Calford Loan Co. might be induced to see the advantage, *to them*, of delaying action."

The object of this early morning visit was about to be made apparent. Bill returned to his position at the desk and lit another cigarette. The suave manner of his unwelcome guest was dangerous. He was prepared. There was something almost feline in the attitude and the expression of the young rancher as he waited for the money-lender to proceed. Perhaps Lablache understood him. Perhaps his understanding warned him to adopt his best manner. His usual method in dealing with his victims was hardly the same as he was now using.

"Well, what is this 'unusual' course?" asked Bill, in no very tolerant tone. He wished it made quite plain that he cared nothing about the "selling up" process to which he knew he must be subjected. Lablache noted the haughty manner and resented it, but still he gave no outward sign. He had a definite object to attain and he would not allow his anger to interfere with his chances of success.

"Merely a pleasant little business arrangement which should meet all parties' requirements," he said easily. "At present you are paying a ten per cent, interest on a principal of thirty-five thousand dollars to the Calford Loan Co. A debt of twenty thousand to me includes an amount of interest which represents ten per cent, interest for ten years. Very well, Your ranch should be yielding a greater profit than it is. With your permission the Calford Trust Co. shall put in a competent manager, whose salary shall be paid out of the profits. The balance of said profits shall be handed Over to your creditors, less an annual income to you of fifteen hundred dollars. Thus the principal of your debts, at a careful computation, should be liquidated in seven years. In consideration of thus shortening the period of the loans by three years the Calford Trust Co. shall allow you a rebate of five per cent, interest. Failing the profits in seven years amounting to the sums of money required, the Calford Trust Co. and myself will forego the balance due to us. Let me plainly assure you that this is no philanthropic scheme but the result of practical calculation. The advantage to you is obvious. An assured income during that period, and your ranch well and ably managed and improved. Your property at the end of seven years will return to you a vastly more valuable possession than it is at present. And we, on our part, will recover our money and interest without the unpleasant reflection that, in doing so, we have beggared you."

Lablache, usurer, scoundrel, smiled benignly at his companion as he pronounced his concluding words. The Hon. Bunning-Ford looked, thought, and looked again. He began to think that Lablache was meditating a more rascally proceeding than he had given him credit for. His words were so specious. His pie was so delicately crusted with such a tempting exterior. What was the object of this magnanimous offer? He felt he must know more.

"It sounds awfully well, but surely that is not all. What, in return, is demanded of me?"

Lablache had carefully watched the effect of his words. He was wondering whether the man he was dealing with was clever beyond the average, or a fool. He was still balancing the point in his mind when Bill put the question.

Lablache looked away, produced a snuff-box and drew up a large pinch of snuff before answering. He blew his nose with trumpet-like vehemence on a great red bandana.

"The only return asked of you is that you vacate the country for the next two years," he said heavily. And in that rejoinder "Lord" Bill understood the man's guile.

It was a sudden awakening, but it came to him as no sort of surprise. He had long suspected, although he had never given serious credence to his suspicions, the object the money-lender had in inveigling both himself and "Poker" John into their present difficulties. Now he understood, and a burning desire swept over him to shoot the man down where he sat. Then a revulsion of feeling came to him and he saw the ludicrous side of the situation. He gazed at Lablache, that obese mountain of blubber, and tried to think of the beautiful, wild Jacky as the money-lender's wife. The thing seemed so preposterous that he burst out into a mocking laugh.

Lablache, whose fishy eyes had never left the rancher's face, heard the tone and slowly flushed with anger. For an instant he seemed about to rise, then instead he leant forward.

"Well?" he asked, breathing his monosyllabic inquiry hissing upon the air.

Bill emitted a thin cloud of smoke into the money-lender's face. His eyes had suddenly become wide open and blazing with anger. He pointed to the door.

"I'll see you damned first! Now—git!"

At the door Lablache turned. In his face was written all the fury of hell.

"Mancha's debt is transferred to me. You will settle it without delay."

He had scarcely uttered the last word when there was a loud report, and simultaneously the crash of a bullet in the casing of the door. Lablache accepted his dismissal with precipitation and hastened to where his horses were stationed, to the accompaniment of "Lord" Bill's mocking laugh. He had no wish to test the rancher's marksmanship further.

CHAPTER XII - LABLACHE FORCES THE FIGHT

A month—just one month and the early spring has developed with almost tropical suddenness into a golden summer. The rapid passing of seasons, the abrupt break, the lightning change from one into another, is one of the many beauties of the climate of that fair land where there are no half measures in Nature's mode of dealing out from her varied store of moods. Spring chases Winter, hoary, bitter, cruel Winter, in the hours of one night; and in turn Spring's delicate influence is overpowered with equal celerity by the more matured and unctuous ripeness of Summer.

Foss River had now become a glorious picture of vivid coloring. The clumps of pine woods no longer present their tattered purplish appearance, the garb in which grim Winter is wont to robe them. They are lighter, gayer, and bathed in the gleaming sunlight they are transformed from their somber forbidding aspect to that of radiant, welcome shade. The river is high, almost to flooding point. And the melting snow on the distant mountain-tops has urged it into a sparkling torrent of icy cold water rushing on at a pace which threatens to tear out its deterring banks and shallow bed in its mad career.

The most magical change which the first month of summer has brought is to be seen in the stock. Cattle, when first brought in from distant parts at the outset of the round-up, usually are thin, mean-looking, and half-starved. Two weeks of the delicious spring grass and the fat on their ribs and loins rolls and shakes as they move, growing almost visibly under the succulent influence of the delicate vegetation.

Few at Foss River appreciated the blessings of summer more fully than did Jacky Allandale, and few worked harder than did she. Almost single-handed she grappled with the stupendous task of the management of the great ranch, and no "hand," however experienced, was more capable in the most arduous tasks which that management involved. From the skillful organization down to the roping and branding of a wild two-year-old steer there was no one who understood the business of stock-raising better than she. She loved it—it was the very essence of life to her.

Silas, her uncle's foreman, was in the habit of summing her up in his brief but expressive way.

"Missie Jacky?" he would exclaim, in tones of surprise, to any one who dared to express wonder at her masterly management. "Guess a cyclone does its biz mighty thorough, but I take it ef that gal 'ud been born a hurricane she'd 'ave dislodged mountains an' played baseball with the glaciers."

But this year things were different with the mistress of the Foss River Ranch. True she went

about her work with that thorough appreciation which she always displayed, but the young face had lost something of its happy girlish delight—that *débonnaire* cheerfulness which usually characterized it. A shadow seemed to be hanging over her—a shadow, which, although it marred in no way her fresh young beauty, added a deepened pensiveness to her great somber eyes, and seemed to broaden the fringing black ring round the gray pupils. This year the girl had more to grapple with than the mere management of the ranch.

Her uncle needed all her care. And, too, the consciousness that the result of all her work was insufficient to pay the exorbitant interest on mortgages which had been forced upon her uncle by the hated, designing Lablache took something of the zest from her labors. Then, besides this, there were thoughts of the compact sealed between her lover and herself in Bad Man's Hollow, and the knowledge of the intentions of the money-lender towards "Lord" Bill, all helped to render her distraught. She knew all about the scene which had taken place at Bill's ranch, and she knew that, for her lover at least, the crash had come. During that first month of the open season the girl had been sorely tried. There was no one but "Aunt" Margaret to whom she could go for comfort or sympathy, and even she, with her wise councils and far-seeing judgment, could not share in the secrets which weighed so heavily upon the girl.

Jacky had not experienced, as might have been expected, very great difficulty in keeping her uncle fast to the grind-stone of duty. Whatever his faults and weaknesses, John Allandale was first of all a rancher, and when once the winter breaks every rancher must work—ay, work like no negro slave ever worked. It was only in the evenings, when bodily fatigue had weakened the purpose of ranching habit, and when the girl, wearied with her day's work, relaxed her vigilance, that the old man craved for the object of his passion and its degrading accompaniment. Then he would nibble at the whisky bottle, having "earned his tonic," as he would say, until the potent spirit had warmed his courage and he would hurry off to the saloon for "half an hour's flutter," which generally terminated in the small hours of the morning.

Such was the state of affairs at the Foss River Ranch when Lablache put into execution his threats against the Hon. Bunning-Ford. The settlement had returned to its customary torpid serenity. The round-up was over, and all the "hands" had returned to the various ranches to which they belonged. The little place had entered upon its period of placid sleep, which would last until the advent of the farmers to spend the proceeds of their garnered harvest. But this would be much later in the year, and in the meantime Foss River would sleep.

The night before the sale of "Lord" Bill's ranch, he and Jacky went for a ride. They had thus ridden out on many evenings of late. Old John was too absorbed in his own affairs to bother himself at these evening journeyings, although, in his careless way, he noticed how frequent a visitor at the ranch Bill had lately become. Still, he made no objection. If his niece saw fit to encourage these visits he would not interfere. In his eyes the girl could do no wrong. It was his one redeeming feature, his love for the motherless girl, and although his way of showing it was more than open to criticism, it was true he loved her with a deep, strong affection.

Foss River was far too sleepy to bother about these comings and goings. Lablache, alone, of the sleepy hamlet, eyed the evening journeys with suspicion. But even he was unable to fathom their object, and was forced to set them down, his whole being consumed with jealousy the while, to lovers' wanderings. However, these nightly rides were taken with purpose. After galloping across the prairie in various directions they always, as darkness crept on, terminated at a certain spot—the clump of willows and reeds at which the secret path across the great keg began.

The sun was well down below the distant mountain peaks when Jacky and her lover reached the scrubby bush of willows and reeds upon the evening before the day of the sale of Bill's ranch. As they drew up their panting horses, and dismounted, the evening twilight was deepening over the vast expanse of the mire.

The girl stood at the brink of the bottomless caldron of viscid muck and gazed out across the deadly plain. Bill stood still beside her, watching her face with eager, hungry eyes.

"Well?" he said at last, as his impatience forced itself to his lips.

"Yes, Bill," the girl answered slowly, as one balancing her decision well before giving judgment, "the path has widened. The rain has kept off long enough, and the sun has done his best for us. It is a good omen. Follow me."

She linked her arm through the reins of her horse's bridle, and leading the faithful animal, stepped fearlessly out on to the muskeg. As she trod the rotten crust she took a zigzag direction from one side of the secret path to the other. That which, in early spring, had scarcely been six feet in width, would now have borne ten horsemen abreast. Presently she turned back. "We need go no further, Bill; what is safe here continues safe across the keg. It will widen in places, but in no place will the path grow narrower."

"But tell me," said the man, anxious to assure himself that no detail was forgotten, "what about the trail of our footprints?"

The girl laughed. Then indenting the ground with her shapely boot until the moisture below oozed into the imprint, she looked up into the lazy face before her.

"See—we wait for one minute, and you shall see the result."

They waited in silence in the growing darkness. The night insects and mosquitoes buzzed around

them. The man's attention was riveted upon the impression made by the girl's foot. Slowly the water filled the print, then slowly, under the moist influence, the ground, sponge-like, rose again, the water disappeared, and all sign of the footmark was gone.

When again the ground had resumed its natural appearance the girl looked up.

"Are you satisfied, Bill? No man or beast who passes over this path leaves a trail which lasts longer than a minute. Even the rank grass, however badly trodden down, rears itself again with amazing vitality. I guess this place was created through the devil's agency and for the purpose of devil's work."

Bill gave one sweeping glance around. Then he turned, and the two made their way back to the edge of the sucking mire.

"Yes, it'll do, dear. Now let us hasten home."

They remounted their horses and were soon lost in the gathering darkness as they made their way over the brow of the rising ground, in the direction of the settlement.

The next day saw the possession of the Hon. Bunning-Ford's ranch pass into other hands. Punctually at noon, the sale began. And by four o'clock the process, which robbed the rancher of everything that he possessed in the world, was completed.

Bill stationed himself on the veranda and smoked incessantly while the sale proceeded. He was there to see how the things went, and, in fact, seemed to take an outsider's interest only. He experienced no morbid sentiment at the loss of his property—it is doubtful if he cared at all. Anyhow, his leisurely attitude and his appearance of good-natured indifference caused many surprised remarks amongst the motley collection of bidders who were present. In spite of these appearances, however, he did take a very keen interest. A representative of Lablache's was there to purchase stock, and Bill knew it, and his interest was centered on this would-be purchaser.

The stock was the last thing to come under the hammer. There were twenty lots. Of these Lablache's representative purchased fifteen—three-quarters of the stock of the entire ranch.

Bill waited only for this, then, as the sale closed, he leisurely rolled and lit another cigarette and strolled to where a horse, which he had borrowed from the Allandales stable, was tied, and rode slowly away.

As he rode away he turned his head in the direction of the house upon the hill. He was leaving for good and all the place which had so long claimed him as master. He saw the small gathering of people still hanging about the veranda, upon which the auctioneer still stood with his clerk, busy over the sales. He noticed others passing hither and thither, as they prepared to depart with their purchases. But none of these things which he looked upon affected him in any mawkish, sentimental manner. It was all over. That little hill, with its wooded background and vast frontage of prairie, from which he had loved to watch the sun get up after its nightly sojourn, would know him no more. His indifference was unassumed. His was not the nature to regret past follies.

He smiled softly as he turned his attention to the future which lay before him, and his smile was not in keeping with the expression of a broken man.

In these last days of waning prosperity Bunning-Ford had noticeably changed. With loss of property he had lost much of that curious veneer of indolence, utter disregard of consequences, which had always been his. Not, that he had suddenly developed a violent activity or boisterous enthusiasm. Simply his interest in things and persons seemed to have received a fillip. There seemed to be an air of latent activity about him; a setness of purpose which must have been patent to any one sufficiently interested to observe the young rancher closely. But Foss River was too sleepy—indifferent—to worry itself about anybody, except those in its ranks who were riding the high horse of success. Those who fell out by the wayside were far too numerous to have more than a passing thought devoted to them. So this subtle change in the man was allowed to pass without comment by any except, perhaps, the money-lender, Lablache, and the shrewd, kindly wife of the doctor—people not much given to gossip.

It was only since the discovery of Lablache's perfidy that "Lord" Bill had understood what living meant. His discovery in Smith's saloon had roused in him a very human manhood. Since that time he had been seized with a mental activity, a craving for action he had never, in all his lazy life, before experienced. This sudden change had been aggravated by Lablache's subsequent conduct, and the flame had been fanned by the right that Jacky had given him to protect her. The sensation was one of absorbing excitement, and the loss of property sat lightly upon him in consequence. Money he had not—property he had not. But he had now what he had never possessed before—he had an object.

A lasting, implacable vengeance was his, from the contemplation of which he drew a satisfaction which no possession of property could have given him. Nature had, with incorrigible perversity, cut him out for a life of ease, whilst endowing him with a character capable of very great things. Now, in her waywardness she had aroused that character and overthrown the hindering superficiality in which she had clothed it. And further to mark her freakish mood, these same capabilities which might easily, under other circumstances, have led him into the fore-front of life's battle, she directed, with inexorable cruelty, into an adverse course. He had been cheated, robbed, and his soul thirsted for revenge. Lablache had robbed the uncle of the girl he loved, and, worse than all, the wretch had tried to oust him from the affections of the girl herself. Yes,

he thirsted for revenge as might any traveler in a desert crave for water. His eyes, no longer sleepy, gleamed as he thought. His long, square jaws seemed welded into one as he thought of his wrongs. His was the vengeance which, if necessary, would last his lifetime. At least, whilst Lablache lived no quarter would he give or accept.

Something of this he was thinking as he took his farewell of the ranch on the hill, and struck out in the direction of the half-breed camp situated in a hollow some distance outside the settlement of Foss River.

CHAPTER XIII - THE FIRST CHECK

The afterglow of sunset slowly faded out of the western sky. And the hush of the night was over all. The feeling of an awful solitude, which comes to those whose business is to pass the night on the open prairie, is enhanced rather than reduced by the buzz of insect life upon the night air. The steady hum of the mosquito—the night song of the grasshoppers and frogs—the ticking, spasmodic call of the invisible beetles—all these things help to intensify the loneliness and magnitude of the wild surroundings. Nor does the smoldering camp-fire lessen the loneliness. Its very light deepens the surrounding dark, and its only use, after the evening meal is cooked, is merely to dispel the savage attack of the voracious mosquito and put the fear of man into the hearts of the prairie scavenger, the coyote, whose dismal howl awakens the echoes of the night at painfully certain intervals, and often drives sleep from the eyes of the weary traveler.

It is rare that the "cow-hand" pitches his camp amongst hills, or in the neighborhood of any bushy growth. The former he shuns from a natural dislike for a limited view. The latter, especially if the bush takes the form of pine woods, is bad for many reasons, chief amongst which is the fact of its being the harborage of the savage, gigantic timber wolf—a creature as naturally truculent as the far-famed grizzly, the denizen of the towering Rockies.

Upon a high level of the prairie, out towards the upper reaches of the Rainy River, a tributary of the broad, swift-flowing Foss River, and some fifteen miles from the settlement, two men were lounging, curled leisurely round the smoldering remains of a camp fire. Some distance away the occasional lowing of a cow betrayed the presence of a band of cattle.

The men were wide awake and smoking. Whether they refrained from sleep through necessity or inclination matters little. Probably the hungry attacks of the newly-hatched mosquito were responsible for their wakefulness. Each man was wrapped in a single brown blanket, and folded saddle-cloth answered as a pillow, and it was noticeable that they were stretched out well to leeward of the fire, so that the smoke passed across them, driving away a few of the less audacious "skitters."

"We'll get 'em in by dinner to-morrow," said one of the sleepless men thoughtfully. His remark was more in the tone of soliloquy than addressed to the other. Then louder, and in a manner which implied resentment, "Them all-fired skitters is givin' me a twistin'."

"Smoke up, pard," came a muffled rejoinder from the region of the other blanket "Maybe your hide's a bit tender yet. I 'lows skitters 'most allus goes fur young 'uns. Guess I'm all right."

"Dessay you are," replied the first speaker, sharply. "I ain't been long in the country—leastways, not on the prairie, an' like as not I ain't dropped into the ways o' things. I've allus heerd as washin' is mighty bad when skitters is around. They doesn't worry you any."

He pulled heavily at his pipe until his face was enveloped in a fog of smoke. His companion's tone of patronage had nettled him. The old hand moved restlessly but did not answer. It is doubtful if the other's sarcasm had been observed. It was scarcely broad enough to penetrate the toughened hide of the older hand's susceptibilities.

The silence was broken by a man's voice in the distance. The sound of an old familiar melody, chanted in a manly and not unmusical voice, reached the fireside. It was the voice of the man who was on watch round the band of cattle, and he was endeavoring to lull them into quiescence. The human voice, in the stillness of the night, has a somnolent effect upon cattle, and even mosquitoes, unless they are very thick, fail to counteract the effect. The older hand stirred. Then he sat up and methodically replenished the fire, kicking the dying embers together until they blazed afresh.

"Jim Bowley do sing mighty sweet," he said, in disparaging tones. "Like a crazy buzz-saw, I guess. S'pose them beasties is gettin' kind o' restless. Say, Nat, how goes the time? It must be night on ter your spell."

Nat sat up and drew out a great silver watch.

"Haf an hour yet, pard." Then he proceeded to re-fill his pipe, cutting great flakes of black tobacco from a large plug with his sheath knife. Suddenly he paused in the operation and listened. "Say, Jake, what's that?"

"What's what?" replied Jake, roughly, preparing to lie down again.

"Listen!"

The two men bent their keen, prairie-trained ears to windward. They listened intently. The night was very black—as yet the moon had not risen. Jake used his eyes as well as ears. On the prairie, as well as elsewhere, eyes have a lot to do with hearing. He sought to penetrate the darkness around him, but his efforts were unavailing. He could hear no sound but the voice of Jim Bowley and the steady plodding of his horse's feet as he ceaselessly circled the band of somnolent cattle. The sky was cloudy, and only here and there a few stars gleamed diamond-like in the heavens, but threw insufficient light to aid the eyes which sought to penetrate the surrounding gloom. The old hand threw himself back on his pillow in skeptical irritation.

"Thar ain't nothin', young 'un," he said disdainfully. "The beasties is quiet, and Jim Bowley ain't no tenderfoot. Say, them skitters 'as rattled yer. Guess you 'eard some prowlin' coyote. They allus come around whar ther's a tenderfoot."

Jake curled himself up again and chuckled at his own sneering pleasantry.

"Coyote yerself, Jake Bond," retorted Nat, angrily. "Them lugs o' yours is gettin' old. Guess yer drums is saggin'. You're mighty smart, I don't think."

The youngster got on to his feet and walked to where the men's two horses were picketed. Both horses were standing with ears cocked and their heads held high in the direction of the mountains. Their attitude was the acme of alertness. As the man came up they turned towards him and whinnied as if in relief at the knowledge of his presence. But almost instantly turned again to gaze far out into the night. Wonderful indeed is a horse's instinct, but even more wonderful is the keenness of his sight and hearing.

Nat patted his broncho on the neck, and then stood beside him watching—listening. Was it fancy, or was it fact? The faintest sound of a horse galloping reached him; at least, he thought so.

He returned to the fire sullenly antagonistic. He did not return to his blanket, but sat silently smoking and thinking. He hated the constant reference to his inexperience on the prairie. If even he did hear a horse galloping in the distance it didn't matter. But it was his ears that had first caught the sound in spite of his inexperience. His companion pigheadedly derided the fact because his own ears were not sufficiently keen to have detected the sound himself.

Thus he sat for a few minutes gazing into the fire. Jake was now snoring loudly, and Nat was glad to be relieved from the tones of his sneering voice. Presently he rose softly from his seat, and taking his saddle blanket, saddled and bridled his horse. Then he mounted and silently rode off towards the herd. It was his relief on the cattle guard.

Jim Bowley welcomed him with the genial heartiness of a man who knows that he has finished his vigil and that he can now lie down to rest. The guarding of a large herd at night is always an anxious time. Cattle are strange things to handle. A stampede will often involve a week's weary scouring of the prairie.

Just as Jim Bowley was about to ride up to the camp, Nat fired a question which he had been some time meditating.

"Guess you didn't hear a horse gallopin' jest now, pard?" he asked quietly.

"Why cert, boy," the other answered quickly, "only a deaf mule could 'a' missed it. Some one passed right under the ridge thar, away to the southwest. Guess they wer' travelin' mighty fast too. Why?"

"Oh, nothin', Jim, on'y I guess Jake Bond's that same deaf mule you spoke of. He's too fond of gettin' at youngsters, the old fossil. I told 'im as I 'card suthin', an' 'e told me as I was a tenderfoot and didn't know wot I was gassin' about."

"Jake's a cantankerous cuss, boy. Let 'im gas; 'e don't cut any figger anyway. Say, you keep yer eye peeled on some o' the young heifers on the far side o' the bunch. They're rustlin' some. They keep mouching after new grass. When the moon gits up you'll see better. S'long, mate."

Jim rode away towards the camp fire, and young Nat proceeded to circle round the great herd of cattle. It was a mighty bunch for three men to handle. But Lablache, its owner, was never one to underwork his men. This was the herd which he had purchased at the sale of Bunning-Ford's ranch. And they were now being taken to his own ranch, some distance to the south of the settlement, for the purpose of re-branding with his own marks.

As young Nat entered upon his vigil the golden arc of the rising moon broke the sky-line of the horizon. Already the clouds were fast clearing, being slowly driven before the yellow glory of the orb of night. Soon the prairie would be bathed in the effulgent, silvery light which renders the western night so delicious when the moon is at its full.

As the cowboy circled the herd, the moon, at first directly to his left, slowly dropped behind until its, as yet, dull light shone full upon his back. The beasts were quite quiet and the sense of responsibility which was his, in a measure, lessened.

Some distance ahead, and near by where' he must pass, a clump of undergrowth and a few stunted trees grew round the base of a hillock and broken rocks. The cattle were reposing close up by this shelter. Nat's horse, as he drew near to the brush, was ambling along at that peculiar gait, half walk, half trot, essentially the pace of a "cow-horse." Suddenly the animal came to a stand, for which there seemed no apparent reason. He stood for a second with ears cocked,

sniffing at the night air in evident alarm. Then a prolonged, low whistle split the air. The sound came from the other side of the rocks, and, to the tenderfoot's ears, constituted a signal.

The most natural thing for him to have done would have been to wait for further developments, if developments there were to be. However, he was a plucky youngster, in spite of his inexperience, and, besides, something of the derision of Jake Bond was still rankling in his mind. He knew the whistle to be the effort of some man, and his discovery of the individual would further prove the accuracy of his hearing, and he would then have the laugh of his companion. A more experienced hand would have first looked to his six-shooter and thought of cattle thieves, but, as Jake had said, he was a tenderfoot. Instead, without a moment's hesitation, he dashed his spurs into his broncho's flanks and swept round to the shadowed side of the rocks.

He realized his folly when too late. The moment he entered the shade there came the slithering whirr of something cutting through the air. Something struck the horse's front legs, and the next moment he shot out of the saddle in response to a somersault which the broncho turned. His horse had been roped by one of his front legs. The cowboy lay where he fell, dazed and half stunned. Then he became aware of three dark faces bending over him. An instant later a gag was forced into his mouth, and he felt himself being bound hand and foot. Then the three faces silently disappeared, and all was quiet about him.

In the meantime, on the rising ground, where the camp fire burned, all was calm slumber. The two old hands were taking their rest with healthy contentment and noisy assertion. The glory of the rising moon was lost to the slumberers, and no dread of coming disaster disturbed them. The stertorous blasts of their nostrils testified to this. The replenished fire slowly died down to a mass of white smoldering ashes, and the chill-growing air caused one of the sleepers to move restlessly in his sleep and draw his head down beneath his blanket for greater warmth.

Up the slope came three figures. They were moving with cautious, stealthy step, the movement of men whose purpose is not open. On they came swiftly—silently. One man led; he was tall and swarthy with long black hair falling upon his shoulders in straight, coarse mass. He was evidently a half-breed, and his clothes denoted him to be of the poorer class—a class accustomed to live by preying upon its white neighbors. He was clad in a pair of moleskin trousers, which doubtless at one time had been white, but which now were of that nondescript hue which dirt conveys. His upper garments were a beaded buckskin shirt and a battered Stetson hat. Around his waist was a cartridge belt, on which was slung a holster containing a heavy six-chambered revolver and a long sheath knife.

His companions were similarly equipped, and the three formed a wild picture of desperate resolve. Yard by yard they drew toward the sleepers, at each step listening for the loud indications of sleep which were made only too apparent upon the still night air. Now they were close upon the fire. One of the unconscious cow-boys, Jim Bowley, stirred. A moment passed. Then the intruders drew a step nearer. Suddenly Jim roused and then sat up. His action at once became a signal. There was a sound of swift footsteps, and the next instant the astonished man was gazing into the muzzle of a heavy pistol.

"Hands up!" cried the voice of the leading half-breed. One of his followers had similarly covered the half-awakened Jake.

Without a word of remonstrance two pairs of hands went up. Astonishment had for the moment paralyzed speech on the part of the rudely awakened sleepers. They were only dimly conscious of their assailants. The compelling rings of metal that confronted them weighed the balance of their judgment, and their response was the instinctive response of the prairie. Whoever their assailants, they had got the drop on them. The result was the law of necessity.

In depressing silence the assailants drew their captives' weapons. Then, after binding their arms, the leader bade them rise. His voice was harsh and his accent "South-western" American. Then he ordered them to march, the inexorable pistol ever present to enforce obedience. In silence the two men were conducted to the bush where the first capture had been made. And here they were firmly tied to separate trees with their own lariats.

"See hyar," said the tall half-breed, as the captives' feet were bound securely. "There ain't goin' to be no shootin'. You're that sensible. You're jest goin' to remain right hyar till daylight, or mebbe later. A gag'll prevent your gassin'. You're right in the track of white men, so I guess you'll do. See hyar, bo', jest shut it," as Jim Bowley essayed to speak, "cause my barker's itchin' to join in a conversation."

The threat had a quieting effect upon poor Jim, who immediately closed his lips. Silent but watchful he eyed the half-breed's face. There was something very familiar about the thin cheeks, high cheek-bones, and about the great hooked nose. He was struggling hard to locate the man. At this moment the third ruffian approached with three horses. The other had been busy fixing a gag in Jake Bond's mouth. Jim Bowley saw the horses come up. And, in the now brilliant moonlight, he beheld and recognized a grand-looking golden chestnut. There was no mistaking that glorious beast. Jim was no tenderfoot; he had been on the prairie in this district for years. And although he had never come into actual contact with the man, he had seen him and knew about the exploits of the owner of that perfect animal.

The half-breed approached him with an improvised gag. For the life of him Jim could not resist a temptation which at that moment assailed him. The threatening attitude of his captor for the instant had lost its effect. If he died for it he must blurt out his almost superstitious

astonishment.

The half-breed seized his prisoner's lower jaw in his hand and compressed the cheeks upon the teeth. Jim's lips parted, and a horrified amazement found vent in words.

"Holy Gawd! man. But be ye flesh or sperrit? Peter Retief—as I'm a livin'—"

He said no more, for, with a wrench, the gag was forced into his mouth by the relentless hand of the man before him. Although he was thus silenced his eyes remained wide open and staring. The dark stern face, as he saw it, was magnified into that of a fiend. The keen eyes and depressed brows, he thought, might belong to some devil re-incarnated, whilst the eagle-beaked nose and thin-compressed lips denoted, to his distorted fancy, a sanguinary cruelty. At the mention of his name this forbidding apparition flashed a vengeful look at the speaker, and a half smile of utter disdain flickered unnoticed around the corners of his mouth.

Once his prisoners were secured the dark-visaged cattle-thief turned to the horses. At a word the trio mounted. Then they rode off, and the wretched captives beheld, to their unspeakable dismay, the consummate skill with which the cattle were roused and driven off. Away they went with reckless precipitance, the cattle obeying the master hand of the celebrated raider with an implicitness which seemed to indicate a strange sympathy between man and beast. The great golden chestnut raced backwards and forwards like some well-trained greyhound, heading the leading beasts into the desired direction without effort or apparent guidance. It was a grand display of the cowboy's art, and, in spite of his predicament and the cruel tightness of his bonds, Jim Bowley reveled in the sight of such a display.

In five minutes the great herd was out of sight, and only the distant rumble of their speeding hoofs reached the captives. Later, the moon, no longer golden, but shedding a silvery radiance over all, shone down upon a peaceful plain. The night hum of insects was undisturbed. The mournful cry of the coyote echoed at intervals, but near by, where the camp fire no longer put the fear of man into the hearts of the scavengers of the prairie, all was still and calm. The prisoners moaned softly, but not loud enough to disturb the peace of the perfect night, as their cruel bonds gnawed at their patience. For the rest, the Western world had resumed its wonted air.

CHAPTER XIV - THE HUE AND CRY

"A thousand head of cattle, John! A thousand; and 'hustled' from under our very noses. By thunder! it is intolerable. Over thirty-five thousand dollars gone in one clean sweep. Why, I say, do we pay for the up-keep of the police if this sort of thing is allowed to go on? It is disgraceful. It means ruination to the country if a man cannot run his stock without fear of molestation. Who said that scoundrel Retief was dead—drowned in the great muskeg? It's all poppy-cock, I tell you; the man's as much alive as you or I. Thirty-five thousand dollars! By heavens!—it's—it's scandalous!"

Lablache leant forward heavily in his chair and rested his great arms upon John Allandale's desk. "Poker" John and he were seated in the former's office, whither the money-lender had come, post-haste, on receiving the news of the daring raid of the night before. The great man's voice was unusually thick with rage, and his asthmatical breathing came in great gusts as his passionate excitement grew under the lash of his own words. The old rancher gazed in stupefied amazement at the financier. He had not as yet fully realized the fact with which he had just been acquainted in terms of such sweeping passion. The old man's brain was none too clear in the mornings now. And the suddenness of the announcement had shocked his faculties into a state of chaos.

"Terrible—terrible," was all he was able to murmur. Then, bracing himself, he asked weakly, "But what are you to do?"

The weather-beaten old face was working nervously. The eyes, in the past keen and direct in their glance, were bloodshot and troubled. He looked like a man who was fast breaking up. Very different from the night when we first met him at the Calford Polo Club ball. There could be no doubt as to the origin of this swift change. The whole atmosphere of the man spoke of drink.

Lablache turned on him without any attempt to conceal the latent ferocity of his nature. The heavy, pouchy jowl was scarlet with his rage. The money-lender had been flicked upon a very raw and tender spot. Money was his god.

"What am I to do?" he retorted savagely. "What are *we* to do? What is all the ranching world of Alberta to do? Why, fight, man. Hound this scoundrel to his lair. Follow him—track him. Hunt him from bush to bush until we fall upon him and tear him limb from limb. Are we going to sit still while he terrorizes the whole country? While he 'hustles' every head of stock from us, and—and spirits it away? No, if we spend fortunes upon his capture we must not rest until he swings from a gibbet at the end of his own lariat."

"Yes, of course—of course," the rancher responded, his cheek twitching weakly. "You are quite right, we must hunt this scoundrel down. But we know what has gone before—I mean, before he was supposed to have died. The man could never be traced. He seemed to vanish into thin air. What do you propose?"

"Yes, but that was two years ago," said Lablache, moodily. "Things may be different now. A thousand head of cattle does not vanish so easily. There is bound to be some trace left behind. And then, the villain has only got a short start of us. I sent a messenger over to Stormy Cloud Settlement the first thing this morning. A sergeant and four men will be sent to work up the case. I expect them here at any moment. As justices of the peace it devolves on both of us to set an example to the settlers, and we shall then receive hearty co-operation. You understand, John," the money-lender went on, with pompous assertiveness, "although, at present, I am the chief sufferer by this scoundrel's depredations, it is plainly your duty as much as mine to take this matter up."

The first rough storm of Lablache's passion had passed. He was "yanking" himself up to the proper attitude for the business in hand. Although he had calmed considerably his lashless eyes gleamed viciously, and his flabby face wore an expression which boded ill for the object of his rage, should that unfortunate ever come within the range of his power.

"Poker" John was struggling hard to bring a once keen intellect to bear upon the affair. He had listened to the money-lender's account of the raid with an almost doubtful understanding, the chief shock to which was the re-appearance of the supposed dead Retief, that prince of "hustlers," who, two years ago, had terrorized the neighborhood by his impudent raids. At last his mind seemed to clear and he stood up. And, bending across the desk as though to emphasize his words, he showed something of the old spirit which had, in days gone by, made him a successful rancher.

"I don't believe it, Lablache. This is some damned yarn to cover the real culprit. Why, man, Peter Retief is buried deep in that reeking keg, and no slapsided galoot's goin' to pitch such a crazy notion as his resurrection down my throat. Retief? Why, I'd as lief hear that Satan himself was abroad duffing cattle. Bah! Where's the 'hand' that's gulled you?"

Lablache eyed the old man curiously. He was not sure that there might not be some truth in the rancher's forcible skepticism. For the moment the old man's words carried some weight, then, as he remembered the unvarnished tale the cowboy had told, he returned to his conviction. He shook his massive head.

"No one has gulled me, John. You shall hear the story for yourself as soon as the police arrive. You will the better be able to judge of the fellow's sincerity."

At this moment the sound of horses' hoofs came in through the open window. Lablache glanced out on to the veranda.

"Ah, here he is, and I'm glad to see they've sent Sergeant Horrocks. The very man for the work. Good," and he rubbed his fat hands together. "Horrocks is a great prairie man."

"Poker" John rose and went out to meet the officer. Later he conducted him into the office. Sergeant Horrocks was a man of medium height, slightly built, but with an air of cat-like agility about him. He was very bronzed, with a sharp, rather than a clever face. His eyes were black and restless, and a thin mouth, hidden beneath a trim black mustache, and a perfectly-shaped aquiline nose, completed the sum of any features which might be called distinctive. He was a man who was thoroughly adapted to his work—work which needed a cool head and quick eye rather than great mental attainments. He was dressed in a brown canvas tunic with brass buttons, and his riding breeches were concealed in, a pair of well-worn leather "chaps." A Stetson hat worn at the exact angle on his head, with his official "side arms" secured round his waist, completed a very picturesque appearance.

"Morning, Horrocks," said the money-lender. "This is a pretty business you've come down on. Left your men down in the settlement, eh?"

"Yes. I thought I'd come and hear the rights of the matter straight away. According to your message you are the chief victim of this 'duffing' business?"

"Exactly," replied Lablache, with a return to his tone of anger, "one thousand head of beeves! Thirty-five thousand dollars' worth!" Then he went on more calmly: "But wait a moment, we'll send down for the 'hand' that brought in the news."

A servant was despatched, and a few minutes later Jim Bowley entered. Jacky, returning from the corrals, entered at the same time. Directly she had seen the police horse outside she knew what was happening. When she appeared Lablache endeavored to conceal a look of annoyance. Sergeant Horrocks raised his eyebrows in surprise. He was not accustomed to petticoats being present at his councils. John, however, without motive, waived all chance of objection by anticipating his guests.

"Sergeant, this is my niece, Jacky. Affairs of the prairie affect her as nearly as they do myself. Let us hear what this man has to tell us."

Horrocks half bowed to the girl, touching the brim of his hat with a semi-military salute. Acquiescence to her presence was thus forced upon him.

Jacky looked radiant in spite of the uncouthness of her riding attire. The fresh morning air was the tonic she loved, and, as yet, the day was too young for the tired shadows to have crept into her beautiful face. Horrocks, in spite of his tacit objection, was forced to admire the sturdy young face of this child of the prairie.

Jim Bowley plunged into his story with a directness and simplicity which did not fail to carry conviction. He told all he knew without any attempt at shielding himself or his companions. Horrocks and the old rancher listened carefully to the story. Lablache looked for discrepancies but found none. Jacky, whilst paying every attention, keenly watched the face of the money-lender. The seriousness of the affair was reflected in all the faces present, whilst the daring of the raid was acknowledged by the upraised brows and wondering ejaculations which occasionally escaped the police-officer and "Poker" John. When the narrative came to a close there followed an impressive pause. Horrocks was the first to break it.

"And how did you obtain your release?"

"A Mennonite family, which had bin travelin' all night, came along 'bout an hour after daylight. They pitched camp nigh on to a quarter mile from the bluff w'ere we was tied up. Then they came right along to look fur kindlin'. There wasn't no other bluff for half a mile but ours. They found us all three. Young Nat 'ad got 'is collar-bone broke. Them 'ustlers 'adn't lifted our 'plugs' so I jest came right in."

"Have you seen these Mennonites?" asked the officer, turning sharply to the money-lender.

"Not yet," was the heavy rejoinder. "But they are coming in."

The significance of the question and the reply nettled the cowboy.

"See hyar, mister, I ain't no coyote come in to pitch yarns. Wot I've said is gospel. The man as 'eld us up was Peter Retief as sure as I'm a living man. Sperrits don't walk about the prairie 'ustling cattle, an' I guess 'is 'and was an a'mighty solid one, as my jaw felt when 'e gagged me. You take it from me, 'e's come around agin to make up fur lost time, an' I guess 'e's made a tidy haul to start with."

"Well, we'll allow that this man is the hustler you speak of," went on Horrocks, bending his keen eyes severely on the unfortunate cowboy. "Now, what about tracking the cattle?"

"Guess I didn't wait fur that, but it'll be easy 'nough."

"Ah, and you didn't recognize the man until you'd seen his horse?"

The officer spoke sharply, like a counsel cross-examining a witness.

"Wal, I can't say like that," said Jim, hesitating for the first time. "His looks was familiar, I 'lows. No, without knowing of it I'd recognized 'im, but 'is name didn't come along till I see that beast, Golden Eagle. I 'lows a good prairie hand don't make no mistake over cattle like that. 'E may misgive a face, but a beastie—no, siree."

"So you base your recognition of the man on the identity of his horse. A doubtful assertion."

"Thar ain't no doubt in my mind, sergeant. Ef you'll 'ave it so, I did—some."

The officer turned to the other men.

"If there's nothing more you want this man for, gentlemen, I have quite finished with him—for the present. With your permission," pulling out his watch, "I'll get him to take me to the er—scene of disaster in an hour's time."

The two men nodded and Lablache conveyed the necessary order to the man, who then withdrew.

As soon as Bowley had left the room three pairs of eyes were turned inquiringly upon the officer.

"Well?" questioned Lablache, with some show of eagerness.

Horrocks shrugged a pair of expressive shoulders.

"From his point of view the man speaks the truth," he replied decisively. "And," he went on, more to himself than to the others, "we never had any clear proof that the scoundrel, Retief, came to grief. From what I remember things were very hot for him at the time of his disappearance. Maybe the man's right. However," turning to the others, "I should not be surprised if Mr. Retief has overreached himself this time. A thousand head of cattle cannot easily be hidden, or, for that matter, disposed of. Neither can they travel fast; and as for tracking, well," with a shrug, "in this case it should be child's play."

"I hope it will prove as you anticipate," put in John Allandale, concisely. "What you suggest has been experienced by us before. However, the matter, I feel sure, is in capable hands."

The officer acknowledged the compliment mechanically. He was thinking deeply. Lablache struggled to his feet, and, supporting his bulk with one hand resting upon the desk, gasped out his final words upon the matter.

"I want you to remember, sergeant, this matter not only affects me personally but also in my capacity as a justice of the peace. To whatever reward I am able to make in the name of H.M. Government I shall add the sum of one thousand dollars for the recovery of the cattle, and the additional sum of one thousand dollars for the capture of the miscreant himself. I have determined to spare no expense in the matter of hunting this devil," with vindictive intensity, "down, therefore you can draw on me for all outlay your work may entail. All I say is, capture him."

"I shall do my best, Mr. Lablache," Horrocks replied simply. "And now, if you will permit me, I will go down to the settlement to give a few orders to my men. Good-morning—er—Miss Allandale; good day, gentlemen. You will hear from me to-night."

The officer left in all the pride of his official capacity. And possibly his pride was not without reason, for many and smart were the captures of evil-doers he had made during his career as a keeper of the peace. But we have been told that "pride goeth before a fall." His estimation of a "hustler" was not an exalted one. He was accustomed to dealing with men who shoot quick and straight—"bad men" in fact—and he was equally quick with the gun, and a dead shot himself. Possibly he was a shade quicker and a trifle more deadly than the smartest "bad man" known, but now he was dealing with a man of all these necessary attainments and whose resourcefulness and cleverness were far greater than his own. Sergeant Horrocks had a harder road to travel than he anticipated.

Lablache took his departure shortly afterwards, and "Poker" John and his niece were left in sole possession of the office at the ranch.

The old man looked thoroughly wearied with the mental effort the interview had entailed upon him. And Jacky, watching him, could not help noticing how old her uncle looked. She had been a silent observer in the foregoing scene, her presence almost ignored by the other actors. Now, however, that they were left alone, the old man turned a look of appealing helplessness upon her. Such was the rancher's faith in this wild, impetuous girl that he looked for her judgment on what had passed in that room with the ready faith of one who regards her as almost infallible, where human intellect is needed. Nor was the girl, herself, slow to respond to his mute inquiry. The swiftness of her answer enhanced the tone of her conviction.

"Set a thief to catch a thief, Uncle John. I guess Horrocks, in spite of his shifty black eyes, isn't the man for the business. He might track the slimmest neche that ever crossed the back of a choyeuse. Lablache is the man Retief has to fear. That uncrowned monarch of Foss River is subtle, and subtlety alone will serve. Horrocks?" with fine disdain. "Say, you can't shoot snipe with a pea-shooter."

"That's so," replied John, with weary thoughtlessness. "Do you know, child, I can't help feeling a strange satisfaction that this Retief's victim is Lablache. But there, one never knows, when such a man is about, who will be the next to suffer. I suppose we must take our chance and trust to the protection of the police."

The girl had walked to the window and now stood framed in the casement of it. She turned her face back towards the old man as he finished speaking, and a quiet little smile hovered round the corners of her fresh ripe lips.

"I don't think Retief will bother us any—at least, he never did before. Somehow I don't think he's an ordinary rascal." She turned back to the window. "Hulloa, I guess Bill's coming right along up the avenue."

A moment later "Lord" Bill, lazily cheerful as was his wont, stepped in through the open French window. The selling up of his ranch seemed to have made little difference to his philosophical temperament. In his appearance, perhaps, for now he no longer wore the orthodox dress of the rancher. He was clad in a tweed lounging suit, and a pair of well-polished, brown leather boots. His headgear alone pertained to the prairie. It was a Stetson hat. He was smoking a cigarette as he came up, but he threw the insidious weed from him as he entered the room.

"Morning, John. How are you, Jacky? I needn't ask you if you have heard the news. I saw Sergeant Horrocks and old Shylock leaving your veranda. Hot lot—isn't it? And all Lablache's cattle, too."

A look of deep concern was on his keen face. Lablache might have been his dearest friend. Jacky smiled over at him. "Poker" John looked pained.

"Guess you're right, Bill," said the rancher. "Hot—very hot. I pity the poor devil if Lablache lays a hand on him. Excuse me, boy, I'm going down to the barn. We've got a couple of ponies we're breaking to harness."

The old man departed. The others watched the burly figure as he passed out of the door. His whole personality seemed shrunken of late. The old robustness seemed a thing of the past. The last two months seemed to have put ten years of ageing upon the kindly old man. Jacky sighed as the door closed behind him, and there was no smile in her eyes as she turned again to her lover. Bill's face had become serious.

"Well?" in a tone of almost painful anxiety.

The girl had started forward and was leaning with her two brown hands upon the back of a chair. Her face was pale beneath her tan, and her eyes were bright with excitement. For answer, Bunning-Ford stepped to the French window and closed it, having first glanced up and down the veranda to see that it was empty. Not a soul was in sight. The tall pines, which lined the approach to the house, waved silently in the light breeze. The clear sky was gloriously blue. On everything was the peace of summer.

The man swung round and came towards the girl. His eagle face was lit up by an expression of triumph. He held out his two hands, and the girl placed her own brown ones in them. He drew

her towards him and embraced her in silence. Then he moved a little away from her. His gleaming eyes indexed the activity of his mind.

"The cattle are safe—as houses. It was a grand piece of work, dear. They would never have faced the path without your help. Say, girlie, I'm an infant at handling stock compared with you. Now—what news?"

Jacky was smiling tenderly into the strong face of the man. She could not help but wonder at the reckless daring of this man, who so many set down as a lazy good-for-nothing. She knew—she had always known, she fancied—the strong character which underlay that indolent exterior. It never appealed to her to regret the chance that had driven him to use his abilities in such a cause. There was too much of the wild half-breed blood in her veins to allow her to stop to consider the might-have-beens. She gloried in his daring, and something of the spirit which had caused her to help her half-brother now forced from her an almost worshipping adoration for her lover.

"Horrocks is to spare no expense in tracking—Retief—down." She laughed silently. "Lablache is to pay. They are going over the old ground again, I guess. The tracks of the cattle. Horrocks is not to be feared. We must watch Lablache. He will act. Horrocks will only be his puppet."

Bill pondered before he spoke.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully at last, "that is the best of news. The very best. Horrocks can track. He is one of the best at that game. But I have taken every precaution. Tracking is useless—waste of time."

"I know that from past experience, Bill. Now that the campaign has begun, what is the next move?"

The girl was all eagerness. Her beautiful dark face was no longer pale. It was aglow with the enthusiasm of her feelings. Her deep, meaning eyes burned with a consuming brilliancy. Framed in its setting of curling, raven hair, her face would have rejoiced the heart of the old masters of the Van Dyke school. She was wondrously beautiful. Bill gazed upon her features with devouring eyes, and thoughts of the wrongs committed by Lablache against her and hers teemed through his brain and set his blood surging through his veins in a manner that threatened to overbalance his usual cool judgment. He forced himself to an outward calmness, however, and the lazy tones of his voice remained as easy as ever.

"On the result of the next move much will depend," he said. "It is to be a terrific *coup*, and will entail careful planning. It is fortunate that the people at the half-breed camp are the friends of—of—Retief."

"Yes, and of mine," put in the girl. Then she added slowly, and as though with painful thought, "Say, Bill, be—be careful. I guess you are all I have in the world—you and uncle. Do you know, I've kind of seen to the end of this racket. Maybe there's trouble coming. Who's to be lagged I can't say. There are shadows around, Bill; the place fairly hums with 'em. Say, don't—don't give Lablache a slant at you. I can't spare you, Bill."

The tall thin figure of her companion stepped over towards her, and she felt herself encircled by his long powerful arms. Then he bent down from his great height and kissed her passionately upon the lips.

"Take comfort, little girl. This is a war, if necessary, to the death. Should anything happen to me, you may be sure that I leave you freed from the snares of old Shylock. Yes, I will be careful, Jacky. We are playing for a heavy stake. You may trust me."

CHAPTER XV - AMONG THE HALF-BREEDS

Lablache was not a man of variable moods. He was too strong; his purpose in life was too strong for any vacillation of temper. His one aim—his whole soul—was wrapt in a craving for money-making and the inevitable power which the accumulation of great wealth must give him. In all his dealings he was perfectly—at least outwardly—calm, and he never allowed access to anger to thwart his ends. An inexorable purpose governed his actions to an extent which, while his feelings might undergo paroxysms of acute changes, never permitted him to make a false move or to show his hand prematurely. But this latest reverse had upset him more than he had ever been upset in his life, and all the great latent force of his character had suddenly, as it were, been precipitated into a torrent of ungovernable fury. He had been wounded deeply in the most vulnerable spot in his composition. Thirty-five thousands of his precious dollars ruthlessly torn from his capacious and retentive money-bags. Truly it was a cruel blow, and one well calculated to disturb the even tenor of his complacency.

Thought was very busy within that massive head as he lumped heavily along from John Allandale's house in the direction of his own store. Some slight satisfaction was his at the reflection of the prompt assistance he had obtained from the police. It was the satisfaction of a man who lived by the assistance of the law, of a man who, in his own inordinate arrogance, considered that the law was made for such as he, to the detriment of those who attempt to thwart

the rich man's purpose. He knew Horrocks to be capable, and although he did not place too much reliance on that astute prairie-man's judgment—he always believed in his own judgment first—still, he knew that he could not have obtained better assistance, and was therefore as content as circumstances would permit. That he was sanguine of recovering his property was doubtful. Lablache never permitted himself the luxury of optimism. He set himself a task and worked steadily on to the required end. So he had decided now. He did not permit himself to dwell on the desired result, or to anticipate. He would simply leave no stone unturned to bring about the recovery of his stolen property.

He moved ponderously along over the smooth dusty road, and at last reached the market-place. The settlement was drowsily quiet. Life of a sort was apparent but it was chiefly "animal." The usual number of dogs were moving about, or peacefully basking in the sun; a few saddle horses were standing with dejected air, hitched to various tying-posts. A buckboard and team was standing outside his own door. The sound of the smith's hammer falling upon the anvil sounded plaintively upon the calmness of the sleepy village. In spite of the sensational raid of the night before, Foss River displayed no unusual activity.

At length the great man reached his office, and threw himself, with great danger to his furniture, into his capacious wicker chair. He was in no mood for business. Instead he gazed long and thoughtfully out of his office window. What somber, vengeful thoughts were teeming through his brain would be hard to tell, his mask-like face betrayed nothing. His sphinx-like expression was a blank.

In this way half an hour and more passed. Then his attention became fixed upon a tall figure sauntering slowly towards the settlement from the direction of Allandale's ranch. In a moment Lablache had stirred himself, and a pair of field-glasses were leveled at the unconscious pedestrian. A moment later an exclamation of annoyance broke from the money-lender.

"Curse the man! Am I never to be rid of this damned Englishman?" He stood now gazing malevolently at the tall figure of the Hon. Bunning-Ford, who was leisurely making his way towards the village. For the time being the channel of Lablache's thoughts had changed its direction. He had hoped, in foreclosing his mortgages on the Englishman's property, to have rid Foss River of the latter's, to him, hateful presence. But since misfortune had come upon "Lord" Bill, the Allandales and he had become closer friends than ever. This effort had been one of the money-lender's few failures, and failure galled him with a bitterness the recollection of which no success could eliminate. The result was a greater hatred for the object of his vengeance, and a lasting determination to rid Foss River of the Englishman forever. And so he remained standing and watching until, at length, the entrance of one of his clerks, to announce that the saloon dinner-time was at hand, brought him out of his cruel reverie, and he set off in quest of the needs of his inner man, a duty which nothing, of whatever importance, was allowed to interfere with.

In the meantime, Horrocks, or, as he was better known amongst his comrades, "the Ferret," was hot upon the trail of the lost cattle. Horrocks bristled with energy at every point, and his men, working with him, had reason to be aware of the fact. It was an old saying amongst them that when "the Ferret" was let loose there was no chance of bits rusting. In other words, his mileage report to his chiefs would be a long one.

As the sergeant anticipated, it was child's play to track the stolen herd. The tracks left by the fast-driven cattle was apparent to the veriest greenhorn, and Horrocks and his men were anything but greenhorns.

Long before evening closed in they had followed the footprints right down to the edge of the great muskeg, and already Horrocks anticipated a smart capture. But his task seemed easier than it really was. On the brink of the keg the tracks became confused. With some difficulty the sleuth instincts of these accomplished trackers led them to follow the marks for a mile and a half along the edge of the mire, then, it seemed, the herd had been turned and driven with great speed back on their tracks. But worse confusion became apparent; and "the Ferret" soon realized that the herd had been driven up and down along the border of the great keg with a view to evading further pursuit. So frequently had this been done that it was impossible to further trace the stock, and the sun was already sinking when Horrocks dismounted, and with him his men were at last forced to acknowledge defeat.

He had come to a standstill with a stretch of a mile and a half of cattle tracks before him. There was no sign further than this of where the beasts had been driven. The keg itself gave no clew. It was as green and trackless as ever, and again on the land side there was not a single foot-print beyond the confused marks along the quagmire's dangerous border.

The work of covering retreat had been carried out by a master hand, and Horrocks was not slow to acknowledge the cleverness of the raider. With all one good prairie man's appreciation for another he detected a foeman worthy of his steel, and he warmed to the problem set out before him. The troopers waited for their superior's instructions. As "the Ferret" did not speak one of the men commented aloud.

"Smart work, sergeant," he said quietly. "I'm not surprised that this fellow rode roughshod over the district for so long and escaped all who were sent to nab him. He's clever, is P. Retief, Esq."

Horrocks was looking out across the great keg. Strangely enough they had halted within twenty yards of the willow bush, at which point the secret path across the mire began. The man with the gold chevrons upon his arm ignored the remark of his companion, but answered with words

which occurred in his own train of thought.

"It's plain enough, I guess. Yonder is the direction taken by the cattle," he said, nodding his head towards the distant peaks of the mountains beyond. "But who's got the nerve to follow 'em? Say," he went on sharply, "somewhere along this bank, I mean in the mile and a half of hoof marks, there's a path turns out, or, at least, firm ground by which it is possible to cross this devil's keg. It must be so. Cattle can't be spirited away. Unless, of course—but no, a man don't duff cattle to drown 'em in a swamp. They've crossed this pernicious mire, boys. We may nab our friend, Retief, but we'll never clap eyes on those beasts."

"It's the same old business over again, sergeant," said one of the troopers. "I was on this job before, and I reckon we landed hereabouts every time we lit on Retief's trail. But we never got no further. Yonder keg is a mighty hard nut to crack. I guess the half-breed's got the bulge on us. If path across the mire there is he knows it and we don't, and, as you say, who's goin' to follow him?" Having delivered himself of these sage remarks he stepped to the brink of the mire and put his foot heavily upon its surface. His top-boot sank quickly through the yielding crust, and the black subsoil rose with oily, sucking action, 'and his foot was immediately buried out of sight. He drew it out sharply, a shudder of horror quickening his action. Strong man and hardy as he was, the muskeg inspired him with a superstitious terror. "Guess there ain't no following them beasties through that, sergeant. Leastways, not for me."

Horrocks had watched his subordinate's action thoughtfully. He knew, without showing, that no man or beast could attempt to cross the mire with any hope of success without the knowledge of some secret path. That such a path, or paths, existed he believed, for many were the stories of how criminals in past days escaped prairie law by such means. However, he had no knowledge of any such paths himself, and he had no intention of sacrificing his life uselessly in an attempt to discover the keg's most jealously guarded secret.

He turned back to his horse and prepared to vault into the saddle.

"It's no use, boys. We are done for to-day. You can ride back to the settlement. I have another little matter on hand. If any of you see Lablache just tell him I shall join him in about two hours' time."

Horrocks rode off and his four troopers headed towards the Foss River.

Despite the fact that his horse had been under the saddle for nearly eight hours Horrocks rode at a great pace. He was one of those men who are always to be found on the prairie—thorough horsemen. Men who, in times of leisure, care more for their horses than they do for themselves; men who regard their horses as they would a comrade, but who, when it becomes a necessity to work or travel, demand every effort the animal can make by way of return for the care which has been lavished upon it. Such men generally find themselves well repaid. A horse is something more than a creature with four legs, one at each corner, head out of one end, tail out of the other. There is an old saying in the West to the effect that a thorough horseman is worthy of man's esteem. The opinion amongst prairie men is that a man who loves his horse can never be wholly bad. And possibly we can accept this decision upon the subject without question, for their experience in men, especially in "bad men," is wide and varied.

Horrocks avoided the settlement, leaving it well to the west, and turned his willing beast in the direction of the half-breed camp. There was an ex-Government scout living in this camp whom he knew; a man who was willing to sell to his late employers any information he chanced to possess. It was the officer's intention to see this man and purchase all he had to sell, if it happened to be worth buying. Hence his visit to the camp.

The evening shadows were fast lengthening when he espied in the distance the squalid shacks and dilapidated teepees of the Breeds. There was a large colony of those wanderers of the West gathered together in the Foss River camp. We have said that these places are hot-beds of crime, a curse to the country; but that description scarcely conveys the wretched poverty and filthiness of these motley gatherings. From a slight rising ground Horrocks looked down on what might have, at first sight, been taken for a small village. A scattering of small tumbled-down shacks, about fifty in number, set out on the fresh green of the prairie, created the first blot of uncleanly, uncouth habitation upon the view. Add to these a proportionate number of ragged tents and teepees, a crowd of unwashed, and, for the most part, undressed children, a hundred fierce and half-starved dogs of the "husky" type. Imagine a stench of dung fire cooking, and the gathering of millions of mosquitoes about a few choyeuses and fat cattle grazing near by, and the picture as it first presents itself is complete.

The approach to such a place makes one almost wish the undulating prairie was not quite so fair a picture, for the contrast with man's filthy squalor is so great that the feeling of nausea which results is almost overpowering. Horrocks, however, was used to such scenes. His duty often took him into worse Breed camps than this. He treated such places to a perfectly callous indifference, and regarded them merely as necessary evils.

At the first shack he drew up and instantly became the center of attention from a pack of yelping dogs and a number of half-fearful, wide-eyed ragamuffins, grimy children nearly naked and ranging in age from two years up to twelve. Young as the latter were they were an evil-looking collection. The noisy greeting of the camp dogs had aroused the elders from their indolent repose within the shacks, and Horrocks quickly became aware of a furtive spying within the darkened doorways and paneless windows.

The reception was nothing unusual to the officer. The Breeds he knew always fought shy of the police. As a rule, such a visit as the present portended an arrest, and they were never quite sure who the victim was to be and the possible consequences. Crime was so common amongst these people that in nearly every family it was possible to find one or more law-breakers and, more often than not, the delinquent was liable to capital punishment.

Ignoring his cool reception, Horrocks hitched his horse to a tree and stepped up to the shack, regardless of the vicious snapping of the dogs. The children fled precipitately at his approach. At the door of the house he halted.

"Hallo there, within!" he called.

There was a moment's pause, and he heard a whispered debate going on in the shadowy interior.

"Hey!" he called again. "Get a hustle on, some of you. Get out," he snapped sharply, as a great husky, with bristling hair, came snuffing at his legs. He aimed a kick at the dog, which, in response, sullenly retreated to a safe distance.

The angry tone of his second summons had its effect, and a figure moved cautiously within and finally approached the door.

"Eh! what is it?" asked a deep, guttural voice, and a bulky form framed itself in the opening.

The police-officer eyed the man keenly. The twilight had so far deepened that there was barely sufficient light to distinguish the man's features, but Horrocks's survey satisfied him as to the fellow's identity. He was a repulsive specimen of the Breed; the dark, lowering face had something utterly cruel in its expression. The cast was brutal in the extreme; sensual, criminal. The shifty black eyes looked anywhere but into the policeman's face.

"That you, Gustave?" said Horrocks, pleasantly enough. He wished to inspire confidence. "I'm looking for Gautier. I've got a nice little job for him. Do you know where he is?"

"Ugh!" grunted Gustave, heavily, but with a decided air of relief. He entertained a wholesome dread of Sergeant Horrocks. Now he became more communicative. Horrocks had not come to arrest anybody. "I see," he went on, gazing out across the prairie, "this is not a warrant business, eh? Guess Gautier is back there," with a jerk of a thumb in a vague direction behind him. "He's in his shack. Gautier's just hooked up with another squaw."

"Another?" Horrocks whistled softly. "Why, that's the sixth to my knowledge. He's very much a marrying man. How much did he pay the neche this time?"

"Two steers and a sheep," said the man, with an oily grin.

"Ah! I wonder how he acquired 'em. Well, I'll go and find him. Gautier is smart, but he'll land himself in the penitentiary if he goes on marrying squaws at that price. Say, which is his shack did you say?"

"Back thar. You'll see it. He's just limed the outside of it. Guess white's the color his new squaw fancies most. S'long."

The man was glad to be rid of his visitor. In spite of the sergeant's assurance, Gustave never felt comfortable in the officer's presence. Horrocks moved off in search of the white hut, while the Breed, with furtive eyes, watched his progress.

There was no difficulty in locating the shack in that colony of grime. Even in the darkness the gleaming white of the ex-spy's abode stood out prominently. The dogs and children now tacitly acknowledged the right of the police-officer's presence in their camp, and allowed him to move about apparently unnoticed. He wound his way amongst the huts and tents, ever watchful and alert, always aiming for Gautier's hut. He knew that in this place at night his life was not worth much. A quick aim, and a shot from behind, and no one would ever know who had dropped him. But the Canadian police are accustomed to take desperate chances in their work, and think less of it than do our police patrols in the slums of London.

He found Gautier sitting at his hut door waiting for him. Another might have been surprised at the Breed's cognizance of the police-officer's intentions, but Horrocks knew the habits of these people, and was fully alive to the fact that while he had been talking to Gustave a messenger was dispatched to warn Gautier that he was sought.

"Well, sergeant, what's your best news?" Gautier asked civilly. He was a bright, intelligent-looking, dusky man, of perhaps forty years. His face was less brutal than that of the other Breed, but it was none the less cunning. He was short and massively built.

"That's just what I've come to ask you, Gautier. I think you can tell me all I want to know—if you've a notion to. Say," with a keen look round, "can we talk here?"

There was not a soul visible but an occasional playing child. It was curious how quiet the camp became. Horrocks was not deceived, however. He knew that a hundred pairs of eyes were watching him from the reeking recesses of the huts.

"No talk here." Gautier was serious, and his words conveyed a lot. "It's bad medicine your coming to-night. But there," with a return to his cunning look, "I don't know that I've got anything to tell."

Horrocks laughed softly.

"Yes—yes, I know. You needn't be afraid." Then lowering his voice: "I've got a roll of bills in my pocket."

"Ah, then don't stay here talking. There's lots to tell, but they'd kill me if they suspected. Where can I see you—quiet-like? They won't lose sight of me if they can help it, but I reckon I'm good for the best of 'em."

The man's attempt to look sincere was almost ludicrous. His cunning eyes twinkled with cupidity. Horrocks kept his voice down.

"Right. I shall be at Lablache's store in an hour's time. You must see me to-night." Then aloud, for the benefit of listening ears, "You be careful what you are doing. This promiscuous buying of wives, with cattle which you may have difficulty in accounting for your possession of, will lead you into trouble. Mind, I've warned you. Just look to it."

His last sentences were called out as he moved away, and Gautier quite understood.

Horrocks did not return the way he had come, but took a circuitous route through the camp. He was a man who never lost a chance in his work, and now, while he was in the midst of that criminal haunt, he thought it as well to take a look round. He hardly knew what he expected to find out—if anything. But he required information of Retief, and he was fully alive to the fact that all that individual's movements would be known here. He trusted to luck to help him to discover something.

The smartest of men have to work against overwhelming odds in the detection of crime. Many and devious are the ways of men whose hand is against the law. Surely is the best detective a mere babe in the hands of a clever criminal. In this instance the very thing that Horrocks was in search of was about to be forced upon him. For underlying that information was a deep-laid scheme.

Never can reliance be placed in a true half-breed. The heathen Chinee is the ideal of truth and honesty when his wiles are compared with the dark ways of the Breed. Horrocks, with all his experience, was no match for the dusky-visaged outcast of the plains. Gautier had been deputed to convey certain information to Lablache by the patriarchs of the camp. And with his native cunning he had decided, on the appearance of Sergeant Horrocks, to extort a price for that which it was his duty to tell. Besides this, as matters had turned out, Horrocks was to receive gratis that for which he would shortly pay Gautier.

He had made an almost complete circuit of the camp. Accustomed as he was to such places, the stench of it almost made him sick. He came to a stand close beside one of the outlying teepees. He was just preparing to fill his pipe and indulge in a sort of disinfecting smoke when he became aware of voices talking loudly close by. The sound proceeded from the teepees. From force of habit he listened. The tones were gruff, and almost Indian-like in the brevity of expression. The language was the bastard jargon of the French half-breed. For a moment he was doubtful. Then his attention became riveted.

"Yes," said one voice, "he is a good man, is Peter. When he has plenty he spends it. He does not rob the poor Breed. Only the gross white man. Peter is clever. Very."

Then another voice, deep-toned and full, took up the eulogy.

"Peter knows how to spend his money. He spends it among his friends. It is good. How much whisky will he buy, think you?"

Another voice chipped in at this point, and Horrocks strained his ears to catch the words, for the voice was the voice of a female and her utterance was indistinct.

"He said he would pay for everything—all we could eat and drink—and that the pusky should be held the night after to-morrow. He will come himself and dance the Red River jig. Peter is a great dancer and will dance all others down."

Then the first speaker laughed.

"Peter must have a long stocking if he would pay for all. A barrel of rye would not go far, and as for food, he must bring several of the steers which he took from old Lablache if he would feed us. But Peter is always as good as his word. He said he would pay. And he will pay. When does he come to prepare?"

"He does not come. He has left the money with Baptiste, who will see to everything. Peter will not give 'the Ferret' a chance."

"But how? The dance will be a danger to him," said the woman's voice. "What if 'the Ferret' hears?"

"He will not hear, and, besides, Peter will be prepared if the damned police come. Have no fear for Peter. He is bold."

The voices ceased and Horrocks waited a little longer. But presently, when the voices again became audible, the subject of conversation had changed, and he realized that he was not likely to hear more that would help him. So, with great caution, he stole quickly away to where his

horse was tied. He mounted hastily and rode off, glad to be away from that reeking camp, and greatly elated with the success of the visit.

He had learned a lot. And he was to hear more yet from Gautier. He felt that the renowned "hustler" was already in his clutches. His spurs went sharply into his broncho's flanks and he raced over the prairie towards the settlement. Possibly he should have known better than to trust to the overhearing of that conversation. His knowledge of the Breeds should have warned him to put little faith in what he had heard. But he was eager. His reputation was largely at stake over this affair, and that must be the excuse for the rashness of his faith. However, the penalty of his folly was to be his, therefore blame can well be spared.

CHAPTER XVI - GAUTIER CAUSES DISSENSION

"Sit down and let me hear the—worst."

Lablache's voice rasped harshly as he delivered his mandate. Horrocks had just arrived at the money-lender's store after his visit to the half-breed camp. The police-officer looked weary. And the dejected expression on his face had drawn from his companion the hesitating superlative.

"Have you got anything to eat?" Horrocks retorted quickly, ignoring the other's commands. "I am famished. Had nothing since I set out from Stormy Cloud. I can't talk on an empty stomach."

Lablache struck a table bell sharply, and one of his clerks, all of whom were still working in the store, entered. The money-lender's clerks always worked early and late. It was part of the great man's creed to sweat his *employees*.

"Just go over to the saloon, Markham, and tell them to send supper for one—something substantial," he called out after the man, who hastened to obey with the customary precipitance of all who served the flinty financier.

The man disappeared in a twinkling and Lablache turned to his visitor again.

"They'll send it over at once. There's some whisky in that bottle," pointing to a small cabinet, through the glass door of which gleamed the white label of "special Glenlivet." "Help yourself. It'll buck you up."

Horrocks obeyed with alacrity, and the genial spirit considerably refreshed him. He then reseated himself opposite to his host, who had faced round from his desk.

"My news is not the—worst, as you seem to anticipate; although, perhaps, it might have been better," the officer began. "In fact, I am fairly well pleased with the result of my day's work."

"Which means, I take it, that you have discovered a clew."

Lablache's heavy eyes gleamed.

"Rather more than a clew," Horrocks went on reflectively. "My information relates more to the man than to the beasts. We shall, I think, lay our hands on this—Retief."

"Good—good," murmured the money-lender, inclining his heavy jowled head. "Find the man and we shall recover the cattle."

"I am not so sure of that," put in the other. "However, we shall see."

Lablache looked slightly disappointed. The capture of Retief seemed to him synonymous with the recovery of his stock. However, he waited for his visitor to proceed. The money-lender was essentially a man to draw his own conclusions after hearing the facts, and no opinion of another was likely to influence him when once those conclusions were arrived at. Lablache was a strong man mentally and physically. And few cared to combat his decisions or opinions.

For a moment further talk was interrupted by the entry of a man with Horrocks's supper. When the fellow had withdrawn the police-officer began his repast and the narration of his story at the same time. Lablache watched and listened with an undisturbed concentration. He lost no point, however small, in the facts as stated by the officer. He refrained from interruption, excepting where the significance of certain points in the story escaped him, and, at the conclusion, he was as conversant with the situation as though he had been present at the investigation. The great man was profoundly impressed with what he heard. Not so much with the shrewdness of the officer as with the simple significance of the loss of further trace of the cattle at the edge of the muskeg. Up to this point of the story he felt assured that Horrocks was to be perfectly relied upon, but, for the rest, he was not so sure. He felt that though this man was the finest tracker in the country the delicate science of deduction was not necessarily an accompaniment to his prairie abilities. Therefore, for the moment, he concentrated his thoughts upon the features surrounding the great keg.

"It is a curious thing," he said retrospectively, as the policeman ceased speaking, "that in all previous raids of this Retief we have invariably tracked the lost stock down to this point. Of course, as you say, there is not the slightest doubt that the beasts have been herded over the keg. Everything seems to me to hinge on the discovery of that path. That is the problem which

confronts us chiefly. How are we to find the secret of the crossing?"

"It cannot be done," said Horrocks, simply but with decision.

"Nonsense," exclaimed the other, with a heavy gasp of breath. "Retief knows it, and the others with him. Those cattle could not have been herded over single-handed. Now to me it seems plain that the crossing is a very open secret amongst the Breeds."

"And I presume you consider that we should work chiefly on that hypothesis?"

"Exactly."

"And you do not consider the possible capture of Retief as being the most important feature of the case?"

"Important—certainly. But, for the moment, of minor consideration. Once we discover the means by which he secretes his stock—and the hiding-place—we can stop his depredations and turn all our energies to his capture. You follow me? At first I was inclined to think with you that the capture of the man would be the best thing. But now it seems to me that the easiest method of procedure will be the discovery of that path."

The rasping tone in which Lablache spoke conveyed to the other his unalterable conviction. The prairie man, however, remained unconvinced.

"Well," he replied, after a moment's deliberation, "I cannot say I agree with you. Open secret or not, I've a notion that we'd stand a better chance of discovering the profoundest of state secrets than elicit information, even supposing them to possess it, of this description from the Breeds. I expect Gautier here in a few minutes; we shall hear what he has to say."

"I trust he *may* have something to say."

Lablache snapped his reply out in that peculiar tone of his which spoke volumes. It never failed to anger him to have his opinions gainsaid. Then his manner changed slightly, and his mood seemed to become contemplative. Horrocks observed the change and wondered what was coming. The money-lender cleared his throat and spat into the stove. Then he spoke with that slow deliberation which was his when thinking deeply.

"Two years ago, when Retief did what he liked in this part of the country, there were many stories going about as to his relationship with a certain lady in this settlement."

"Miss Allandale—yes, I have heard."

"Just so; some said that she—er—was very partial to him. Some, that they were distantly connected. All were of opinion that she knew a great deal of the man if she only chose to tell. These stories were gossip—merely. These small places are given to gossip. But I must confess to a belief that gossip is often—always, in fact—founded on a certain amount of fact."

There was no niceness of feeling about this mountain of obesity in matters of business. He spoke as callously of the girl, for whom he entertained his unholy passion, as he would speak of a stranger. He experienced no compunction in linking her name with that of an outlaw. His gross nature was of too low an order to hold anything sacred where his money-bags were affected.

"Perhaps you—er—do not know," he pursued, carefully lighting his pipe and pressing the charred tobacco down with the tip of his little finger, "that this girl is the daughter of a Breed mother?"

"Guess I hadn't a notion."

Horrocks's keen eyes flashed with interest. He too lit his pipe as he lounged back in his chair.

"She is a quarter-breed, and, moreover, the esteem in which she is held by the skulking inhabitants of the camp inclines me to the belief that—er—judicious—er—handling—"

"You mean that through her we might obtain the information we require?"

Horrocks punctuated the other's deliberate utterances with hasty eagerness. Lablache permitted a vague smile about the corners of his mouth, his eyes remained gleaming coldly.

"You anticipate me. The matter would need delicate handling. What Miss Allandale has done in the past will not be easy to find out. Granting, of course, that gossip has not wronged her," he went on doubtfully. "On second thoughts, perhaps you had better leave that source of information to me."

He relapsed apparently into deep thought. His pensive deliberation was full of guile. He had a purpose to achieve which necessitated the suggestion which he had made to this representative of the law. He wished to impress upon his companion a certain connivance on the part of, at least, one member of the house of Allandale with the doings of the raider. He merely wished to establish a suspicion in the mind of the officer. Time and necessity might develop it, if it suited Lablache's schemes that such should occur. In the meantime he knew he could direct this man's actions as he chose.

The calm superiority of the money-lender was not lost upon his companion. Horrocks was nettled, and showed it.

"But you'll pardon me, Mr. Lablache. You have offered me a source of information which, as a police-officer, it is my duty to sound. As you yourself admit, the old stories of a secret love affair may have some foundation in fact. Accept that and what possibilities are not opened up? Had I been employed on the affairs of Retief, during his previous raids, I should certainly have worked upon so important a clew."

"Tut, tut, man," retorted the other, sharply. "I understood you to be a keen man at your business. A single ill-timed move in the direction we are discussing and the fat will be in the fire. The girl is as smart as paint; at the first inkling of your purpose she'll curl up—shut up like a rat trap. The Breeds will be warned and we shall be further off success than ever. No, no, when it comes to handling Jacky Allandale you leave it to me—Ah!"

Lablache's ejaculation was the result of the sudden apparition of a dark face peering in at his window. He swung round with lightning rapidity, and before Horrocks could realize what he was doing his fat hand was grasping the butt of a revolver. Then, with a grunt of annoyance, he turned back to his guest.

"That's your Breed, I take it. For the moment I thought it was some one else; it's always best in these parts to shoot first and inquire afterwards. I occasionally get some strange visitors."

The policeman laughed as he went to the door. His irritation at the money-lender's manner was forgotten. The strangeness of the sight of Lablache's twenty stone of flesh moving with lightning rapidity astonished him beyond measure. Had he not seen it nothing would have convinced him of the man's marvelous agility when roused by emergency. It was something worth remembering.

Sure enough, the face on the other side of the window belonged to Gautier, and, as Horrocks opened the door, the Breed pushed his way stealthily in.

"It's all right, boss," said the man, with some show of anxiety, "I've slipped 'em. I'm watched pretty closely, but—good evening, sir," he went on, turning to Lablache with obsequious politeness. "This is bad medicine—this business we're on."

Lablache cleared his throat and spat, but deigned no reply. He intended to take no part in the ensuing conversation. He only wished to observe.

Horrocks at once became the officer to the subordinate. He turned sharply on the Breed.

"Cut the cackle and come to business. Have you anything to tell us about this Retief? Out with it sharp."

"That depends, boss," said the man, with a cunning smile. "As you sez. Cut the cackle and come to business. Business means a deal, and a deal means 'cash pappy.' Wot's the figger?"

There was no obsequious politeness about the fellow now. He was about as bad a specimen of the Breed as could well be found. Hence his late employment by the authorities. "The worse the Breed the better the spy," was the motto of those whose duty it was to investigate crime. Gautier was an excellent spy, thoroughly unscrupulous and rapacious. His information was always a saleable commodity, and he generally found his market a liberal one. But with business instincts worthy of Lablache himself he was accustomed to bargain first and impart after.

"See here," retorted Horrocks, "I don't go about blind-folded. Neither am I going to fling bills around without getting value for 'em. What's your news? Can you lay hands on Retief, or tell us where the stock is hidden?"

"Guess you're looking fer somethin' now," said the man, impudently. "Ef I could supply that information right off some 'un 'ud hev to dip deep in his pocket fur it. I ken put you on to a good even trail, an' fifty dollars 'ud be small pay for the trouble an' the danger I'm put to. Wot say? Fifty o' the best greenbacks?"

"Mr. Lablache can pay you if he chooses, but until I know that your information's worth it I don't part with fifty cents. Now then, we've had dealings before, Gautier—dealings which have not always been to your credit. You can trust me to part liberally if you've anything worth telling, but mind this, you don't get anything beforehand, and if you don't tell us all you know, in you go to Calford and a diet of skilly'll be your lot for some time to come."

The man's face lowered considerably at this. He knew Horrocks well, and was perfectly aware that he would be as good as his word. There was nothing to be gained by holding out. Therefore he accepted the inevitable with as bad a grace as possible. Lablache kept silence, but he was reading the Breed as he would a book.

"See hyar, sergeant," said Gautier, sulkily, "you're mighty hard on the Breeds, an' you know it. It'll come back on you, sure, one o' these days. Guess I'm going to play the game square. It ain't fur me to bluff men o' your kidney, only I like to know that you're going to treat me right. Well, this is what I've got to say, an' it's worth fifty as you'll 'low."

Horrocks propped himself upon the corner of the money-lender's desk and prepared to listen. Lablache's lashless eyes were fixed with a steady, unblinking stare upon the half-breed's face. Not a muscle of his own pasty, cruel face moved. Gautier was talking to, at least, one man who was more cunning and devilish than himself.

The dusky ruffian gave a preliminary cough and then launched upon his story with all the flowery

embellishments of which his inventive fancy was capable. What he had to tell was practically the same as Horrocks had overheard. There were a few items of importance which came fresh to the police-officer's ears. It stuck Lablache that the man spoke in the manner of a lesson well learned, and, in consequence, his keen interest soon relaxed. Horrocks, however, judged differently, and saw in the man's story a sound corroboration of his own information. As the story progressed his interest deepened, and at its conclusion he questioned the half-breed closely.

"This pusky. I suppose it will be the usual drunken orgie?"

"I guess," was the laconic rejoinder.

"Any of the Breeds from the other settlements coming over?"

"Can't say, boss. Like enough, I take it."

"And what is Retief's object in defraying all expenses—in giving the treat, when he knows that the white men are after him red-hot?"

"Mebbe it's bluff—cheek. Peter's a bold man. He snaps his fingers at the police," replied Gautier, illustrating his words with much appreciation. He felt he was getting a smack at the sergeant.

"Then Peter's a fool."

"Guess you're wrong thar. Peter's the slickest 'bad man' I've heerd tell of."

"We'll see. Now what about the keg? Of course the cattle have crossed it. A secret path?"

"Yup."

"Who knows the secret of it?"

"Peter."

"Only?"

The Breed hesitated. His furtive eyes shifted from one face to the other of his auditors. Then encountering the fixed stare of both men he glanced away towards the window. He seemed uncomfortable under the mute inquiry. Then he went on doubtfully.

"I guess thar's others. It's an old secret among the Breeds. An' I've heerd tell as some whites knows it."

A swift exchange of meaning glances passed between the two listeners.

"Who?"

"Can't say."

"Won't—you mean?"

"No, boss. Ef I knew it 'ud pay me well to tell. Guess I don't know. I've tried to find out."

"Now look you. Retief has always been supposed to have been drowned in the keg. Where's he been all the time?"

The half-breed grinned. Then his face became suddenly serious. He began to think the cross-questioning was becoming too hot. He decided to draw on his imagination.

"Peter was no more drowned than I was. He tricked you—us all—into that belief. Gee!—but he's slick. Peter went to Montana. When the States got too sultry fur 'im he jest came right back hyar. He's been at the camp fur two weeks an' more."

Horrocks was silent after this. Then he turned to Lablache.

"Anything you'd like to ask him?"

The money-lender shook his head and Horrocks turned back to his man.

"I guess that's all. Here's your fifty," he went on, taking a roll of bills from his pocket and counting out the coveted greenbacks. "See and don't get mad drunk and get to shooting. Off you go. If you learn anything more I'm ready to pay for it."

Gautier took the bills and hastily crammed them into his pocket as if he feared he might be called upon to return them. Then he made for the door. He hesitated before he passed out.

"Say, sergeant, you ain't goin' fur to try an' take 'im at the pusky?" he asked, with an appearance of anxiety.

"That's my business. Why?"

The Breed shrugged.

"Ye'll feed the coyotes, sure as—kingdom come. Say they'll jest flay the pelt off yer."

"Git!"

The rascal "got" without further delay or evil prophecy. He knew Horrocks.

When the door closed, and the officer had assured himself of the man's departure, he turned to his host.

"Well?"

"Well?" retorted Lablache.

"What do you make of it?"

"An excellent waste of fifty dollars."

Lablache's face was expressive of indifference mixed with incredulity.

"He told you what you already knew," he pursued, "and drew on his imagination for the rest. I'll swear that Retief has not been seen at the Breed camp for the last fortnight. Moreover, that man was reciting a carefully-thought-out tale. I fancy you have something yet to learn in your business, Horrocks. You have not the gift of reading men."

The police-officer's face was a study. As he listened to the masterful tone of his companion his color came and went. His dark skin flushed and then rapidly paled. A blaze of anger leapt into his keen, flashing eyes. Lablache had flicked him sorely. He struggled to keep cool.

"Unfortunately my position will not allow me to fall out with you," he said, with scarcely-suppressed heat, "otherwise I should call you sharply to account for your insulting remarks. For the moment we will pass them over. In the meantime, Mr. Lablache, let me tell you, my experience leads me to trust largely to the story of that man. Gautier has sold me a good deal of excellent information in the past, and I am convinced that what I have now heard is not the least of his efforts in the law's behalf. Rascal—scoundrel—as he is, he would not dare to set me on a false scent—"

"Not if backed by a man like Retief—and all the half-breed camp? You surprise me."

Horrocks gritted his teeth but spoke sharply. Lablache's supercilious tone of mockery drove him to the verge of madness.

"Not even under these circumstances. I shall attend that pusky and effect the arrest. I understand these people better than you give me credit for. I presume your discretion will not permit you to be present at the capture?"

It was Horrocks's turn to sneer now. Lablache remained unmoved. He merely permitted the ghost of a smile.

"My discretion will not permit me to be present at the pusky. There will be no capture, I fear."

"Then I'll bid you good-night. There is no need to further intrude upon your time."

"None whatever."

The money-lender did not attempt to show the policeman any consideration. He had decided that Horrocks was a fool, and when Lablache formed such an opinion of a man he rarely attempted to conceal it, especially when the man stood in a subordinate position.

After seeing the officer off the premises, Lablache moved heavily back to his desk. The alarm clock indicated ten minutes to nine. He stood for some moments gazing with introspective eyes at the timepiece. He was thinking hard. He was convinced that what he had just heard was a mere fabrication, invented to cover some ulterior motive. That motive puzzled him. He had no fear for Horrocks's life. Horrocks wore the uniform of the Government. Lawless and all as the Breeds were, he knew they would not resist the police—unless, of course, Retief were there. Having decided in his mind that Retief would not be there he had no misgivings. He failed to fathom the trend of affairs at all. In spite of his outward calm he felt uneasy, and he started as though he had been shot when he heard a loud knocking at his private door.

The money-lender's hand dropped on to the revolver lying upon the desk, and he carried the weapon with him when he went to answer the summons. His alarm was needless. His late visitor was "Poker" John.

The old rancher came in sheepishly enough. There was no mistaking the meaning of his peculiar crouching gait, the leering upward glance of his bloodshot eyes. To any one who did not know him, his appearance might have been that of a drink-soaked tramp, so dishevelled and bleared he looked. Lablache took in the old man's condition in one swift glance from his pouched and fishy eyes. His greeting was cordial—too cordial. Any other but the good-hearted, simple old man would have been suspicious of it. Cordiality was not Lablache's nature.

"Ah, John, better late than never," he exclaimed gutturally. "Come in and have a smoke."

"Yes, I thought I'd just come right down and—see if you'd got any news."

"None—none, old friend. Nothing at all. Horrocks is a fool, I'm thinking. Take that chair," pointing to the basket chair. "You're not looking up to the mark. Have a nip of Glenlivet."

He passed the white-labeled bottle over to his companion, and watched the rancher curiously as he shakily helped himself to a liberal "four fingers." "Poker" John was rapidly breaking up. Lablache fully realized this.

"No news—no news," murmured John, as he smacked his lips over his "tot" of whisky. "It's bad, man, very bad. We're not safe in this place whilst that man's about. Dear, dear, dear."

The senility of the rancher was painfully apparent. Doubtless it was the result of his recent libations and excesses. The money-lender was quite aware that John had not come to him to discuss the "hustler." He had come to suggest a game of cards, but for reasons of his own the former wished to postpone the request. He had not expected that "Poker" John would have come this evening; therefore, certain plans of his were not to have been put into execution until the following day. Now, however, it was different. John's coming, and his condition, offered him a chance which was too good to be missed, and Lablache was never a man to miss opportunities.

CHAPTER XVII - THE NIGHT OF THE PUSKY

Presently the old man drew himself up a little. The spirit had a bracing effect upon him. The dull leering eyes assumed a momentary brightness, and he almost grew cheerful. The change was not lost upon Lablache. It was a veritable game of the cat and the mouse.

"This is the first time your stock has been touched," said John, meaninglessly. His thoughts were running upon the game of cards he had promised himself. An unaccountable lack of something like moral courage prevented him talking of it. Possibly it was the iron influence of his companion which forbade the suggestion of cards. "Poker" John was inwardly chafing at his own weakness.

"Yes," responded the other, "I have not been touched before." Then, suddenly, he leant forward, and, for the moment, the money-lender's face lit up with something akin to kindness. It was an unusual sight, and one not to be relied upon. "How many years is it, John, that we have struggled side by side in this benighted land?"

The rancher looked at the other, then his eyes dropped. He scarcely comprehended. He was startled at the expression of that leathery, puffed face. He shifted uneasily with the curious weakly restlessness of a shattered nerve.

"More years, I guess, than I care to think of," he murmured at last.

"Yes, yes, you're right, John—quite right. It doesn't do to look back too far. We're getting on. But we're not old men yet. We're rich, John, rich in land and experience. No, not so old. We can still give the youngsters points, John. Ha, ha!"

Lablache laughed hollowly at his own pleasantry. His companion joined in the laugh, but without mirth. Poker—he could think of nothing but poker. The money-lender insinuatingly pushed the whisky bottle closer to the senile rancher. Almost unconsciously the old man helped himself.

"I wonder what it would be like living a private, idle life?" Lablache went on, as though speaking to himself. Then directly to his companion, "Do you know, old friend, I'm seriously thinking of selling out all my interests and retiring. I've worked very hard—very hard. I'm getting tired of it all. Sometimes I feel that rest would be good. I have amassed a very large fortune, John—as you know."

The confidences of the money-lender were so unusual that "Poker" John, in a dazed way, mildly wondered. The whisky had roused him a good deal now, and he felt that it was good to talk like this. He felt that the money-lender was a good fellow, and much better than he had thought. He even experienced compunction for the opinions which, at times, he had expressed of this old companion. Drink plays strange pranks with one's better judgment at times. Lablache noted the effect of his words carefully.

"Yes," said John, "you have worked hard—we have both worked hard. Our lives have not been altogether without pleasure. The occasional game of cards we have had together has always helped to relieve monotony, eh, Lablache? Yes—yes. No one can say we have not earned rest. But there—yes, you have been more fortunate than I. I could not retire."

Lablache raised his sparse eyebrows. Then he helped himself to some whisky and pushed the bottle over to the other. When John had again replenished his glass the money-lender solemnly raised his and waved it towards the gray-headed old man. John responded unsteadily.

"How!"

"How!" replied the rancher.

Both men drank the old Indian toast. Simple honesty was in one heart, while duplicity and low cunning filled the other.

"You could not retire?" said Lablache, when they had set their empty glasses upon the desk.

"No—no," answered the other, shaking his head with ludicrous mournfulness, "not retire; I have responsibilities—debts. You should know. I must pay them off. I must leave Jacky provided for."

"Yes, of course. You must pay them off. Jacky should be your first consideration."

Lablache pursed his sensual lips. His expression was one of deep concern. Then he apparently

fell into a reverie, during which John was wondering how best to propose the longed-for game of cards. The other roused himself before the desired means suggested itself to the old gambler. And his efforts were cut short abruptly.

"Jacky ought to marry," Lablache said without preamble. "One never knows what may happen. A good husband—a man with money and business capacity, would be a great help to you, and would assure her future."

Lablache had touched upon the one strong point which remained in John Allandale's character. His love for Jacky rivaled his passion for poker, and in its pure honesty was perhaps nearly as strong as that feverish zest. The gambler suddenly became electrified into a different being. The signs of decay—the atmosphere of drink, as it were, fell from him in the flashing of a second, and the old vigorous rancher, like the last dying flame of a fire, shot up into being.

"Jacky shall marry when she chooses, and whatever man she prefers. I will never profit by that dear child's matrimonial affairs," he said simply.

Lablache bit his lips. He had been slightly premature. He acquiesced with a heavy nod of the head and poured himself out some more whisky. The example was natural and his companion followed it.

"You are quite right, John. I merely spoke from a worldly point of view. But your decision affects me closely."

The other looked curiously at the money-lender, who thus found himself forced to proceed. Hitherto he had chosen his own gait. Now he felt himself being drawn. The process was new to him, but it suited his purpose.

"How?"

Lablache sighed. It was like the breathing of an adipose pig.

"I have known that niece of yours, John, ever since she came into this world. I have watched her grow. I understand her nature as well as you do yourself. She is a clever, bright, winsome girl. But she needs the guiding hand of a good husband."

"Just so. You are right. I am too old to take proper care of her. When she chooses she shall marry."

John's tone was decisive. His words were non-committing and open to no argument. Lablache went on.

"Supposing now a rich man, a very rich man, proposed marriage for her. Presuming he was a man against whom there was no doubtful record—who, from a worldly point of view, there could be no objection to—should you object to him as a husband for Jacky?"

The rancher was still unsuspecting.

"What I have stated should answer your question. If Jacky were willing I should have no objection."

"Supposing," the money-lender went on, "she were unwilling, but was content to abide by your decision. What then?"

There was a passing gleam of angry protest in the rancher's eyes as he answered.

"What I have said still holds good," he retorted a little hotly. "I will not influence the child."

"I am sorry. I wish to marry your girl."

There was an impressive silence after this announcement. "Poker" John stared in blank wonderment at his companion. The expectation of such a contingency could not have been farther from his thought. Lablache—to many his niece—it was preposterous—ludicrous. He would not take it seriously—he could not. It was a joke—and not a nice one.

He laughed—and in his laugh there was a ring of anger.

"Of course you are joking, Lablache," he said at last. "Why, man, you are old enough to be the girl's father."

"I was never more serious in my life. And as for age," with a shrug, "at least you will admit my intellect is unimpaired. Her interests will be in safe keeping."

Having recovered from his surprise the old man solemnly shook his head. Some inner feeling made him shrink from thoughts of Lablache as a husband for his girl. Besides, he had no intention of retreating from the stand he had taken.

"As far as I am concerned the matter is quite impossible. If Jacky comes to me with a request for sanction of her marriage to you, she shall have it. But I will express no wish upon the matter. No, Lablache, I never thought you contemplated such a thing. You must go to her. I will not interfere. Oh, dear! oh, dear!" and the old man laughed again nervously.

Lablache remained perfectly calm. He had expected this result; although he had hoped that it might have been otherwise. Now he felt that he had paved the way to methods much dearer to

his heart. This refusal of John's he intended to turn to account. He would force an acceptance from Jacky, and induce her uncle, by certain means, to give his consent.

The money-lender remained silent while he refilled his pipe. "Poker" John seized the opportunity.

"Come, Lablache," he said jocosely, "let us forget this little matter. Have a drink of your own whisky—I'll join you—and let us go down to the saloon for a gentle flutter."

He helped himself to the spirit and poured out a glass for his companion. They silently drank, and then Lablache coughed, spat and lit his pipe. He fumbled his hat on to his head and moved to the door.

"Come on, then," he said gutturally. And John Allandale followed him out.

The two days before the half-breed pusky passed quickly enough for some of those who are interested, and dragged their weary lengths all too slowly for others. At last, however, in due course the day dawned, and with it hopes and fears matured in the hearts of not a few of the denizens of Foss River and the surrounding neighborhood.

To all appearance the most unconcerned man was the Hon. Bunning-Ford, who still moved about the settlement in his cheery, *débonnaire* fashion, ever gentlemanly and always indolent. He had taken up his residence in one of the many disused shacks which dotted round the market-place, and there, apparently, sought to beguile the hours and eke out the few remaining dollars which were his. For Lablache, in his sweeping process, had still been forced to hand over some money, over and above his due, as a result of the sale of the young rancher's property. The trifling amount, however, was less than enough to keep body and soul together for six months.

Lablache, too, staunch to his opinions, did not trouble himself in the least. For the rest, all who knew of the meditated *coup* of Horrocks were agitated to a degree. All hoped for success, but all agreed in a feeling of pessimism which was more or less the outcome of previous experiences of Retief. Did not they know, only too well, of the traps which had been laid and which had failed to ensnare the daring desperado in days gone by? Horrocks they fondly believed to be a very smart man, but had not some of the best in the Canadian police been sent before to bring to justice this scourge of the district?

Amongst those who shared these pessimistic views Mrs. Abbot was one of the most skeptical. She had learnt all the details of the intended arrest in the way she learned everything that was going on. A few judicious questions to the doctor and careful observations never left her long in the dark. She had a natural gift for absorbing information. She was a sort of social amalgam which never failed to glean the golden particles of news which remained after the "panning up" of daily events in Foss River. Nothing ever escaped this dear old soul, from the details of a political crisis in a distant part of the continent down to the number of drinks absorbed by some worthless half-breed in "old man" Smith's saloon. She had one of those keen, active brains which refuses to become dull and torpid in an atmosphere of humdrum monotony. Luckily her nature never allowed her to become a mischievous busybody. She was too kindly for that—too clever, tactful.

After duly weighing the point at issue she found Horrocks's plans wanting, hence her unbelief, but, at the same time, her old heart palpitated with nervous excitement as might the heart of any younger and more hopeful of those in the know.

As for the Allandales, it would be hard to say what they thought. Jacky went about her duties with a placidity that was almost worthy of the great money-lender himself. She showed no outward sign, and very little interest. Her thoughts she kept severely to herself. But she had thoughts on the subject, thoughts which teemed through her brain night and day. She was in reality aglow with excitement, but the Breed nature in her allowed no sign of emotion to appear. "Poker" John was beyond a keen interest. Whisky and cards had done for him what morphine and opium does for the drug fiend. He had no thoughts beyond them. In lucid intervals, as it were, he thought, perhaps, as well as his poor dulled brain would permit him, but the result of his mental effort would scarcely be worth recording.

And so the time drew near.

Horrocks, since his difference of opinion with Lablache, had made the ranch his headquarters, leaving the money-lender as much as possible out of his consultations. He had been heartily welcomed by old John and his niece, the latter in particular being very gracious to him. Horrocks was not a lady's man, but he appreciated comfort when he could get it, and Jacky spared no trouble to make him comfortable now. Had he known the smiling thought behind her beautiful face his appreciation might have lessened.

As the summer day drew to a close signs of coming events began to show themselves. First of all Aunt Margaret made her appearance at the Allandales' house. She was hot and excited. She had come up for a gossip, she said, and promptly sat down with no intention of moving until she had heard all she wanted to know. Then came "Lord" Bill, cheerily monosyllabic. He always considered that long speeches were a disgusting waste of time. Following closely upon his heels came the doctor and Pat Nabob, with another rancher from an outlying ranch. Quite why they had come up they would have hesitated to say. Possibly it was curiosity—possibly natural interest in affairs which nearly affected them. Horrocks, they knew, was at the ranch. Perhaps the magnetism which surrounds persons about to embark on hazardous undertakings had attracted them thither.

As the hour for supper drew near the gathering in the sitting-room became considerable, and as each newcomer presented himself, Jacky, with thoughtful hospitality, caused another place to be set at her bountiful table. No one was ever allowed to pass a meal hour at the ranch without partaking of refreshment. It was one of the principal items provided for in the prairie creed, and the greatest insult to be offered at such time would have been to leave the house before the repast.

At eight o'clock the girl announced the meal with characteristic heartiness.

"Come right along and feed," she said. "Who knows what to-night may bring forth? I guess we can't do better than drink success to our friend, Sergeant Horrocks. Whatever the result of his work to-night we all allow his nerve's right. Say, good people, there's liquor on the table—and glasses; a bumper to Sergeant Horrocks."

The wording of the girl's remarks was significant. Truly Horrocks might have been the leader of a forlorn hope. Many of those present certainly considered him to be such. However, they were none the less hearty in their toast, and Jacky and Bill were the two first to raise their glasses on high.

The toast drunk, tongues were let loose and the supper began. Ten o'clock was the time at which Horrocks was to set out. Therefore there were two hours in which to make merry. Never was a merrier meal taken at the ranch. Spirits were at bursting point, due no doubt to the current of excitement which actuated each member of the gathering.

Jacky was in the best of spirits, and even "Poker" John was enjoying one of his rare lucid intervals. "Lord" Bill sat between Jacky and Mrs. Abbot, and a more charming companion the old lady thought she had never met. It was Jacky who led the talk, Jacky who saw to every one's wants, Jacky whose spirits cheered everybody, by her light badinage, into, even against their better judgment, a feeling of optimism. Even Horrocks felt the influence of her bright, winsome cheeriness.

"Capture this colored scoundrel, Sergeant Horrocks," the girl exclaimed, with a laughing glance, as she helped him to a goodly portion of baked Jack-rabbit, "and we'll present you with the freedom of the settlement, in an illuminated address inclosed in a golden casket. That's the mode, I take it, in civilized countries, and I guess we are civilized hereabout, some. Say, Bill, I opine you're the latest thing from England here to-night. What does 'freedom' mean?"

Bill looked dubious. Everybody waited for his answer.

"Freedom—um. Yes, of course—freedom. Why, freedom means banquets. You know—turtle soup—bile—indigestion. Best champagne in the mayor's cellar. Police can't run you in if you get drunk. All that sort of thing, don'tcherknow."

"An excellent definition," laughed the doctor.

"I wish somebody would present me with 'freedom,'" said Nabob, plaintively.

"It's a good thing we don't go in for that sort of thing extensively in Canada," put in Horrocks, as the representative of the law. "The peaceful pastime of the police would soon be taken from them. Why, the handling of 'drunks' is our only recreation."

"That, and for some of them the process of lowering four per cent. beer," added the doctor, quietly.

Another laugh followed the doctor's sally.

When the mirth had subsided Aunt Margaret shook her head. This levity rather got on her nerves. This Retief business, as she understood it, was a very serious affair, especially for Sergeant Horrocks. She was keenly anxious to hear the details of his preparations. She knew most of them, but she liked her information first hand. With this object in view she suggested, rather than asked, what she wanted to know.

"But I don't quite understand. I take it you are going single-handed into the half-breed camp, where you expect to find this Retief, Sergeant Horrocks?"

Horrocks's face was serious as he looked over at the old lady. There was no laughter in his black, flashing eyes. He was not a man given to suavity. His business effectually crushed any approach to that sort of thing. He was naturally a stern man, too.

"I am not quite mad, madam," he said curtly. "I set some value upon my life."

This crushing rejoinder had no effect upon Aunt Margaret. She still persisted.

"Then, of course, you take your men with you. Four, you have, and smart they look, too. I like to see well-set-up men. I trust you will succeed. They—I mean the Breeds—are a dangerous people."

"Not so dangerous as they're reckoned, I guess," said Horrocks, disdainfully. "I don't anticipate much trouble."

"I hope it will turn out as you think," replied the old lady, doubtfully.

Horrocks shrugged his shoulders; he was not to be drawn.

There was a moment's silence after this, which was at length broken by "Poker" John.

"Of course, Horrocks," he said, "we shall carry out your instructions to the letter. At three in the morning, failing your return or news of you, I set out with my ranch hands to find you. And woe betide those black devils if you have come to harm. By the way, what about your men?"

"They assemble here at ten. We leave our horses at Lablache's stables. We are going to walk to the settlement."

"I think you are wise," said the doctor.

"Guess horses would be an encumbrance," said Jacky.

"An excellent mark for a Breed's gun," added Bill. "Seems to me you'll succeed," he went on politely. His eagle face was calmly sincere. The gray eyes looked steadily into those of the officer's. Jacky was watching her lover keenly. The faintest suspicion of a smile was in her eyes.

"I should like to be there," she said simply, when Bill had finished. "It's mean bad luck being a girl. Say, d'you think I'd be in the way, sergeant?"

Horrocks looked over at her, and in his gaze was a look of admiration. In the way he knew she would be, but he could not tell her so. Such spirit appealed to him.

"There would be much danger for you, Miss Jacky," he said. "My hands would be full, I could not look after you, and besides—" He broke off at the recollection of the old stories about this girl. Suddenly he wondered if he had been indiscreet. What if the stories were true. He ran cold at the thought. These people knew his plans. Then he looked into the girl's beautiful face. No, it must be false. She could have nothing in common with the rascally Breeds.

"And besides—what?" Jacky said, smiling over at the policeman.

Horrocks shrugged.

"When Breeds are drunk they are not responsible."

"That settles it," the girl's uncle said, with a forced laugh. He did not like Jacky's tone. Knowing her, he feared she intended to be there to see the arrest.

Her uncle's laugh nettled the girl a little, and with a slight elevation of her head, she said,—

"I don't know."

Further talk now became impossible, for, at that moment the troopers arrived. Horrocks discovered that it was nearly ten o'clock. The moment for the start had come, and, with one accord, everybody rose from the table. In the bustle and handshaking of departure Jacky slipped away. When, she returned the doctor and Mrs. Abbot were in the hall alone with "Lord" Bill. The latter was just leaving. "Poker" John was on the veranda seeing Horrocks off.

As Jacky came downstairs Aunt Margaret's eyes fell upon the ominous holster and cartridge belt which circled the girl's hips. She was dressed for riding. There could be no mistaking the determined set of her face.

"Jacky, my dear," said the old lady in dismay. "What are you doing? Where are you going?"

"Guess I'm going to see the fun—I've a notion there'll be some."

"But—"

"Don't 'but' me, Aunt Margaret, I take it you aren't deaf."

The old lady relapsed into dignified silence, but there was much concern and a little understanding in her eyes as she watched the girl pass out to the corrals.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PUSKY

A pusky is a half-breed dance. That is the literal meaning of the word. The practical translation, however, is often different. In reality it is a debauch—a frightful orgie, when all the lower animal instincts—and they are many and strong in the half-breed—are given full sway. When drunkenness and bestial passions rule the actions of these worse than savages. When murder and crimes of all sorts are committed without scruple, without even thought. Latterly things have changed, and these orgies are less frequent among the Breeds, or, at least, conducted with more regard for decorum. But we are talking of some years ago, at a time when the Breeds had to learn the meaning of civilization—before good order and government were thoroughly established in this great Western country; in the days when Indian "Sun" dances, and other barbarous functions were held. In the days of the Red River Jig, when a good fiddler of the same was held to be a man of importance; when the method of tuning the fiddle to the necessary pitch for the playing of that curious dance was a secret known only to a privileged few. Some might call them the "good" old days. "Bad" is the adjective which best describes that period.

When Horrocks and his men set out for the Breed camp they had discarded their police clothes and were clad in the uncouth garb of the half-breeds. They had even gone to the length of staining their faces to the coppery hue of the Indians. They were a ragged party, these hardy riders of the plains, as they embarked on their meditated capture of the desperate raider. All of the five were "tough" men, who regarded their own lives lightly enough—men who had seen many stirring times, and whose hairbreadth escapes from "tight" corners would have formed a lengthy narrative in themselves. They were going to they knew not what now, but they did not shrink from the undertaking. Their leader was a man whose daring often outweighed his caution, but, as they well knew, he was endowed with a reckless man's luck, and they would sooner follow such as he—for they were sure of a busy time—than work with one of his more prudent colleagues.

At the half-breed camp was considerable bustle and excitement. The activity of the Breed is not proverbial; they are at best a lazy lot, but now men and women came and went bristling with energy to their finger tips. Preparations were nearing completion. The chief item of importance was the whisky supply, and this the treasurer, Baptiste, had made his personal care. A barrel of the vilest "rot-gut" that was ever smuggled into prohibition territory had been procured and carefully secreted. This formed the chief refreshment, and, doubtless, the "bluestone" with which its fiery contents were strengthened, would work the passionate natures, on which it was to play, up to the proper crime-committing pitch.

The orgie was to be held in a barn of considerable dimensions. It was a ramshackle affair, reeking of old age and horses. The roof was decidedly porous in places, being so lame and disjointed that the starry resplendence of the summer sky was plainly visible from beneath it.

This, however, was a trifling matter, and of much less consequence than the question of space. What few horse stalls had once occupied the building had been removed, and the mangers alone remained, with the odor of horse, to remind the guests of the original purpose of their ballroom. A careful manipulation of dingy Turkey red, and material which had once been white, struggled vainly to hide these mangers from view, while coarse, rough boards which had at one time floored some of the stalls, served to cover in the tops and convert them into seats. The result was a triumph of characteristic ingenuity. The barn was converted into a place of the necessary requirements, but rendered hideous in the process.

Next came the disguising of the rafters and "collar-ties" of the building. This was a process which lent itself to the curiously warped artistic sense of the benighted people. Print—I mean cotton rags—was the chief idea of decoration. They understood these stuffs. They were cheap—or, at least, as cheap as anything sold at Lablache's store. Besides, print decorated the persons of the buxom Breed women, therefore what more appropriate than such stuff to cover the nakedness of the building. Festoons of print, flags of print, rosettes of print: these did duty for the occasion. The staring patterns gleamed on every beam, or hung in bald draping almost down to the height of an ordinary man's head. The effect was strangely reminiscent of a second-hand clothes shop, and helped to foster the nauseating scent of the place.

A row of reeking oil lamps, swinging in crazy wire swings, were suspended down the center from the moldering beams, and in the diamond window spaces were set a number of black bottles, the neck of each being stuffed with a tallow candle.

One corner of the room was set apart for the fiddler, and here a daïs of rough boarding, also draped in print stuff, was erected to meet the requirements of that honored personage. Such was the uncouth place where the Breeds proposed to hold their orgie. And of its class it was an excellent example.

At ten o'clock the barn was lit up, and strangely bizarre was the result. The draught through the broken windows set the candles a-guttering, until rivers of yellow fat decorated the black bottles in which they were set. The stench from these, and from the badly-trimmed coal oil lamps down the center, blended disgustingly with the native odor of the place, until the atmosphere became heavy, pungent, revolting in the nostrils, and breathing became a labor after the sweet fresh air of the prairie outside.

Soon after this the dancers began to arrive. They came in their strange deckings of glaring colors, and many and varied were the types which soon filled the room. There were old men and there were young men. There were girls in their early teens, and toothless hags, decrepit and faltering. Faces which, in wild loveliness, might have vied with the white beauty of the daughters of the East. Faces seared and crumpled with weight of years and nights of debauchery. Men were there of superb physique, whilst others crouched huddled, with shuffling gait towards the manger seats, to seek rest for their rotting bones, and ease for their cramping muscles.

Many of the faces were marred by disease; small-pox was a prevalent scourge amongst these people. The effect of the pure air of the prairie was lost upon the germ-laden atmosphere which surrounded these dreadful camps. Crime, too, was stamped on many of the faces of those gathering in the reeking ballroom. The small bullet head with low, receding forehead; the square set jaws and sagging lips; the shifty, twinkling little eyes, narrow-set and of jetty hue; such faces were plentiful. Nor were these features confined to the male sex alone. Truly it was a motley gathering, and not pleasant to look upon.

All, as they came, were merry with anticipation; even the hags and the rheumatism-ridden male fossils croaked out their quips and coarse pleasantries to each other with gleeful unctuousness,

inspired by thoughts of the generous contents of the secreted barrel. Their watery eyes watered the more, as, on entering the room, they glanced round seeking to discover the fiery store of liquor, which they hoped to help to dispose of. It was a loathsome sight to behold these miserable wretches gathering together with no thought in their beast-like brains but of the ample food and drink which they intended should fall to their share. Crabbed old age seeking rejuvenation in gut-burning spirit.

The room quickly filled, and the chattering of many and strange tongues lent an apish tone to the function. The French half-breed predominated, and these spoke their bastard lingo with that rapidity and bristling elevation of tone which characterizes their Gallic relatives. It seemed as though each were trying to talk his neighbor down, and the process entailed excited shriekings which made the old barn ring again.

Baptiste, with a perfect understanding of the people, served out the spirit in pannikins with a lavish hand. It was as well to inspire these folk with the potent liquor from the start, that their energies might be fully aroused for the dance.

When all, men and women alike, had partaken of an "eye-opener," Baptiste gave the signal, and the fiddler struck up his plaintive wail. The reedy strings of his instrument shrieked out the long-drawn measure of a miserable waltz, the company paired off, and the dance began.

Whatever else may be the failings of the Breeds they can dance. Dancing is as much a part of their nature as is the turning of a dog twice before he lies down, a feature of the canine race. Those who were physically incapable of dancing lined the walls and adorned the manger seats. For the rest, they occupied the sanded floor, and danced until the dust clouded the air and added to the choking foulness of the atmosphere.

The shrieking fiddle lured this savage people, and its dreadful tone was music of the sweetest to their listening ears. This was a people who would dance. They would dance so long as they could stand.

More drink followed the first dance. Baptiste had not yet recognized the pitch of enthusiasm which must promise a successful evening. The quantities of liquor thus devoured were appalling. The zest increased. The faces wearing an habitual frown displayed a budding smile. The natural smiler grinned broadly. All warmed to the evening's amusement.

Now came the festive barn dance. The moccasined feet pounded the filthy floor, and the dust gathered thick round the gums of the hard-breathing dancers. The noise of coarse laughter and ribald shoutings increased. All were pleased with themselves, but more pleased still with the fiery liquid served out by Baptiste. The scene grew more wild as time crept on, and the effect of the liquor made itself apparent. The fiddler labored cruelly at his wretched instrument. His task was no light one, but he spared himself no pains. His measure must be even, his tone almost unending to satisfy his countrymen. He understood them, as did Baptiste. To fail in his work would mean angry protests from those he served, and angry protests amongst the Breeds generally took the form of a shower of leaden bullets. So he scraped away with aching limbs, and with heavy foot pounding out the time upon the crazy daïs. He must play until long after daylight, until his fingers cramped, and his old eyes would remain open no longer.

Peter Retief had not as yet put in an appearance. Horrocks was at his post viewing the scene from outside one of the broken windows. His men were hard by, concealed at certain points in the shelter of some straggling bush which surrounded the stable. Horrocks, with characteristic energy and disregard for danger, had set himself the task of spying out the land. He had a waiting game to play, but the result he hoped would justify his action.

The scene he beheld was not new to him, his duties so often carried him within the precincts of a half-breed camp. No one knew the Breeds better than did this police officer.

Time passed. Again and again the fiddle ceased its ear-maddening screams as refreshment was partaken of by the dancers. Wilder and wilder grew the scene as the potent liquor took hold of its victims. They danced with more and more reckless abandon as each time they returned to step it to the fiddler's patient measure. Midnight approached and still no sign of Retief. Horrocks grew restless and impatient.

Once the fiddle ceased, and the officer watching saw all eyes turn to the principal entrance to the barn. His heart leapt in anticipation as he gazed in the direction. Surely this sudden cessation could only herald the coming of Retief.

He saw the door open as he craned forward to look. For the moment he could not see who entered; a crowd obscured his view. He heard a cheer and a clapping of hands, and he rejoiced. Then the crowd parted and he saw the slim figure of a girl pass down the center of the reeking den. She was clad in buckskin shirt and dungaree skirt. At the sight he muttered a curse. The newcomer was Jacky Allandale.

He watched her closely as she moved amongst her uncouth surroundings. Her beautiful face and graceful figure was like to an oasis of stately flora in a desert of trailing, vicious brambles, and he marveled at the familiarity with which she came among these people. Moreover, he became beset with misgivings as he remembered the old stories which linked this girl's name with that of Retief. He struggled to fathom the meaning of what he saw, but the real significance of her coming escaped him.

The Breeds once more returned to their dancing, and all went on as before. Horrocks followed Jacky's movements with his eyes. He saw her standing beside a toothless old woman, who wagged her cunning, aged head as she talked in answer to the girl's questions. Jacky seemed to be looking and inquiring for some one, and the officer wondered if the object of her solicitude was Retief. He would have been surprised had he known that she was inquiring and looking for himself. Presently she seated herself and appeared to be absorbed in the dance.

The drink was flowing freely now, and a constant demand was being made upon Baptiste. Whilst the fiery spirit scorched down the hardened throats, strange, weird groans came from the fiddler's woeful instrument. The old man was tuning it down for the plaintive requirements of the Red River Jig.

The dance of the evening was about to begin. Men and women primed themselves for the effort. Each was eager to outdo his or her neighbor in variety of steps and power of endurance. All were prepared to do or die. The mad jig was a national contest, and the one who lasted the longest would be held the champion dancer of the district—a coveted distinction amongst this strange people.

At last the music began again, and now the familiar "Ragtime" beat fascinatingly upon the air. Those who lined the walls took up the measure, and, with foot and clapping hands, marked the time for the dancers. Those who competed leapt to the fray, and soon the reeking room became stifling with dust.

The fiddler's time, slow at the commencement, soon grew faster, and the dancers shook their limbs in delighted anticipation. Faster and faster they shuffled and jigged, now opposite to partners, now round each other, now passing from one partner to another, now alone, for the admiration of the onlookers. Nor was there pause or hesitation. An instant's pause meant dropping out of that mad and old time "hoe-down," and each coveted the distinction of champion. Faster and more wildly they footed it, and soon the speed caused some of the less agile to drop out. It was a giddy sight to watch, and the strange clapping of the spectators was not the least curious feature of the scene.

The crowd of dancers grew thinner as the fiddler, with a marvelous display of latent energy, kept ever-increasing his speed.

In spite of himself Horrocks became fascinated. There was something so barbarous—heathenish—in what he beheld. The minutes flew by, and the dance was rapidly nearing its height. More couples fell out, dead beat and gasping, but still there remained a number who would fight it out to the bitter end. The streaming faces and gaping lips of those yet remaining told of the dreadful strain. Another couple dropped out, the woman actually falling with exhaustion. She was dragged aside and left unnoticed in the wild excitement. Now were only three pairs left in the center of the floor.

The police-officer found himself speculating as to which would be the winner of the contest.

"That brown-faced wench, with the flaming red dress, 'll do 'em all," he said to himself. The woman he was watching had a young Breed of great agility for her *vis-à-vis*. "She or her partner 'll do it," he went on, almost audibly. "Good," he was becoming enthusiastic, "there's another couple done," as two more suddenly departed, and flung themselves on the ground exhausted. "Yes, they'll do it—crums, but there goes her partner! Keep it up, girl—keep it up. The others won't be long. Stay with—"

He broke off in alarm as he felt his arm suddenly clutched from behind. Simultaneously he felt heavy breathing blowing upon his cheek. Quick as a flash his revolver was whipped out and he swung round.

"Easy, sergeant," said the voice of one of his troopers. "For Gawd's sake don't shoot. Say, Retief's down at the settlement. A messenger's jest come up to say he's 'hustled' all our horses from Lablache's stable, and the old man himself's in trouble. Come over to that bluff yonder, the messenger's there. He's one of Lablache's clerks."

The police-officer was dumbfounded, and permitted himself to be conducted to the bluff without a word. He was wondering if he were dreaming, so sudden and unexpected was the announcement of the disaster.

When he halted at the bluff, the clerk was still discussing the affair with one of the troopers. As yet the other two were in their places of concealment, and were in ignorance of what had happened.

"It's dead right," the clerk said, in answer to Horrocks's sharply-put inquiry. "I'd been in bed sometime when I was awakened by a terrible racket going on in the office. It's just under the room I sleep in. Well, I hopped out of bed and slipped on some clothes, and went downstairs, thinking the governor had been taken with a fit or something. When I got down the office was in darkness, and quiet as death. I went cautiously to work, for I was a bit scared. Striking a light I made my way in, expecting to find the governor laid out, but, instead, I found the furniture all chucked about and the room empty. It wasn't two shakes before I lit upon this sheet of paper. It was lying on the desk. The governor's writing is unmistakable. You can see for yourself; here it is —"

Horrocks took the sheet, and, by the light of a match read the scrawl upon it. The writing had

evidently been done in haste, but its meaning was clear.

"Retief is here," it ran. "I am a prisoner. Follow up with all speed. LABLACHE."

After reading, Horrocks turned to the clerk, who immediately went on with his story.

"Well, I just bolted out to the stables intending to take a horse and go over to 'Poker' John's. But when I got there I found the doors open, an' every blessed horse gone. Yes, your horses as well—and the governor's buckboard too. I jest had a look round, saw that the team harness had gone with the rest, then I ran as hard as I could pelt to the Foss River Ranch. I found old John up, but he'd been drinking, so, after a bit of talk, I learned from him where you were and came right along. That's all, sergeant, and bad enough it is too. I'm afraid they'll string the governor up. He ain't too popular, you know."

The clerk finished up his breathless narrative in a way that left no doubt in the mind of his hearers as to his sincerity. He was trembling with nervous excitement still. And even in the starlight the look upon his face spoke of real concern for his master.

For some seconds the officer did not reply. He was thinking rapidly. To say that he was chagrined would hardly convey his feelings. He had been done—outwitted—and he knew it. Done—like the veriest tenderfoot. He, an officer of wide experience and of considerable reputation. And worst of all he remembered Lablache's warning. He, the money-lender, had been more far-seeing—had understood something of the trap which he, Horrocks, had plunged headlong into. The thought was as worm-wood to the prairie man, and helped to cloud his judgment as he now sought for the best course to adopt. He saw now with bitter, mental self-reviling, how the story that Gautier had told him—and for which he had paid—and which had been corroborated by the conversation he had heard in the camp, had been carefully prepared by the wily Retief; and how he, like a hungry, simple fish, had deliberately risen and devoured the bait. He was maddened by the thought, too, that the money-lender had been right and he wrong, and took but slight solace from the fact that the chief disaster had overtaken that great man.

However, it was plain that something must be done at once to assist Lablache, and he cast about in his mind for the best means to secure the money-lender's release. In his dilemma a recollection came to him of the presence of Jacky Allandale in the barn, and a feeling nearly akin to revenge came to him. He felt that in some way this girl was connected with, and knew of, the doings of Retief.

With a hurried order to remain where they were to his men he returned to his station at the window of the barn. He looked in, searching for the familiar figure of the girl. Dancing had ceased, and the howling Breeds were drinking heavily. Jacky was no longer to be seen, and, with bitter disappointment, he turned again to rejoin his companions. There was nothing left to do but to hasten to the settlement and procure fresh horses.

He had hardly turned from the window when several shots rang out on the night air. They came from the direction in which he was moving. Instantly he comprehended that an attack was being made upon his troopers. He drew his pistol and dashed forward at a run. Three paces sufficed to terminate his race. Silence had followed the firing of the shots he had heard. Suddenly his quick ears detected the hiss of a lariat whistling through the air. He spread out his arms to ward it off. He felt something fall upon them. He tried to throw it off, and, the next instant the rope jerked tight round his throat, and he was hurled, choking, backwards upon the ground.

CHAPTER XIX - LABLACHE'S MIDNIGHT VISITOR

Lablache was alone in his office. He was more alone than he had ever been in his life; or, at least, he felt more alone—which amounted to much the same thing. Possibly, had he been questioned on the subject, he would have pooh-poohed the idea, but, nevertheless, in his secret heart he felt that, in spite of his vast wealth, he was a lonely man. He knew that he had not a single friend in Foss River; and in Calford, another center of his great wealth, things were no better. His methods of business, whilst they brought him many familiar acquaintances—a large circle of people who were willing to trade, repelled all approach to friendship. Besides, his personality was against him. His flinty disposition and unscrupulous love of power were all detrimental to human affection.

As a rule, metaphorically speaking, he snapped his fingers at these things. Moreover, he was glad that such was the case; he could the more freely indulge his passion for grab. Hated, he could work out his peculiar schemes without qualms of conscience; loved, it would have been otherwise. Yes, Lablache preferred this social ostracism.

But the great money-lender had his moments of weakness—moments when he rebelled against his solitary lot. He knew that his isolated position had been brought about by himself—fostered by himself, and he knew he preferred that it should be so. But, nevertheless, at times he felt very lonely, and in these moments of weakness he wondered if he obtained full consolation in his great wealth for his marooned position. Generally the result of these reflections brought him satisfaction. How? is a question. Possibly he forced himself, by that headstrong power with which he bent others who came into contact with him to his will, to such a conclusion. Lablache was

certainly a triumph of relentless purpose over flesh and feelings.

Lablache was nearly fifty, and had lived alone since he was in his teens. Now he pined as all who live a solitary life must some day pine, for a companion to share his loneliness. He craved not for the society of his own sex. With the instinct in us all he wanted a mate to share with him his golden nest. But this mass of iron nerve and obesity was not as other men. He did not weakly crave, and then, with his wealth, set out to secure a wife who could raise him in the social scale, or add to the bags which he had watched grow in bulk from flattened folds of sacking, to the distended proportions of miniature balloons. No, he desired a girl, the only relation of a man whom he had helped to ruin—a girl who could bring him no social distinction, and who could not add one penny piece to his already enormous wealth. Moreover, strangely enough, he had conceived for her a passion which was absolutely unholy in its intensity. It is needless, then, to add, when, speaking of such a man, that, willing or not, he intended that Jacky Allandale should be his.

Thoughts of this wild, quarter-breed girl filled his brain as he sat solitary in his little office on the night of the pusky. He sat in his favorite chair, in his favorite position. He was lounging back with his slippered feet resting on the burnished steel foot-rests of the stove. There was no fire in the stove, of course, but from force of habit he gazed thoughtfully at the mica sides which surrounded the firebox. Probably in this position he had thought out some of his most dastardly financial schemes and therefore most suitable it seemed now as he calculated his chances of capturing the wild prairie girl for his mate.

He had given up all thoughts of ever obtaining her willing consent, and, although his vanity had been hurt by her rejection of his advances, still he was not the man to be easily thwarted. His fertile brain had evolved a means by which to achieve his end, and, to his scheme-loving nature, the process was anything but distasteful. He had always, from the first moment he had decided to make Jacky Allandale his wife, been prepared for such a contingency as her refusal, and had never missed an opportunity of ensnaring her uncle in his financial toils. He had understood the old man's weakness, and, with satanic cunning, had set himself to the task of wholesale robbery, with crushing results to his victim. This had given him the necessary power to further prosecute his suit. As yet he had not displayed his hand. He felt that the time was barely ripe. Before putting the screw on the Allandales it had been his object to rid the place, and his path, of his only stumbling block. In this he had not quite succeeded as we have seen. He quite understood that the Hon. Bunning-Ford must be removed from Foss River first. Whilst he was on hand Jacky would be difficult to coerce. Instinctively he knew that "Lord" Bill was her lover, and, with him at hand to advise her, Jacky would hold out to the last. However, he believed that in the end he must conquer. Bunning-Ford's resources were very limited he knew, and soon his hated rival must leave the settlement and seek pastures new. Lablache was but a clever scheming mortal. He did not credit others with brains of equal caliber, much less cleverer and more resourceful than his own. It had been better for him had his own success in life been less assured, for then he would have been more doubtful of his own ability to do as he wished, and he would have given his adversaries credit for a cleverness which he now considered as only his.

After some time spent in surveying and considering his plans his thoughts reverted to other matters. This was the night of the half-breed pusky. His great face contorted into a sarcastic smile as he thought of Sergeant Horrocks. He remembered with vivid acuteness every incident of his interview with the officer two nights ago. He bore the man no malice now for the contradiction of himself, for the reason that he was sure his own beliefs on the subject of Retief would be amply realized. His lashless eyes quivered as his thoughts invoked an inward mirth. No one realized more fully than did this man the duplicity and cunning of the Breed. He anticipated a great triumph over Horrocks the next time he saw him.

As the time passed on he became more himself. His loneliness did not strike him so keenly. He felt that after all there was great satisfaction to be drawn from a watcher's observance of men. Isolated as he was he was enabled to look on men and things more critically than he otherwise would be.

He reached over to his tobacco jar, which stood upon his desk, and leisurely proceeded to fill his pipe. It was rarely he indulged himself in an idle evening, but to-night he somehow felt that idleness would be good. He was beginning to feel the weight of his years.

He lit his heavy briar and proceeded to envelop himself in a cloud of smoke. He gasped out a great sigh of satisfaction, and his leathery eyelids half closed. Presently a gentle tap came at the glass door, which partitioned off the office from the store. Lablache called out a guttural "Come in," at the same time glancing at the loud ticking "alarm" on the desk. He knew who his visitor was.

One of the clerks opened the door.

"It is past ten, sir, shall I close up?" he asked.

"Yes, close up. Whose evening off is it?"

"Rodgers, sir. He is still out. He'll be in before midnight, sir."

"Ah, down at the saloon, I expect," said Lablache, drily. "Well, bolt the front door. Just leave it on the spring latch. I shall be up until he comes in. What are you two boys going to do?"

"Going to bed, sir."

"All right; good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

The door closed quietly after the clerk, and Lablache heard his two assistants close up the store and then go upstairs to their rooms. The money-lender was served well. His employees in the store had been with him for years. They were worked very hard and their pay was not great, but their money was sure, and their employment was all the year round. So many billets upon the prairie depended upon the seasons—opulence one month and idleness the next. On the ranches it was often worse. There is but little labor needed in the winter. And those who have the good fortune to be employed all the year round generally experience a reduction in wages at the end of the fall round-up, and find themselves doing the "chores" when winter comes on.

After the departure of the clerk Lablache re-settled himself and went on smoking placidly. The minutes ticked slowly away. An occasional groan from the long-suffering basket chair, and the wreathing clouds of smoke were the only appreciable indication of life in that little room. By-and-by the great man reached a memorandum tablet from his desk and dotted down a few hurried figures. Then he breathed a great sigh, and his face wore a look of satisfaction. There could be no doubt as to the tenor of his thoughts. Money, money. It was as life to him.

The distant rattle of the spring lock of the store front door being snapped-to disturbed the quiet of the office. Lablache heard the sound. Then followed the bolting of the door. The money-lender turned again to his figures. It was the return of Rodgers, he thought, which had disturbed him. He soon became buried in further calculations. While figuring he unconsciously listened for the sound of the clerk's footsteps on the stairs as he made his way up to his room. The sound did not come. The room was clouded with tobacco smoke, and still Lablache belched out fresh clouds to augment the reek of the atmosphere. Suddenly the glass door opened. The money-lender heard the handle move.

"Eh, what is it, Rodgers?" he said, in a displeased tone. As he spoke he peered through the smoke.

"What d'you want?" he exclaimed angrily. Then he rubbed his eyes and craned forward only to fall back again with a muttered curse. He had stared into the muzzle of a heavy six-shooter.

He moved his hand as though to throw his memorandum pad on the desk, but instantly a stern voice ordered him to desist and the threatening revolver came closer.

"Jest stay right thar, pard." The words were spoken in an exaggerated Western drawl. "My barker's mighty light in the trigger. I guess it don't take a hundred-weight to loose it. And I don't cotton to mucking up this floor with yer vitals."

Lablache remained still. He saw before him the tall thin figure of a half-breed. He had black lank hair which hung loosely down almost on to his shoulders. His face was the color of mud, and he was possessed of a pair of keen gray eyes and a thin-hooked nose. His face wore a lofty look of command, and was stamped by an expression of the utmost resolution. He spoke easily and showed not the smallest haste.

"Guess we ain't met before, boss—not familiar-like, leastways. My name's Retief—Peter Retief, an' I take it yours is Lablache. Now I've jest come right along to do biz with you—how does that fit your bowels?"

The compelling ring of metal faced the astonished money-lender. For the moment he remained speechless.

"Wal?" drawled the other, with elaborate significance.

Lablache struggled for words. His astonishment—dismay made the effort a difficult one.

"You've got the drop on me you—you damned scoundrel," he at last burst out, his face for the moment purpling with rage. "I'm forced to listen to you now," he went on more gutturally, as the paroxysm having found vent began to pass, "but watch yourself that you make no bad reckoning, or you'll regret this business until the rope's round your neck. You'll get nothing out of me—but what you take. Now then, be sharp. What are you going to do?"

The half-breed grinned.

"You're mighty raw oh the hide jest now, I guess. But see hyar, my reckonin's are nigh as slick as yours. An' jest slant yer tongue some. 'Damned scoundrel' sliden' from yer flannel face is like a coyote roundin' on a timber wolf, an' a coyote ain't as low down as a skunk. I opine I want a deal from you," Retief went on, with a hollow laugh, "and wot I want I mostly git, in these parts."

Lablache was no coward. And even now he had not the smallest fear for his life. But the thought of being bluffed by the very man he was willing to pay so much for the capture of riled him almost beyond endurance. The Breed noted the effect of his words and pushed his pistol almost to within arm's reach of the money-lender's face.

The half-breed's face suddenly became stem.

"That's a dandy ranch of yours down south. Me an' my pards 'ave taken a notion to it. Say, you're

comin' right along with us. Savee? Guess we'll show you the slickest round up this side o' the border. Now jest sit right thar while I let my mates in."

Retief took no chances. Lablache, under pistol compulsion, was forced to remain motionless in his chair. The swarthy Breed backed cautiously to the door until his hand rested upon the spring catch. This, with deft fingers, he turned and then forced back, and the next moment he was joined by two companions as dark as himself and likewise dressed in the picturesque garb of the prairie "hustler." The money-lender, in spite of his predicament, was keenly alert, and lost no detail of the new-comers' appearance. He took a careful mental photograph of each of the men, trusting that he might find the same useful in the future. He wondered what the next move would be. He eyed the Breed's pistol furtively, and thought of his own weapon lying on his desk at the corner farthest from him. He knew there was no possible chance of reaching it. The slightest unbidden move on his part would mean instant death. He understood, only too well, how lightly human, life was held by these people. Implicit obedience alone could save him. In those few thrilling moments he had still time to realize the clever way in which both he and Horrocks had been duped. He had never for a moment believed in Gautier's story, but had still less dreamed of such a daring outrage as was now being perpetrated. He had not long to wait for developments. Directly the two men were inside, and the door was again closed, Retief pointed to the money-lender.

"Hustle, boys—the rope. Lash his feet."

One of the men produced an old lariat. In a trice the great man's feet were fast.

"His hands?" said one of the men.

"Guess not. He's goin' to write, some."

Lablache instantly thought of his cheque-book. But Retief had no fancy for what he considered was useless paper.

The hustler stepped over to the desk. His keen eyes spotted the money-lender's pistol lying upon the far corner of it. He had also noted his prisoner casting furtive glances in the direction of it. To prevent any mischance he picked the gleaming weapon up and slipped it into his hip pocket. After that he drew a sheet of foolscap from the stationery case and laid it on the blotting pad. Then he turned to his comrades.

"Jest help old money-bags over," he said quietly. He was thoroughly alert, and as calmly indifferent to the danger of discovery as if he were engaged on the most righteous work.

When Lablache had been hoisted and pushed into position at the desk the raider took up a pen and held it out towards him.

"Write," he said laconically.

Lablache hesitated. He looked from the pen to the man's leveled pistol. Then he reluctantly took the pen. The half-breed promptly dictated, and the other wrote. The compulsion was exasperating, and the great man scrawled with all the pettishness of a child.

The message read—

"Retief is here. I am a prisoner. Follow up with all speed."

"Now sign," said the Breed, when the message was written.

Lablache signed and flung down the pen.

"What's that for?" he demanded huskily.

"For?" His captor shrugged. "I guess them gophers of police are snugly trussed by now. Mebbe, though, one o' them might 'a' got clear away. When they find you're gone, they'll light on that paper. I jest want 'em to come right along after us. Savee? It'll 'most surprise 'em when they come along." Then he turned to his men. "Now, boys, lash his hands, and cut his feet adrift. Then, into the buckboard with him. Guess his carcass is too bulky for any 'plug' to carry. Get a hustle on, lads. We've hung around here long enough."

The men stepped forward to obey their chief, but, at that moment, Lablache gave another display of that wonderful agility of his of which, at times, he was capable. His rage got the better of him, and even under the muzzle of his captor's pistol he was determined to resist. We have said that the money-lender was no coward; at that moment he was desperate.

The nearest Breed received a terrific buffet in the neck, then, in spite of his bound feet, Lablache seized his heavy swivel chair, and, raising it with all his strength he hurled it at the other. Still Relief's pistol was silent. The money-lender noticed the fact, and he became even more assured. He turned heavily and aimed a blow at the "hustler." But, even as he struck, he felt the weight of Retief's hand, and struggling to steady himself—his bound feet impeding him—he overbalanced and fell heavily to the ground. In an instant the Breeds were upon him. His own handkerchief was used to gag him, and his hands were secured. Then, without a moment's delay, he was hoisted from the floor—his great weight bearing his captors down—and carried bodily out of the office and thrown into his own buckboard, which was waiting at the door. Retief sprang into the driving seat whilst one of the Breeds held the prisoner down, some other dark figures leapt into the saddles of several waiting horses, and the party dashed off at a breakneck speed.

The gleaming stars gave out more than sufficient light for the desperate teamster. He swung the well-fed, high-mettled horses of the money-lender round, and headed right through the heart of the settlement. The audacity of this man was superlative. He lashed the animals into a gallop which made the saddle horses extend themselves to keep up. On, on into the night they raced, and almost in a flash the settlement was passed. The sleepy inhabitants of Foss River heard the mad racing of the horses but paid no heed. The daring of the raider was his safeguard.

Lablache knew their destination. They were traveling southward, and he felt that their object was his own ranch.

CHAPTER XX - A NIGHT OF TERROR

That midnight drive was one long nightmare to the unfortunate captive. He had been thrown, sprawling, into the iron-railed "carryall" platform at the back of the buckboard, and lay on the nut-studded slats, where he was jolted and bumped about like the proverbial pea on a drum.

When the raider changed his direction, and turned off the trail on to the open prairie, the horrors of the prisoner's position were intensified a hundredfold. Alone, there was insufficient room for the suffering man in the limited space of the "carryall," but beside him sat, or rather crouched, a burly Breed, ready at a moment's notice to quash any attempt at escape on the part of the wretched money-lender.

Thus he was borne along, mile after mile, southward towards his own ranch. Sometimes during that terrible ride Lablache found time to wonder what was the object of these people in thus kidnapping him. Surely if they only meant to carry off his cattle, such a task could have been done without bringing him along with them. It seemed to him that there could be only one interpretation put upon the matter, and, in spite of his present agonies, the great man shuddered as he thought.

Courageous as he was, he endured a period of mental agony which took all the heart out of him. He understood the methods of the prairie so well that he feared the very worst. A tree—a lariat—and he saw, in fancy, a crowd of carrion swarming round his swinging body. He could conceive no other object, and his nerves became racked almost to breaking pitch.

The real truth of the situation was beyond his wildest dreams. The significance of the fact that this second attack was made against him was lost upon the wretched man. He only seemed to realize with natural dread that Retief—the terror of the countryside—was in this, therefore the outcome must surely be the very worst.

At length the horses drew up at Lablache's lonely ranch. His nearest neighbor was not within ten miles of him. With that love of power and self aggrandisement which always characterized him, the money-lender had purchased from the Government a vast tract of country, and retained every acre of it for his own stock. It might have stood him in good stead now had he let portions of his grazing, and so settled up the district. As it was, his ranch was characteristic of himself—isolated; and he knew that Retief could here work his will with little chance of interference.

As Lablache was hoisted from the buckboard and set upon his feet, and the gag was removed from his mouth, the first thing he noticed was the absolute quiescence of the place. He wondered if his foreman and the hands were yet sleeping.

He was not long left in doubt. Retief gave a few rapid orders to his men, and as he did so Lablache observed, for the first time, that the Breeds numbered at least half-a-dozen. He felt sure that not more than four besides their chief had traveled with them, and yet now the number had increased.

The obvious conclusion was that the others were already here at the time of the arrival of the buckboard, doubtless with the purpose of carrying out Retief's plans.

The Breeds moved off in various directions, and their chief and the money-lender were left alone. As soon as the others were out of earshot the raider approached his captive. His face seemed to have undergone some subtle change. The lofty air of command had been replaced by a look of bitter hatred and terrible cruelty.

"Now, Lablache," he said coldly, "I guess you're goin' to see some fun. I ain't mostly hard on people. I like to do the thing han'some. Say I'll jest roll this bar'l 'long so as you ken set. An' see hyar, ef you're mighty quiet I'll loose them hands o' yours."

Lablache deigned no reply, but the other was as good as his word.

"Sulky, some, I guess," the half-breed went on. "Wal, I'm not goin' back on my word," he added as he rolled the barrel up to his prisoner and scotched it securely. "Thar, set."

The money-lender didn't move.

"Set!" This time the word conveyed a command and the other sat down on the barrel.

"Guess I can't stand cantankerous cusses. Now, let's have a look at yer bracelets."

He sat beside his captive and proceeded to loosen the rope which bound his wrists. Then he quietly drew his pistol and rested it on his knee. Lablache enjoyed his freedom, but wondered what was coming next.

There was a moment of silence while the two men gazed at the corrals and buildings set out before them. Away to the right, on a rising ground, stood a magnificent house built of red pine lumber. Lablache had built this as a dwelling for himself. For the prairie it was palatial, and there was nothing in the country to equal it. This building alone had cost sixty thousand dollars. On a lower level there were the great barns. Four or five of these stood linked up by smaller buildings and quarters for the ranch hands. Then there was a stretch of low buildings which were the boxes built for the great man's thoroughbred stud horses. He was possessed of six such animals, and their aggregate cost ran into thousands of pounds, each one having been imported from England.

Then there were the corrals with their great ten-foot walls, all built of the finest pine logs cut from the mountain forests. These corrals covered acres of ground and were capable of sheltering five thousand head of cattle without their capacity being taxed. It was an ideal place and represented a considerable fortune. Lablache noticed that the corrals were entirely empty. He longed to ask his captor for explanation, but would not give that swarthy individual the satisfaction of imparting unpleasant information.

However, Retief did not intend to let the money-lender off lightly. The cruel expression of his face deepened as he followed the direction of Lablache's gaze.

"Fine place, this," he said, with a comprehensive nod. "Cost a pile o' dollars, I take it."

No answer.

"You ain't got much stock. Guess the boys 'ave helped themselves liberal."

Lablache turned his face towards his companion. He was fast being drawn.

"Heard 'em gassin' about twenty thousand head some days back. Guess they've borrowed 'em," he went on indifferently.

"You villain!" the exasperated prisoner hissed at last.

If ever a look conveyed a lust for murder Lablache's lashless eyes expressed it.

"Eh? What? Guess you ain't well." The icy tones mocked at the distraught captive.

The money-lender checked his wrath and struggled to keep cool.

"My cattle are on the range. You could never have driven off twenty thousand head. It would have been impossible without my hearing of it. It is more than one night's work."

"That's so," replied the half-breed, smiling sardonically. "Say, your hands and foreman are shut up in their shack. They've bin taking things easy fur a day or two. Jest to give my boys a free hand. Guess we've been at work here these three days."

The money-lender groaned inwardly. He understood the Breed's meaning only too well. At last his bottled-up rage broke out again.

"Are you man or devil that you spirit away great herds like this. Across the keg, I know, but how—how? Twenty thousand! My God, you'll swing for this night's work," he went on impotently. "The whole countryside will be after you. I am not the man to sit down quietly under such handling. If I spend every cent I'm possessed of, you shall be hounded down until you dare not show your face on this side of the border."

"Easy, boss," the Breed retorted imperturbably. "Ef you want to see that precious store o' yours again a civil tongue 'll help you best. I'm mostly a patient man—easy goin'-like. Now jest keep calm an' I'll let you see the fun. Now that's a neat shack o' yours," he went on, pointing to the money-lender's mansion. "Wonder ef I could put a dose o' lead into one o' the windows from here."

Lablache began to think he was dealing with a madman. He remained silent, and the Breed leveled his pistol in the direction of the house and fired. A moment's silence followed the sharp report. Then Retief turned to his captive.

"Guess I didn't hear any glass smash. Likely I missed it," and he chuckled fiendishly. Lablache sat gazing moodily at the building. Then the half-breed's voice roused him. "Hello, wot's that?" He was pointing at the house. "Why, some galoot's lightin' a bonfire! Say, that's dangerous Lablache. They might fire your place."

But the other did not answer. His eyes were staring wide with horror. As if in answer to the pistol-shot a fire had been lit against the side of the house. It was no ordinary fire, either, but a great pile of hay. The flames shot up with terrible swiftiness, licking up the side of the red pine house with lightning rapidity. Lablache understood. The house was to be demolished, and Retief had given the signal. He leapt up from his seat, forgetful of his bound feet, and made as though to seize the Breed by the throat. He got no further, however, for Retief gripped him by the shoulder, and, notwithstanding his great bulk, hurled him back on to the barrel, at the same time pressing the muzzle of his pistol into his face.

"Set down, you scum," he thundered. "Another move like that an' I'll let the atmosphere into yer." Then with a sudden return to his grim pastime, as the other remained quiet, "Say, red pine makes powerful fine kindlin'. I reckon they'll see that light at the settlement. You don't seem pleased, man. Ain't it a beaut. Look, they've started it the other side. Now the smoke stack's caught. Burn, burn, you beauty. Look, Lablache, a sixty thousand dollar fire, an' all yours. Ain't you proud to think that it's all yours?"

Lablache was speechless with horror. Words failed to express his feelings. The Breed watched him as a tiger might contemplate its helpless prey. He understood something of the agony the great man was suffering. He wanted him to suffer—he meant him to suffer. But he had only just begun the torture he had so carefully prepared for his victim.

Presently the roof of the building crashed in, and, for the moment, the blaze leapt high. Then, soon, it began to die down. Retief seemed to tire of watching the dying blaze. He turned again to his prisoner.

"Not 'nough, eh? Not 'nough. We can't stop here all night. Let's have the rest. The sight'll warm your heart." And he laughed at his own grim pleasantry. "The boys have cleared out your stud 'plugs.' And, I guess, yer barns are chocked full of yer wheel gearing and implements. Say, I guess we'll have 'em next."

He turned from his silent captive without waiting for reply, and rapidly discharged the remaining five barrels of his pistol. For answer another five bonfires were lighted round the barns and corals. Almost instantly the whole place became a gorgeous blaze of light. The entire ranch, with the exception of one little shack was now burning as only pine wood can burn. It was a terrible, never-to-be-forgotten sight, and Lablache groaned audibly as he saw the pride of his wealth rapidly gutted. If ever a man suffered the money-lender suffered that night Retief showed a great understanding of his prisoner—far too great an understanding for a man who was supposed to be a stranger to Lablache—in the way he set about to torture his victim. No bodily pain could have equaled the mental agony to which the usurer was submitted. The sight of the demolishing of his beautiful ranch—probably the most beautiful in the country—was a cruelly exquisite torture to the money-loving man. That dread conflagration represented the loss to him of a fortune, for, with grasping pusillanimity, Lablache had refused to insure his property. Had Retief known this he could not have served his own purpose better. Possibly he did know, and possibly that was the inducement which prompted his action. Truly was the money-lender paying dearly for past misdeeds. With the theft of his cattle and the burning of his ranch his loss was terrible, and, in his moment of anguish, he dared not attempt to calculate the extent of the catastrophe.

When the fire was at its height Retief again addressed his taunting language to the man beside him, and Lablache writhed under the lash of that scathing tongue.

"I've heerd tell you wer' mighty proud of this place of yours. Spent piles o' bills on it. Nothin' like circulatin' cash, I guess. Say now, how long did it take you to fix them shacks up?"

No answer. Lablache was beyond mere words.

"A sight longer than it takes a bit of kindlin' to fetch 'em down, I take it," he went on placidly. "When d'ye think you'll start re-building? I wonder," thoughtfully, "why they don't fire that shed yonder," pointing to the only building left untouched. "Ah, I was forgettin', that's whar your hands are enjoyin' themselves. It's thoughtful o' the boys. I guess they're good lads. They don't cotton to killin' prairie hands. But they ain't so particular over useless lumps o' flesh, I guess," with a glance at the stricken man beside him.

Lablache was gasping heavily. The mental strain was almost more than he could bear, and his crushed and hopeless attitude brought a satanic smile on the cruel face beside him.

"You don't seem to fancy things much," Retief went on. "Guess you ain't enjoyin' yerself. Brace up, pard; you won't git another sight like this fur some time. Why, wot's ailing yer?" as the barrel on which they were seated moved and Lablache nearly rolled over backwards. "I hadn't a notion yer wouldn't enjoy yerself. Say, jest look right thar. Them barns," he added, pointing, towards the fire, "was built mighty solid. They're on'y jest cavin'."

Lablache remained silent. Words, he felt, would be useless. In fact it is doubtful if he would have been equal to expression. His spirit was crushed and he feared the man beside him as he had never feared any human being before. Such was the nervous strain put upon him that the sense of his loss was rapidly absorbed in a dread for his own personal safety. The conflagration had lost its fascination for him, and at every move—every word—of his captor he dreaded the coming of his own end. It was a physical and mental collapse, and bordered closely on frenzied terror. It was no mental effort of his own that kept him from hurling himself upon the other and biting and tearing in a vain effort to rend the life out of him. The thought—the fever, desire, craving—was there, but the will, the personality, of the Breed held him spellbound, an inert mass of flesh incapable of physical effort—incapable almost of thought, but a prey to an overwhelming terror.

The watching half-breed at length rose from his seat and shrugged his thin, stooping shoulders. He had had enough of his pastime, and time was getting on. He had other work to do before daylight. He put his hand to his mouth and imitated the cry of the coyote. An instant later answering cries came from various directions, and presently the Breeds gathered round their chief.

"Say, bring up the 'plugs,' lads. The old boy's had his bellyfull. I guess we'll git on." Then he turned upon the broken money-lender and spoke while he re-charged the chambers of his pistol.

"See hyar, Lablache, this night's work is on'y a beginning. So long as you live in Foss River Settlement so long will I hunt you out an' hustle yer stock. You talked of houndin' me, but I guess the shoe's on the other foot. I ain't finished by a sight, an' you'll hear from me agin'. I don't fancy yer life," he went on with a grin. "Et's too easy, I guess. Et's yer bills I'm after. Ye've got plenty an' to spare. But bills is all-fired awk'ud to handle when they pass thro' your dirty hands. So I'll wait till you've turned 'em into stock. Savee? I'm jest goin' right on now. Thar's a bunch o' yer steers waitin' to be taken off. Happen I'm goin' to see to 'em right away. One o' these lads'll jest set some bracelets on yer hands, and leave yer tucked up and comfortable so you can't do any harm, and you can set right thar an' wait till some 'un comes along an' looses yer. So long, pard, an' remember, Foss River's the hottest place outside o' hell fur you, jest now."

Some of the half-breeds had brought up the horses whilst Retief was talking, and, as he finished speaking, the hustler vaulted on to the back of the great chestnut, Golden Eagle, and prepared to ride away. Whilst the others were getting into their saddles he took one look at the wretched captive whose hands had been again secured. There was a swift exchange of glances—malevolent and murderous on the part of the money-lender, and derisive on the part of the half-breed—then Retief swung his charger round, and, at the head of his men, galloped away out into the starry night.

CHAPTER XXI - HORROCKS LEARNS THE SECRET OF THE MUSKEG

The rope which brought Horrocks to the ground came near to strangling him. He struggled wildly as he fell, and, as he struggled, the grip of the rope tightened. He felt that the blood was ready to burst from his temples and eyes. Then everything seemed to swim about him and he believed consciousness was leaving him. Everything was done in a moment and yet he seemed to be passing through an eternity of time.

The lariat is a handy weapon, but to truly appreciate its merits one must be a prairie man. The Breeds are prairie men. They understand fully the uses to which a "rope" may be put. For criminal purposes they appreciate its silent merits, and the dexterity with which they can use it makes its value equal to, and even surpass, the noisier and more tell-tale pistol.

The next thing that the policeman knew was that he was stretched on his back upon the ground, disarmed, and with a great bandanna secured about his eyes and mouth, and his hands tied behind his back. Then a gruff voice bade him rise, and, as he silently obeyed, he was glad to feel that the gripping lariat was removed from his throat. Truly had the officer's pride gone before a fall. And his feelings were now of the deepest chagrin. He stood turning his head from side to side, blindly seeking to penetrate the bandage about his eyes. He knew where he was, of course, but he would have given half his year's salary for a sight of his assailants.

He was not given long for his futile efforts. The same rough voice which had bade him rise now ordered him to walk, and he found himself forced forward by the aid of a heavy hand which gripped one of his arms. The feeling of a blindfold walk is not a happy one, and the officer experienced a strange sensation of falling as he was urged he knew not whither. After a few steps he was again halted, and then he felt himself seized from behind and lifted bodily into a conveyance.

He quickly realized that he was in a buckboard. The slats which formed the body of it, as his feet lit upon them, told him this. Then two men jumped in after him and he found himself seated between them. And so he was driven off.

In justice to Horrocks it must be said that he experienced no fear. True, his chagrin was very great. He saw only too plainly what want of discretion he had displayed in trusting to the Breed's story, but he felt that his previous association with the rascal warranted his credulity, and the outcome must be regarded as the fortune of war. He only wondered what strange experience this blindfold journey was to forerun. There was not the least doubt in his mind as to whose was the devising of this well-laid and well-carried-out plot. Retief, he knew, must be answerable for the plan, and the method displayed in its execution plainly showed him that every detail had been carefully thought out, and administered by only too willing hands. That there was more than ordinary purpose in this blindfold journey he felt assured, and he racked his brains to discover the desperado's object. He even found time to speculate as to how it had fared with his men, only here he was even more at a loss than in the case of his own ultimate fate.

In less than half an hour from the time of his capture the buckboard drew up beside some bush. Horrocks knew it was a bluff. He could hear the rustle of the leaves as they fluttered in the gentle night air. Then he was unceremoniously hustled to the ground, and, equally unceremoniously, urged forward until his feet trod upon the stubbly, breaking undergrowth. Next he was brought to a stand and swung round, face about, his bonds were removed, and four powerful hands gripped his arms. By these he was drawn backwards until he bumped against a tree-trunk. His hands were then again made fast, but this time his arms embraced the tree behind him. In this

manner he was securely trussed.

Now from behind—his captors were well behind him—a hand reached over, and, by a swift movement, removed the bandage from before his eyes. Then, before he had time to turn his head, he heard a scrambling through the bush, and, a moment later, the sound of the creaking buckboard rapidly receding. He was left alone; and, after one swift, comprehensive survey, to his surprise, he found himself facing the wire-spreading muskeg, at the very spot where he had given up further pursuit of the cattle whose "spur" he had traced down to the brink of the viscid mire.

His astonishment rendered him oblivious to all else. He merely gazed out across that deceptive flat and wondered. Why—why had this thing been done, and what strange freak had induced the "hustler" to conceive such a form of imprisonment for his captive? Horrocks struggled with his confusion, but he failed to fathom the mystery, and never was a man's confusion worse confounded than was his.

Presently he bethought him of his bonds, and he cautiously tried them. They were quite unyielding, and, at each turn of his arms, they caused him considerable pain. The Breeds had done their work well, and he realized that he must wait the raider's pleasure. He was certain of one thing, however, which brought him a slight amount of comfort. He had been brought here for a definite purpose. Moreover, he did not believe that he was to be left here alone for long. So, with resignation induced by necessity, he possessed himself of what patience he best could summon.

How long that solitary vigil lasted Horrocks had no idea. Time, in that predicament, was to him of little account. He merely wondered and waited. He considered himself more than fortunate that his captors had seen fit to remove the bandage from his eyes. In spite of his painful captivity he felt less helpless from the fact that he could see what might be about him.

From a general survey his attention soon became riveted upon the muskeg spread out before him, and, before long, his thoughts turned to the secret path which he knew, at some point near by, bridged the silent horror. All about him was lit by the starry splendor of the sky. The scent of the redolent grass of the great keg hung heavily upon the air and smelt sweet in his nostrils. He could see the ghostly outline of the distant peaks of the mountains, he could hear the haunting cries of nightfowl and coyote; but these things failed to interest him. Familiarity with the prairie made them, to him, commonplace. The path—the secret of the great keg. That was the absorbing thought which occupied his waiting moments. He felt that its discovery would more than compensate for any blunders he had made. He strained his keen eyes as he gazed at the tall waving grass of the mire, as though to tear from the bosom of the awful swamp the secret it so jealously guarded. He slowly surveyed its dark surface, almost inch by inch, in the hopes of discovering the smallest indication or difference which might lead to the desired end.

There was nothing in what he saw to guide him, nothing which offered the least suggestion of a path. In the darkness the tall waving grass took a nondescript hue which reached unbroken for miles around. Occasionally the greensward seemed to ripple in the breeze, like water swayed by a soft summer zephyr, but beyond this the outlook was uniform—darkly mysterious—inscrutable.

His arms cramped under the pressure of the restraining bonds and he moved uneasily. Now and again the rustling of the leaves overhead caused him to listen keenly. Gradually his fancy became slightly distorted, and, as time passed, the sounds which had struck so familiarly upon his ears, and which had hitherto passed unheeded, began to get upon his nerves.

By-and-by he found himself listening eagerly for the monotonous repetition of the prairie scavenger's dismal howl, and as the cries recurred they seemed to grow in power and become more plaintively horrible. Now, too, the sighing of the breeze drew more keen attention from the imprisoned man, and fancy magnified it into the sound of many approaching feet. These matters were the effect of solitude. At such times nerves play curious pranks.

In spite of his position, in spite of his anxiety of mind, the police-officer began to grow drowsy. The long night's vigil was telling, and nature rebelled, as she always will rebel when sleep is refused and bodily rest is unobtainable. A man may pace his bedroom for hours with the unmitigated pain of toothache. Even while the pain is almost unendurable his eyes will close and he will continue his peregrinations with tottering gait, awake, but with most of his faculties drowsily faltering. Horrocks found his head drooping forward, and, even against his will, his eyes would close. Time and again he pulled himself together, only the next instant to catch himself dozing off again.

Suddenly, however, he was electrified into life. He was awake now, and all drowsiness had vanished. A sound—distant, rumbling, but distinct—had fallen upon his, for the moment, dulled ears. For awhile it likened to the far-off growl of thunder, blending with a steady rush of wind. But it was not passing. The sound remained and grew steadily louder. A minute passed—then another and then another. Horrocks stared in the direction, listening with almost painful intensity. As the rumbling grew, and the sound became more distinct, a light of intelligence crept into the prisoner's face. He heard and recognized.

"Cattle!" he muttered, and in that pronouncement was an inflection of joy. "Cattle—and moving at a great pace."

He was alert now, as alert as he had ever been in his life. Was he at last going to discover the coveted secret? Cattle traveling fast at this time of night, and in the vicinity of the great keg.

What could it mean? To his mind there could only be one construction which he could reasonably put upon the circumstance. The cattle were being "hustled," and the hustler must be the half-breed Retief.

Then, like a douche of cold water, followed the thought that he had been purposely made a prisoner at the edge of the muskeg. Surely he was not to be allowed to see the cattle pass over the mire and then be permitted to go free. Even Retief in his wildest moments of bravado could not meditate so reckless a proceeding. No, there was some subtle purpose underlying this new development—possibly the outcome was to be far more grim than he had supposed. He waited horrified, at his own thoughts, but fascinated in spite of himself.

The sound grew rapidly and Horrocks's face remained turned in the direction from which it proceeded. He fancied, even in the uncertain light, that he could see the distant crowd of beasts silhouetted against the sky-line. His post of imprisonment was upon the outskirts of the bush, and he had a perfect and uninterrupted view of the prairie along the brink of the keg, both to the north and south.

It was his fancy, however, which designed the silhouette, and he soon became aware that the herd was nearer than he had supposed. The noise had become a continuous roar as the driven beasts came on, and he saw them loom towards him a black patch on the dark background of the dimly-lit prairie. The bunch was large, but his straining eyes as yet could make no estimate of its numbers. He could see several herders, but these, too, were as yet beyond recognition.

Yet another surprise was in store for the waiting man. So fixed had his attention been upon the on-coming cattle that he had not once removed his eyes from the direction of their approach. Now, however, a prolonged bellow to the right of him caused him to turn abruptly. To his utter astonishment he saw, not fifty yards from him, a solitary horseman leading a couple of steers by ropes affixed to their horns. He wondered how long this strange apparition had been there. The horse was calmly nibbling at the grass, and the man was quietly resting himself with elbows propped upon the horn of his saddle. He, too, appeared to be gazing in the direction of the on-coming cattle. Horrocks tried hard to distinguish the man's appearance, but the light was too uncertain to give him more than the vaguest idea of his personality.

The horse seemed to be black or very dark brown. And the general outline of the rider was that of a short slight man, with rather long hair which flowed from beneath the brim of his Stetson hat. The most curious distinguishable feature was his slowness. The horse was big and the man, was so small that, as he sat astride of his charger, he looked to be little more than a boy of fifteen or sixteen.

Horrocks's survey was cut short, however, for now the herd of cattle was tearing down upon him at a desperate racing pace. He saw the solitary rider gather up his lines and move his horse further away from the edge of the muskeg. Then the herd of cattle came along. They raced past the bluff where the officer was stationed, accompanied by four swarthy drivers, one of which was mounted upon a great chestnut horse whose magnificent stride and proportions fixed the captive's attention. He had heard of "Golden Eagle," and he had no doubt in his mind that this was he and the rider was the celebrated cattle-thief. The band and its drovers swept by, and Horrocks estimated that the cattle numbered many hundreds.

After awhile he heard the sound of voices. Then the beasts were driven back again over their tracks, only at a more gentle pace. Several times the performance was gone through, and each time, as they passed him, Horrocks noticed that their pace was decreased, until by the sixth time they passed their gait had become a simple mouche, and they leisurely nipped up the grass as they went, with bovine unconcern. It was a masterly display of how cattle can be handled, and Horrocks forgot for a while his other troubles in his interest in the spectacle.

After passing him for the sixth time the cattle came to a halt; and then the strangest part of this strange scene was enacted. The horseman with the led steers, whom, by this time, Horrocks had almost forgotten, came leisurely upon the field of action. No instructions were given. The whole thing was done in almost absolute silence. It seemed as if long practice had perfected the method of procedure.

The horseman advanced to the brink of the muskeg, exactly opposite to the bluff where the captive was tied, and with him the two led steers. Horrocks held his breath—his excitement was intense. The swarthy drivers roused the tired cattle and headed them towards the captive steers. Horrocks saw the boyish rider urge his horse fearlessly on to the treacherous surface of the keg. The now docile and exhausted cattle followed leisurely. There was no undue bustle or haste. It was a veritable "follow my leader." Where it was good enough for the captive leaders to go it was good enough for the weary beasts to follow, and so, as the boy rider moved forward, the great herd followed in twos and threes. The four drivers remained until the end, and then, as the last steer set foot on the dreadful mire, they too joined in the silent procession.

Horrocks exerted all his prairie instinct as he watched the course of that silent band. He was committing to memory, as far as he was capable, the direction of the path across the keg, for, when opportunity offered, he was determined to follow up his discovery and attempt the journey himself. He fancied in his own secret heart that Retief had at last overreached himself, and in thus giving away his secret he was paving the way to his own capture.

It was not long before the cattle and their drivers passed out of sight, but Horrocks continued to watch, so that he should lose no chance detail of interest. At length, however, he found that his

straining gaze was useless, and all further interest passed out of his lonely vigil.

Now he busied himself with plans for his future movements, when he should once more be free. And in such thought the long night passed, and the time drew on towards dawn.

The surprises of the night were not yet over, however, for just before the first streaks of daylight shot athwart the eastern sky he saw two horsemen returning across the muskeg. He quickly recognized them as being the raider himself and the boyish rider who had led the cattle across the mire. They came across at a good pace, and as they reached the bank the officer was disgusted to see the boy ride off in a direction away from the settlement, and the raider come straight towards the bluff. Horrocks was curious about the boy who seemed so conversant with the path across the mire, and was anxious to have obtained a clearer view of him.

The raider drew his horse up within a few yards of the captive. Horrocks had a good view of the man's commanding, eagle face. In spite of himself he could not help but feel a strange admiration for this lawless Breed.

There was something wonderfully fascinating and lofty in the hustler's direct, piercing gaze as, proudly disdainful, he looked down upon his discomfited prisoner.

He seemed in no hurry to speak. A shadowy smile hovered about his face as he eyed the officer. Then he turned away and looked over to the eastern horizon. He turned back again and drawled out a greeting. It was not cordial but it was characteristic of him.

"Wal?"

Horrocks made no reply. The Breed laughed mockingly, and leant forward upon the horn of his saddle.

"Guess you've satisfied your curiosity—some. Say, the boys didn't handle you too rough, I take it. I told 'em to go light."

Horrocks was constrained to retort.

"Not so rough as you'll be handled when you get the law about you."

"Now I call that unfriendly. Guess them's gopher's words. But say, pard, the law ain't got me yet. Wot d'ye think of the road across the keg? Mighty fine trail that." He laughed as though enjoying a good joke.

Horrocks felt that he must terminate this interview. The Breed had a most provoking way with him. His self-satisfaction annoyed his hearer.

"How much longer do you intend to keep me here?" Horrocks exclaimed bitterly. "I suppose you mean murder; you'd better get on with it and stop gassing. Men of your kidney don't generally take so much time over that sort of business."

Retief seemed quite unruffled.

"Murder? Why, man, I didn't bring you here to murder you. Guess ef I'd a notion that way you'd 'a' been done neat long ago. No, I jest wanted to show you what you wanted to find out. Now I'm goin' to let you go, so you, an' that skunk Lablache'll be able to chin-wag over this night's doin's. That's wot I'm here fer right now."

As he finished speaking the Breed circled Golden Eagle round behind the tree, and, bending low down from the saddle, he cut the rope which held the policeman's wrists. Horrocks, feeling himself freed, stepped quickly from the bush into the open, and faced about towards his liberator. As he did so he found himself looking up into the muzzle of Retief's revolver. He stood his ground unflinchingly.

"Now, see hyar, pard," said Retief, quietly, "I've a mighty fine respect for you. You ain't the cuckoo that many o' yer mates is. You've got grit, anyway. But that ain't all you need. 'Savee's' a mighty fine thing—on occasions. Now you need 'Savee.' I'll jest give yer a piece of advice right hyar. You go straight off down to Lablache's ranch. You'll find him thar. An' pesky uncomfortable you'll find him. You ken set him free, also his ranch boys, an' when you've done that jest make tracks for Stormy Cloud an' don't draw rein till you git thar. Ef ever you see Retief on one trail, jest hit right off on to another. That's good sound sense right through fur you. Say, work on that, an' you ain't like to come to no harm. But I swear, right hyar, ef you an' me ever come to close quarters I'll perforate you—'less you git the drop on me. An' to do that'll keep you humpin'. So long, pard. It's jest gettin' daylight, ah' I don't calc'late to slouch around hyar when the sun's shinin'. Don't go fur to forget my advice. I don't charge nothin' fur it, but it's good, pard—real good, for all that. So long."

He swung his horse round, and before Horrocks had time to collect himself, much less to speak, he was almost out of sight.

Half dazed and still wondering at the strangeness of the desperate Breed's manner he mechanically began to walk slowly in the direction of the Foss River Settlement.

CHAPTER XXII - THE DAY AFTER

Morning broke over a disturbed and restless community at Foss River. The chief residents who were not immediately concerned in the arrest of Retief—only deeply interested, and therefore skeptical—had gone to bed over-night eager for the morning light to bring them news. Their broken slumbers ceased as daylight broadened into sunrise, and, without waiting for their morning coffee, the majority set out to gather the earliest crumbs of news obtainable. There were others, of course, who were not in the know, or, at least, had only heard vague rumors. These were less interested, and therefore failed to rise so early.

Amongst the earliest abroad was Doctor Abbot. Aunt Margaret's interest was not sufficient to drag her from her downy couch thus early, but, with truly womanly logic, she saw no reason why the doctor should not glean for her the information she required. Therefore the doctor rose and shivered under the lightness of his summer apparel in the brisk morning air.

The market-place, upon which the doctor's house looked, was almost deserted when he passed out of his door. He glanced quickly around for some one whom he might recognize. He saw that the door of "Lord" Bill's shack was open, but it was too far off for him to see whether that lazy individual was yet up. A neche was leisurely cleaning up round Lablache's store, whilst the local butcher was already busy swabbing out the little shed which did duty for his shop. As yet there was no other sign of life abroad, and Doctor Abbot prepared to walk across to the butcher for a gossip, and thus wait for some one else to come along.

He stepped briskly from his house, for he was "schrammed" with cold in his white drill clothing. As he approached the energetic butcher, he saw a man entering the market-place from the southern extremity of the settlement. He paused to look closely at the new-comer. In a moment he recognized Thompson, one of the clerks from Lablache's store. He conjectured at once that this man might be able to supply him with the information he desired, and so changed his direction and went across to meet him.

"Mornin', Thompson," he said, peering keenly into the pale, haggard face of the money-lender's employee. "What's up with you? You look positively ill. Have you heard how the arrest went off last night?"

There was a blunt directness about the doctor which generally drove straight to the point. The clerk wearily passed his hand across his forehead. He seemed half asleep, and, as the doctor had asserted, thoroughly ill.

"Arrest, doctor? Precious little arrest there's been. I've been out on the prairie all night. What, haven't you heard about the governor? Good lor'! I don't know what's going to happen to us all. Do you think we're safe here?"

"Safe here? What do you mean, man?" the doctor answered, noting the other's fearful glances round. "Why, what ails you? What about Lablache?"

Others had now appeared upon the market-place and Doctor Abbot saw "Lord" Bill, dressed in a gray tweed suit, and looking as fresh as if he had just emerged from the proverbial bandbox, coming leisurely towards him.

"What about Lablache, eh?" replied Thompson, echoing the doctor's question ruefully. "A pretty nice thing Horrocks and his fellows have let themselves, and us, in for."

Bill had come up now and several others had joined the group. They stood by and listened while the clerk told his story. And what a story it was too. It was vividly sanguinary, and enough to strike terror into the hearts of his audience.

He told with great gusto of how Lablache had been abducted. How the police horses and the money-lender's had been stolen from the stables at the store. He dwelt on the frightful horrors committed up at the Breed camp. How he had seen the police shot down before his very eyes, and he became expansive on the fact that, with his own hands, Retief had carried off Horrocks, and how he had heard the raider declare his intention of hanging him. It was a terrible tale of woe, and his audience was thrilled and horrified. "Lord" Bill alone appeared unmoved. A close observer even might have noticed the faintest suspicion of a smile at the corners of his mouth. The smile broadened as the sharp doctor launched a question at the narrator of terrible facts.

"How came you to see all this, and escape?"

Thompson was at no loss. He told how he had been sent up by "Poker" John to find Horrocks and tell him about Lablache. How he arrived in time to see the horrors perpetrated, and how he only managed to escape with his own life by flight, under cover of the darkness, and how, pursued by the bloodthirsty Breeds, he had managed to hide on the prairie, where he remained until daylight, and then by a circuitous route got back to the settlement.

"I tell you what it is, doctor," he finished up consequentially, "the Breeds are in open rebellion, and, headed by that devil, Retief, intend to clear us whites out of the country. It's the starting of another Riel rebellion, and if we don't get help from the Government quickly, it's all up with us. That's my opinion," and he gazed patronizingly upon the crowd, which by this time had assembled.

"Nonsense, man," said the doctor sharply. "Your opinion's warped. Besides, you're in a blue funk.

Come on over to 'old man' Smith's and have a 'freshener.' You want bucking-up. Coming, Bill?" he went on, turning to Bunning-Ford. "I want an 'eye-opener' myself. What say to a 'Collins'?"

The three moved away from the crowd, which they left horrified at what it had heard, and eagerly discussing and enlarging upon the sanguinary stories of Thompson.

"Poker" John was already at the saloon when the three reached the door of "old man" Smith's reeking den. The proprietor was sweeping the bar, in a vain effort to clear the atmosphere of the nauseating stench of stale tobacco and drink. John was propped against the bar mopping up his fourth "Collins." He usually had a thirst that took considerable quenching in the mornings now. His over-night potations were deep and strong. Morning "nibbling" had consequently become a disease with him. "Old man" Smith, with a keen eye to business, systematically mixed the rancher's morning drinks good and strong.

Bill and the doctor were not slow to detect the condition of their old friend, and each felt deeply on the subject. Their cheery greetings, however, were none the less hearty. Smith desisted in his dusty occupation and proceeded to serve his customers.

"We're having lively times, John," said the doctor, after emptying his "long sleever." "Guess Retief's making things 'hum' in Foss River."

"Hum? Shout is more like it," drawled Bill. "You've heard all the news, John?"

"I've enough news of my own," growled the rancher.

"Been up all night. I see you've got Thompson with you. What did Horrocks do after you told him about Lablache?" he went on, turning to the clerk.

Bill and the doctor exchanged meaning glances. The clerk having found a fresh audience again repeated his story. "Poker" John listened carefully. At the close of the narrative he snorted disdainfully and looked from the clerk to his two friends. Then he laughed loudly. The clerk became angry.

"Excuse me, Mr. Allandale, but if you doubt my word—"

"Doubt your word, boy?" he said, when his mirth had subsided. "I don't doubt your word. Only I've spent most of the night up at the Breed camp myself."

"And were you there, sir, when Horrocks was captured?"

"No, I was not. After you came to my place and went on to the camp, I was very uneasy. So, after a bit, I got my 'hands' together and prepared to follow you up there. Just as I was about to set out," he went on, turning to the doctor and Bill, "I met Jacky coming in. Bless you if she hadn't been to see the pusky herself. You know," with a slight frown, "that child is much too fond of those skulking Breeds. Well, anyway, she said everything was quiet enough while she was there and," turning again to Thompson, "she had seen nothing of Retief or Horrocks or any of the latter's men. We just put our heads together, and she convinced me that I was right, after what had occurred at the store, and had better go up. So up I went. We searched the whole camp. I guess we were there for nigh on three hours. The place was quiet enough. They were still dancing and drinking, but not a blessed sign of Horrocks could we find."

"I expect he'd gone before you got there, sir," put in Thompson.

"Did you find the bodies of the murdered police?" asked the doctor innocently.

"Not a sign of 'em," laughed John. "There were no dead policemen, and, what's more, there was no trace of any shooting."

The three men turned on the clerk, who felt that he must justify himself.

"There was shooting enough, sir; you mark my words. You'll hear of it to-day, sure."

"Lord" Bill walked away towards the window in disgust. The clerk annoyed him.

"No, boy, no. I'm thinking you are mistaken. I should have discovered some trace had there been any shooting. I don't deny that your story's true, but in the excitement of the moment I guess you got rattled—and saw things."

Old John laughed and turned away. At that instant Bill called them all over to the window. The bar window overlooked the market-place, and the front of Lablache's store was almost opposite to it.

Bill pointed towards the store as the three men gathered round. "Old man" Smith also ranged himself with the others.

"Look!" Bill smiled grimly.

A buckboard had just drawn up outside Lablache's emporium and two people were alighting. A crowd had gathered round the arrivals. There was no mistaking one of the figures. The doctor was the first to give expression to the thought that was in the mind of each of the interested spectators.

"Lablache!" he exclaimed in astonishment

"And Horrocks," added "Lord" Bill quietly.

"Guess he wasn't hung then after all," said "Poker" John, turning as he spoke. But Thompson had taken his departure. This last blow was too much. And he felt that it was an advantageous moment in which to retire to his employer's store, and hide his diminished head amongst the bales of dry goods and the monumental ledgers to be found there.

"That youth has a considerable imagination." The Hon. Bunning-Ford turned from the window and strolled leisurely towards the door.

"Where are you going?" exclaimed "Poker" John.

"To cook some breakfast."

"No, no, you must come up to the ranch with me. Let's go right over to the store first, and hear what Lablache has to say. Then we'll go and feed."

Bill shrugged. Then,—

"Lablache and I are not on the best of terms," he said doubtfully. He wished to go notwithstanding his demur. Besides he was anxious to go on to the ranch to see Jacky. The doubt in his tone gave John his cue, and the old man refused to be denied.

"Come along," he said, and linking his arm within the other's, he led the way over to the store; the doctor, equally eager, bringing up the rear.

Bill suffered himself to be thus led. He knew that in such company Lablache could not very well refuse him admission to his office. He had a decided wish to be present when the money-lender told his tale. However, in this he was doomed to disappointment. Lablache had already decided upon a plan of action.

At the store the three friends made their way through the crowd of curious people who had gathered on the unexpected return of the chief actors in last night's drama; they made their way quickly round to the back where the private door was.

Lablache was within, and with him Horrocks. The heavy voice of the money-lender answered "Poker" John's summons.

"Come in."

He was surprised when the door opened, and he saw who his visitors were. John and the doctor he was prepared for, but "Lord" Bill's coming was a different matter. For an instant he seriously meditated an angry objection. Then he altered his mind, a thing which was rare with him. After all the man's presence could do no harm, and he felt that to object to him, would be to quarrel with the rancher. On second thoughts he would tolerate what he considered the intrusion.

Lablache was ensconced in his basket chair, and Horrocks was at the great man's desk. Neither moved as their visitors entered. The troubles of the previous night were plainly written on both men's faces. There was a haggard look in their eyes, and a generally dishevelled appearance about their dress. Lablache in particular looked unwashed and untidy. Horrocks looked less troubled, and there was a strong air of determination about his face.

"Poker" John showed no niceness in broaching the subject of his visit. His libations had roused him to the proper pitch for plain speaking.

"Well, what happened to you last night, Lablache? I guess you're looking about as blue as they make 'em. Say, I thought sure Retief was going to do for you when I heard about it."

"Ah. Who told you about—about me?"

"Your clerk."

"Rodgers?"

"No, Thompson."

"Ah! Have you seen Rodgers at all?"

"No." John turned to the other two. "Have you?"

Neither of the men had seen the clerk, and old John turned again to Lablache.

"Why, what's happened to Rodgers?"

"Oh, nothing. I haven't seen him since I have been back—that's all."

"Well, now tell us all about last night," went on the rancher. "This matter is going to be cleared up. I have been thinking of a vigilance committee. We can't do better."

Lablache shook his great head. To the doctor and "Lord" Bill there seemed to be an utter hopelessness conveyed in the motion.

"I have nothing to tell. Neither has Horrocks. What happened last night concerns ourselves alone. You may possibly hear more later on, but the telling by us now will do no good, and probably a lot of harm. As for your vigilance committee, form it if you like, but I doubt that you will do any good

with it."

This refusal riled the old rancher. He was just in that condition when it would take little to make him quarrel. He was about to rap out an angry retort when a knock came at the partition door. It was Thompson. He had come to say that the troopers had returned, and wanted to see the sergeant. Also to say that Rodgers was with them. Horrocks immediately went out to see them, and, before John could say a word, Lablache turned on him.

"Look here, John, for the present my lips are sealed. It is Horrocks's wish. He has a plan which he wishes to carry out quietly. The result of his plan largely depends upon silence. Retief seems to have sources of information everywhere. Walls have ears, man. Now, I shall be glad if you will leave me. I—I must get cleaned up."

John's anger died within him. He saw that Lablache was upset. He looked absolutely ill. The old man's good nature would not allow him to press this companion of his ranching life further. There was nothing left for him to do but leave.

As he rose to go, the money-lender unbent still further.

"I'll see you later, John, I may then be able to tell you more. Perhaps it may interest you to know that Horrocks has discovered the path across the keg, and—he's going to cross it. Good-by. So long, Doc."

"Very well, I shall be up at the ranch. Come along, Bill. Jacky, I expect, is waiting breakfast for us."

Lablache heard the old man's remark as the latter passed out, and a bitter feeling of resentment rose within him. He felt that everything was against him. His evil nature, however, would not let him remain long desponding. He ground his teeth and cursed bitterly. It had only wanted a fillip such as this to rouse him from the curious lethargic hopelessness into which the terrible night's doings had cast him.

The moment the three men got away from the store, Doctor Abbot drew attention to the money-lender's words.

"Going to cross the keg, eh? Well, if he's really discovered the path it's certainly the best thing to do. He's a sharp man is Horrocks."

"He's a fool!"

Bill's words were so emphatic that both men stared at him. If they were startled at his words, they were still more startled at the set expression of his face. Doctor Abbot thought he had never seen the *insouciant* Bill so roused out of himself.

"Why—how?"

"How? I tell you, man, that no one knows that path except—except—Retief, and, supposing Horrocks has discovered it, if he attempts to cross, there can only be one result to his mad folly. I tell you what it is, the man should be stopped. It's absolute suicide—nothing more nor less."

Something in the emphasis of "Lord" Bill's words kept the others silent until the doctor left them at his home. Then as the two men hurried out across the prairie towards the ranch, the conversation turned back to the events of the previous evening.

At the ranch they found Jacky awaiting the old man's return, on the veranda. She was surprised when she saw who was with him. Her surprise was a pleasant one, however, and she extended her hand in cordial welcome.

"Come right in, Bill. Gee, but you look fit—and slick."

The two young people smiled into each other's faces, and no onlooker, not even the observant Aunt Margaret, could have detected the understanding which passed in that look. Jacky was radiant. Her sweet, dark face was slightly flushed. There were no tell-tale rings about her dark eyes. For all sign she gave to the contrary she might have enjoyed the full measure of a night's rest. Her visit to the Breed camp, or, for that matter, any other adventures which had befallen her during the night, had left no trace on her beautiful face.

"I've brought the boy up to feed," said old John. "I guess we'll get right to it. I've got a 'twist' on me that'll take considerable to satisfy."

The meal passed pleasantly enough. The conversation naturally was chiefly confined to the events of the night. But somehow the others did not respond very eagerly to the old rancher's evident interest and concern. Most of the talking—most of the theorizing—most of the suggestions for the stamping out of the scourge, Retief, came from him, the others merely contenting themselves with agreeing to his suggestions with a lack of interest which, had the old man been perfectly sober, he could not have failed to observe. However, he was especially obtuse this morning, and was too absorbed in his own impracticable theories and suggestions to notice the others' lack of interest.

At the conclusion of the meal the rancher took himself off down to the settlement again. He must endeavor to draw Lablache, he said. He would not wait for him to come to the ranch.

Jacky and Bill went out on to the veranda, and watched the old man as he set out with unsteady gait for the settlement.

"Bill," said the girl, as soon as her uncle was out of earshot, "what news?"

"Two items of interest One, the very best, and the other—the very worst."

"Which means?"

"No one has the least suspicion of us; and Horrocks, the madman, intends to attempt the passage of the keg."

"Lord" Bill jaws shut with a snap as he ceased speaking. The look which accompanied his last announcement was one of utter dejection. Jacky did not reply for an instant, her great eyes had taken on a look of deep anxiety as she gazed towards the muskeg.

"Bill, can nothing be done to stop him?" She gazed appealingly up into the face of the tall figure beside her. "He is a brave man, if foolish."

"That's just it, dear. He's headstrong and means to see this thing through. Had I thought that he would ever dream of contemplating such a suicidal feat as attempting that path, I'd never have let him see the cattle cross last night. My God! it turns me sick to think of it."

"Hush, Bill, don't talk so loud. Do you think any one could dissuade him? Lablache, or—or uncle, for instance."

Bunning-Ford shook his head. His look was troubled.

"Horrocks is not the man to be turned from his purpose," he replied. "And besides, Lablache would not attempt such a thing. He is too keen to capture—Relief," with a bitter laugh. "A life more or less would not upset that scoundrel's resolve. As for your uncle," with a shrug, "I don't think he's the man for the task. No, Jacky," he went on, with a sigh, "we must let things take their course now. We have embarked on this business. We mustn't weaken. His blood be upon his own head."

They relapsed into silence for some moments. "Lord" Bill lit a cigarette, and leant himself against one of the veranda posts. He was worried at the turn events had taken. He had no grudge against Horrocks; the man was but doing his duty. But his meditated attempt he considered to be an exaggerated sense of that duty. Presently he spoke again.

"Jacky—do you know, I feel that somehow the end of this business is approaching. What the end is to be I cannot foretell. One thing, however, is clear. Sooner or later we must run foul of people, and when that occurs—well," throwing his cigarette from him viciously, "it simply means shooting. And—"

"Yes, Bill, I know what you would say. Shooting means killing, killing means murder, and murder means swinging. You're right, but," and the girl's eyes began to blaze, "before that, Lablache must go under. Whatever happens, Bill, before we decorate any tree with our bodies, if our object is not already obtained, I'll shoot him with my own pistol. I guess we're embarked on a game that we're going to see through."

"That's so. We'll see it through. Do you know what stock we've taken, all told? Close on twenty thousand head, and—all Lablache's. They're snug over at 'Bad Man's' Hollow, and a tidy fine bunch they are. The division with the boys is a twentieth each, and the balance is ours. Our share is ten thousand." He ceased speaking. Then presently he went on, harking back to the subject of Horrocks. "I wish that man could be stayed. His failure must precipitate matters. Should he drown, as he surely will, the whole countryside will join in the hue and cry. It is only his presence here that keeps the settlers in check. Well, so be it. It's a pity. But I'm not going to swing. They'll never take me alive."

"If it comes to that, Bill, you'll not be alone, I guess. You can gamble your soul, when it comes to open warfare I'm with you, an' I guess I can shoot straight."

Bill looked at the girl in astonishment. He noted the keen deep eyes, the set little mouth. The fearless expression on her beautiful face. Her words had fairly taken his breath away, but he saw that she had meant what she said.

"No, no, girlie. No one will suspect you. Besides, this is my affair. You have your uncle."

"Say, boy, I love my uncle—I love him real well. I'm working for him, we both are—and we'll work for him to the last. But our work together has taught me something, Bill, and when I cotton to teaching there's nothing that can knock what I learn out of my head. I've just learned to love you, Bill. And, as the Bible says, old Uncle John's got to take second place. That's all. If you go under—well, I guess I'll go under too."

Jacky gave her lover no chance to reply. As he opened his lips to expostulate and took a step towards her she darted away, and disappeared into the sitting-room. He followed her in, but the room was empty.

He paused. Then a smile spread over his face.

"I don't fancy we shall go under, little woman," he muttered, "at least, not if I can help it."

He turned back to the veranda and strolled away towards the settlement.

CHAPTER XXIII - THE PAW OF THE CAT

Lablache was alone. Horrocks had left him to set out on his final effort to discover Retief's hiding-place. The great man was eagerly waiting for his return. Evening was drawing on and the officer had not yet put in an appearance, neither had the money-lender received any word from him. In consequence he was beginning to hope that Horrocks had succeeded.

All day the wretched man had been tortured by horrid fears. And, as time passed and evening drew on, his mood became almost a panic. The money-lender was in a deplorable state of mind; his nerves were shaken, and he was racked by a dread of he scarce knew what. What he had gone through the night before had driven him to the verge of mental collapse. No bodily injury could have thus reduced him; for, whatever might have been his failings, physical cowardice was not amongst the number. Any moral weakness which might have been his had been so obscured by long years of success and prosperity, that no one knowing him would have believed him to be so afflicted. No, in spite of his present condition Lablache was a strong man.

But the frightful mental torture he had endured at Retief's hands had told its tale. The attack of the last twenty-four hours had been made against him alone; at least, so Lablache understood it. Retief's efforts were only in his direction; the raider had robbed him of twenty thousand head of cattle; he had burnt his beautiful ranch out, in sheer wantonness it seemed to the despairing man; what then would be his next move if he were not stopped? What else was there of his—Lablache's—that the Breed could attack? His store—yes—yes; his store! That was all that was left of his property in Foss River. And then—what then? There was nothing after that, except, perhaps—except his life.

Lablache stirred in his seat and wheezed heavily as he arrived at this conclusion. His horrified thoughts were expressed in the look of fear that was in his lashless eyes.

His life—yes! That must be the raider's culminating object. Or would he leave him that, so that he might further torture him by burning him out of Calford. He pondered fearfully, and hard, practical as was his nature, the money-lender allowed his imagination to run riot over possibilities which surely his cooler judgment would have scoffed at.

Lablache rose hurriedly from his chair. It only wanted a quarter to five. Putting his head through the partition doorway he ordered his astonished clerks to close up. He felt that he could not—dare not keep the store open longer. Then he inspected the private door of his office. The spring catch was fast. He locked his safe. All the time he moved about fearfully—like some hunted criminal. At last he returned to his seat. His bilious eyes roved over the various objects in the room. A hunted look was in them. His mind seemed fixed on one thought alone—the coming of Retief.

After this he grew more calm. Perhaps the knowledge that the store was secure now against any intruder helped to steady his nerves. Then he started—was the store secure? He rose again and went to the window to put up the shutter. He gazed out towards the Foss River Ranch, and, as he gazed, he saw some one riding fast towards the settlement.

The horseman came nearer; the sight fascinated the great man. Now the traveler had reached the market place, and was coming on towards the store. Suddenly the money-lender recognized in the horseman one of Horrocks's troopers, mounted on a horse from John Allandale's stable. A wild hope leapt up in his heart. Then, as the man drew nearer and Lablache saw the horrified expression of his face, hope went from him, and he feared the worst.

The clatter of hoofs ceased outside the office door. Lablache stepped heavily forward and threw it open. He stood framed in the doorway as the man gasped out his terrible news.

"He's drowned, sir, drowned before our eyes. We tried, but couldn't save him. He would go, sir; we tried to persuade him, but he would go. No more than fifty yards from the bank, and then down he went. He was out of sight in two minutes. It was horrible, sir, and him never uttered a sound. I'm going in to Stormy Cloud to report an' get instructions. Anything I can do, sir?"

So the worst was realized. For the moment the money-lender could find no words. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. His last hope—the last barrier between him and the man whom he considered his arch enemy, Retief, seemed to have been shattered. He thought not of the horror of the policeman's drowning; he felt no sorrow at the reckless man's ghastly end. He merely thought of himself. He saw only how the man's death affected his personal interests. At last he gurgled out some words. He scarce knew what he said.

"There's nothing to be done. Yes—no—yes, you'd better go up to the Allandales," he went on uncertainly. "They'll send a rescue party."

The trooper dashed off and Lablache securely fastened the door. Then he put the shutter over the window, and, notwithstanding that it was broad daylight still, he lit the lamp.

Once more he returned to his protesting chair, into which he almost fell. To him this last

catastrophe was as the last straw. What was now to become of the settlement; what was to become of him? Horrocks gone; the troopers withdrawn, or, at least, without a guiding hand, what might Retief not be free to do while the settlement awaited the coming of a fresh detachment of police. He impotently cursed the raider. The craven weakness, induced by his condition of nervous prostration, was almost pitiable. All the selfishness which practically monopolized his entire nature displayed itself in his terror. He cared nothing for others. He believed that Retief was at war with him alone. He believed that the raider sought only his wealth—his wealth which his years of hard work and unscrupulous methods had laboriously piled up—the wealth he loved and lived for—the wealth which was to him as a god. He thought of all he had already lost. He counted it up in thousands, and his eyes grew wide with horror and despair as the figures mounted up, up, until they represented a great fortune.

The long-suffering chair creaked under him as he flung himself back in it, his pasty, heavy-jowled face was ghastly under the lash of despairing thought. Only a miser, one of those wretched creatures who live only for the contemplation of their hoarded wealth, could understand the feelings of the miserable man as he lay back in his chair.

The man who had thus reduced the money-lender must have understood his nature as did the inquisitors of old understand the weaknesses of their victims. For surely he could have found no other vulnerable spot in the great man's composition.

The first shock of the trooper's news began to pass. Lablache's mind began to balance itself again. Such a state of nerves as was his could not last and the man remain sane. Possibly the thought that he was still a rich man came to his aid. Possibly the thought of hundreds of thousands of dollars sunk in perfect securities, in various European centers, toned down the grievousness of his losses. Whatever it was he grew calmer, and with calmness his scheming nature reasserted itself.

He moved from his seat and helped himself liberally to the whisky which was in his cabinet. He needed the generous spirit, and drank it off at a gulp. His chair behind him creaked. He started. His ashen face became more ghastly in its hue. He looked round fearfully. Then he understood, and he wheezed heavily. Once more he sat himself down, and the warming spirit steadily did its work.

Suddenly his mind leapt forward, as it were, from its stagnatory condition of abject fear. It traveled swiftly, urged by a pursuing dread over plans for the future. The guiding star of his thought was safety. At all costs he must find safety for his property and himself. So long as Retief was at large there could be no safety for him in Foss River. He must get away. He must get away, bearing with him the fruits which yet remained to him of his life's toil. He had contemplated retiring before. His retirement from business would mean ruin to many of those who had borrowed from him he knew, and to those on whose property he held mortgages as security. But that could not be helped. He was not going to allow himself to suffer through what he considered any humanitarian weakness. Yes, he would retire—get away from the reach of Retief and his companions, and—ah!

His thoughts merged into another channel—a channel which, under the stress of his terrors, had for the moment been obscured. He suddenly thought of the Allandales. Here for the instant was a stumbling block. Or should he renounce his passion for Jacky? He drummed thoughtfully with his finger-tips upon the arms of his chair.

No, why should he give her up? Something of his old nerve was returning. He held all the cards. He knew he could, by foreclosing, ruin "Poker" John. Why should he give the girl up, and see her calmly secured by that cursed Bunning-Ford? His bilious eyes half closed and his sparse eyebrows drew together in a deep concentration of thought. Then presently his forehead smoothed, and his lashless eyes gleamed wickedly. He rose heavily to his feet and labored to and fro across the floor, with his beefy hands clasped behind his back.

"Excellent—excellent," he muttered. "The devil could not have designed it better." There was a grim, evil smile about his mouth. "Yes, a game—a game. It will tickle old John, and will carry out my purpose. The mortgages which I hold on his property are nothing to me. Most are gambling debts. For the rest the interest has covered the principal. I have seen to that. But he is in arrears now. Good—good. Their abandonment represents no loss to me—ha, ha." He chuckled mirthlessly. "A little game—a gentle flutter, friend John, and the stakes all in my favor. But I do not intend to lose. Oh, no. The girl might outwit me if I lost. I shall win, and on my wedding day I shall be magnanimous—good." He unclasped his hands and rubbed them together gleefully.

"The uncle's consent—his persuasion. She will do as he wishes or—ruin. It is capital—a flawless scheme. And then to leave Foss River forever. God, but I shall be glad," with a return to his nervous dread. He looked about him; eagerly, his great paunchy figure pictured grotesquely beneath the pasty, fearful face.

"Now to see John," he went on, after a moment's pause. "How—how? I wish I could get him here. It would be better here. There would be no chance of listening ears. Besides, there is the whisky." He paused again thinking. "Yes," he muttered presently. "Delay would be bad. I must not give my enemy time. At once—at once. Nothing like doing things at once. I must go to John. But—" and he looked dubiously at the darkened window—"when I return it will be dark." He picked up his other revolver and slipped it into his breast pocket. "Yes, yes, I am getting foolish—old. Come along, my friend, we will go."

He seized his hat and went to the office door. He paused with his hand upon the lock, and gave one final look round, then he turned the spring with a great show of determination and passed out.

It was a different man who left the little office on that evening to the man who had for so many years governed the destinies of the smaller ranching world of the Foss River district. He had truly said that he was getting old—but he did not quite realize how old. His enemies had done their work only too well. The terrible consequences of the night of terror were to have far-reaching results.

The money-lender set out for the ranch bristling with eagerness to put into execution his hastily conceived plan.

He found the old rancher in his sanctum. He was alone brooding over the calamity which had befallen the police-officer, and stimulating his thought with silent "nippings" at the whisky bottle. He was in a semi-maudlin condition when the money-lender entered, and greeted his visitor with almost childish effusion.

Lablache saw and understood, and a sense of satisfaction came to him. He hoped his task would be easier than he had anticipated. His evil nature rose to the occasion, and, for the moment, his own troubles and fears were forgotten. There was a cat-like licking of the lips as he contemplated the pitiful picture before him.

"Well?" said old John, looking into the other's face with a pair of bloodshot eyes, as he re-seated himself after rising to greet his visitor. "Well, poor Horrocks has gone—gone, a victim to his sense of duty. I guess, Lablache, there are few men would have shown his grit."

"Grit! Yes, that's so." The money-lender had been about to say "folly," but he checked himself. He did not want to offend "Poker" John—now.

"Yes. The poor fellow was too good for his work," he went on, in tones of commiseration. "'Tis indeed a catastrophe, John. And we are the losers by it. I regret now that I did not altogether agree with him when he first came amongst us."

John wagged his head. He looked to be near weeping. His companion's sympathetic tone was almost too much for his whisky-laden heart. But Lablache had not come here to discuss Horrocks, or, for that matter, to sympathize with the gray-headed wreck of manhood before him. He wished to find out first of all if anybody was about whom his plans concerned, and then to force his proposition upon his old companion. He carefully led the rancher to talk of other things.

"The man has gone into Stormy Cloud to report?"

"Yes."

"And who are they likely to send down in place—ah—of the unfortunate Horrocks, think you?"

"Can't say. I guess they'll send a good man. I've asked for more men."

The old man roused somewhat from his maudlin state.

"Ah, that's a good move, John," said the money-lender. "What does Jacky think about—these things?"

The question was put carelessly. John yawned, and poured out a "tot" of whisky for his friend.

"Guess I haven't seen the child since breakfast. She seemed to take it badly enough then."

"Thanks. Aren't you going to have one?" as John pushed the glass over to the other.

"Why, yes, man. Never shirk my liquor."

He dashed a quantity of raw spirit into his glass and drank it off. Lablache looked on with intense satisfaction. John rose unsteadily, and, supporting himself against the furniture as he went, moved over to the French window and closed it. Then he lurched heavily back into his chair again. His eyes half closed. But he roused at the sound of Lablache's guttural tones.

"John, old friend." Muddled as he was the rancher started at the term. "I've come to have a long chat with you. This morning I could not talk. I was too broken up—too, too ill. Now listen and you shall hear of all that happened last night, and then you will the better be able to judge of the wisdom of my decision."

John listened while Lablache told his tale. The money-lender embellished the facts slightly so as the further to emphasize them. Then, at the conclusion of the story of his night's doings, he went on to matters which concerned his future.

"Yes, John, there is nothing left for me but to get out of the country. Mind this is no sudden determination, but a conclusion I have long arrived at. These disastrous occurrences have merely hastened my plans. I am not so young as I was, you know," with an attempt at lightness, "I simply dare not stay. I fear that Retief will soon attempt my life."

He sighed and looked for sympathy. Old John seemed too amazed to respond. He had never realized that the raider's efforts were solely directed against Lablache. The money-lender went on.

"And that is why I have come to you, my oldest friend. I feel you should be the first to know, for with no one else in Foss River have I lived in such perfect harmony. And, besides, you are the most interested."

The latter was in the tone of an afterthought. Strangely enough the careless way in which it was spoken carried the words well home to the rancher's muddled brain.

"Interested?" he echoed blankly.

"Why, yes. Certainly, you are the most interested. I mean from a monetary point of view. You see, the winding up of my business will entail the settling up of—er—my books."

"Yes," said the rancher, with doubtful understanding.

"Then—er—you take my meaning as to how—er—how you are interested."

"You mean my arrears of interest," said the gray headed old man dazedly.

"Just so. You will have to meet your liabilities to me."

"But—but—man." The rancher spluttered for words to express himself. This was the money-lender's opportunity, and he seized it.

"You see, John, in retiring from business I am not altogether a free agent. My affairs are so mixed up with the affairs of the Calford Trust and Loan Co. The period of one of your mortgages, for instance—the heaviest by the way—has long expired. It has not been renewed. The interest is in arrears. This mortgage was arranged by me jointly with the Calford Trust and Loan Co. When I retire it will have to be settled up. Being my friend I have not troubled you, but doubtless the company will have no sentiment about it. As to the others—they are debts of honor. I am afraid these things will have to be settled, John. You will of course be able to meet them."

"God, man, but I can't," old John exclaimed. "I tell you I can't," he reiterated in a despairing voice.

Lablache shrugged his obese shoulders.

"That is unfortunate."

"But, Lablache," said the rancher, gazing with drunken earnestness into the other's face, "you will not press me?"

"Why no, John, of course not—as far as I am personally concerned. I have known you too long and have too much regard for you and—yours. No, no, John; of course I am a business man, but I am still your friend. Friend—eh, John—your friend."

The rancher looked relieved, and helped himself to more whisky. Lablache joined him and they silently drank. "Poker" John set his empty glass down first.

"Now Lablache, about these lia-liabilities," he said with a hiccup. "What is to be done?"

"Well, John, we are friends of such old standing that I don't like to retire from business and leave you inconvenienced by the process. Perhaps there is a way by which I can help you. I am very wealthy—and wealth is a great power—a very great power even in this wild region. Now, suppose I make a proposition to you."

CHAPTER XXIV - "POKER" JOHN ACCEPTS

"Ah!"

There was a tone of drunken suspicion about the exclamation which was not lost on Lablache.

"If you were suddenly called upon to meet your liabilities to me, John," said the money-lender, smiling, "how would it fix you?"

"It would mean ruin," replied John, hoarsely.

Lablache cleared his throat and snorted. Then he smiled benignly upon his old companion.

"That's just what I thought. Well, you're not going to be ruined—by me. I'm going to burn the mortgages and settle with the Calford Trust and Loan Co. myself—"

The rancher feared to trust his ears.

"That is if you are willing to do something for me."

In his eager hope John Allandale had leant forward so as not to miss a word the other said. Now, however, he threw himself back in his chair. Some suspicion was in his mind. It might have been intuition. He knew Lablache well. He laughed cynically.

"That's more like you," he said roughly.

"One moment," said the money-lender; the smile vanished from his lips. "Fair play's good

medicine. We'll wipe out your debts if you'll tell your niece that you want her to marry me."

"I'll—I'll—"

"Hold on, John," with upraised hand, as the old man purpled with rage and started to shout.

"I'll see you damned first!" The rancher had lurched on to his feet and his fist came down with a crash upon the corner of the table. Lablache remained unmoved.

"Tut tut, man; now listen to me." The old man towered unsteadily over him. "I can't understand your antipathy to me as a husband for your niece. Give your consent—she'll do it for you—and, on my wedding day, I burn those mortgages and I'll settle 100,000 dollars upon Jacky. Besides this I'll put 200,000 dollars into your ranch to develop it, and only ask ten per cent, of the profits. Can I speak fairer? That girl of yours is a good girl, John; too good to kick about the prairie. I'll make her a good husband. She shall do as she pleases, live where she likes. You can always be with us if you choose. It's no use being riled, John, I'm making an honest proposition."

The rancher calmed. In the face of such a generous proposal he could not insult Lablache. He was determined, however. It was strange, perhaps, that any suggestion for his influence to be used in his niece's choice of a husband should have such a violent effect upon him. But "Poker" John was a curious mixture of weakness and honor. He loved his niece with a dotting affection. She was the apple of his eye. To him the thought of personal benefit at the cost of her happiness was a sacrilege. Lablache understood this. He knew that on this point the rancher's feelings amounted to little short of mania. And yet he persisted. John's nature was purely obstinate, and obstinacy is weakness. The money-lender knew that obstinacy could be broken down by steady determination. However, time, with him, was now everything. He must clinch the deal with as little delay as possible if he would escape from Foss River and the ruinous attacks of Retief. This thought was ever present with him and urged him to press the old man hard. If John Allandale would not be reasonable, he, Lablache, must force an acceptance of his terms from him.

The rancher was mollified. His dulled brain suddenly saw a loop-hole of escape.

"I guess you mean well enough, Lablache. But say, ask the child yourself."

The other shook his massive head.

"I have—she has refused."

"Then why in thunder do you come to me?"

The angry light was again in the rancher's bloodshot eyes.

"Why? Because she will marry me if you choose. She can't refuse—she dare not."

"Then, by God, I'll refuse for her—"

He paused disconcertedly in his wrath. Lablache's cold eyes fixed him with their icy stare.

"Very well, John," said Lablache, with a contemptuous shrug. "You know the inevitable result of such a hasty decision. It means ruin to you—beggary to that poor child." His teeth snapped viciously. Then he smiled with his mouth. "I can only put your de—refusal down to utter, unworthy selfishness."

"Not selfishness, Lablache—not that. I would sacrifice everything in the world for that child—"

"Except your own pleasure—your own personal comforts. Bah, man!" with scathing contempt, "your object must be plain to the veriest fool. You do not wish to lose her. You fear to lose your best servant lest in consequence you find the work of the ranch thrust upon your own hands. You would have no time to indulge your love of play. You would no longer be able to spend three parts of your time in 'old man' Smith's filthy bar. Your conduct is laudable, John—it is worthy of you."

Lablache had expected another outburst of anger, but John only leered in response to the other's contempt. Drunk as he was, the rancher saw the absurdity of the attack.

"Piffle!" he exclaimed. "Now see, when Jacky comes in you shall hear what she has to say."

"Poker" John smiled with satisfaction at his own 'cuteness. He felt that he had outwitted the astute usurer. His simplicity, however, was of an infantile order.

"That would be useless." Lablache did not want to be confronted with Jacky. "My mind is quite made up. The Calford Trust will begin proceedings at once, unless—"

"Unless I give my consent."

The satisfaction had suddenly died out of John Allandale's face. Even in his maudlin condition he understood the relentless purpose which backed the money-lender's proposal. To his credit be it said that he was thinking only of Jacky—the one being who was dearer to him than all else in the world. For himself he had no thought—he did not care what happened. But he longed to save his niece from the threatened catastrophe. His seared old face worked in his distress. Lablache beheld the sign, and knew that he was weakening.

"Why force me to extremities, John?" he said presently. "If you would only be reasonable, I feel sure you would have no matter for regret. Now, suppose I went a step further."

"No—no," weakly. There followed a pause. John Allandale avoided the other's eyes. To the old man the silence of the room became intolerable. He opened his lips to speak. Then he closed them—only to open them again. "But—but what step do you propose? Is—is it honest?"

"Perfectly." Lablache was smiling in that indulgent manner he knew so well how to assume. "And it might appeal to you. Pressure is a thing I hate. Now—suppose we leave the matter to—to chance."

"Chance?" The rancher questioned the other doubtfully.

"Yes—why not?" The money-lender's smile broadened and he leaned forward to impress his hearer the more surely. "A little game—a game of poker, eh?"

John Allandale shook his head. He failed to grasp the other's meaning.

"I don't understand," he said, struggling with the liquor which fogged his dull brain.

"No, of course you don't," easily. "Now listen to me and I'll tell you what I mean." The money-lender spoke as though addressing a wayward child. "The stakes shall be my terms against your influence with Jacky. If you win you keep your girl, and I cancel your mortgages; if I win I marry your girl under the conditions I have already offered. It's wholly an arrangement for your benefit. All I can possibly gain is your girl. Whichever way the game goes I must pay. Saints alive—but what an old fool I am!" He laughed constrainedly. "For the sake of a pretty face I'm going to give you everything—but there," seriously, "I'd do more to win that sweet child for my wife. What d'you say, John?"

There could be no doubt that Lablache meant what he said, only he might have put it differently. Had he said that there was nothing at which he would stop to secure Jacky, it would have been more in keeping with the facts, He meant to marry the girl. His bilious eyes watered. There was a sensual look in them. His heavy lips parted and closed with a sucking smack as though expressing appreciation of a tasty morsel.

John remained silent, but into his eyes had leapt a gleam which told of the lust of gaming aroused. His look—his whole face spoke for him. Lablache had primed his hook with an irresistible bait. He knew his man.

"See," he went on, as the other remained silent, "this is the way we can arrange it. We will play 'Jackpots' only. The best seven out of thirteen. It will be a pretty game, in which, from an outsider's point of view, I alone can be the loser. If I win I shall consider myself amply repaid. If I lose—well," with an expressive movement of the hands, "I will take my chance—as a sportsman should. I love your niece, John, and will risk everything to win her. Now, think of it. It will be the sweetest, prettiest gamble. And, too, think of the stake. A fortune, John—a fortune for you. And for me a bare possibility of realizing my hopes."

The old gambler's last vestige of honor struggled to make itself apparent in a negative movement of the head. But the movement would not come. His thoughts were of the game, and ere yet the last words of the money-lender had ceased to sound, he was captured. The satanic cunning of the proposal was lost upon his sodden intellect. It was a contemptible, pitiable piece of chicanery with which Lablache sought to trap the old man into giving his consent and assistance. The money-lender had no intention of losing the game. He knew he must win. He was merely resorting to this means because he knew the gambling spirit of the rancher. He knew that "Poker" John's obstinacy was proof against any direct attack; that no persuasion would induce the consent he desired. The method of a boxer pounding the body of an opponent whom he knows to be afflicted with some organic weakness of the heart is no more cowardly than was Lablache's proposal.

The rancher still remained silent. Lablache moved in his chair; one of his great fat hands rested for a moment on John's coat sleeve.

"Now, old friend," he said, with a hoarse, whistling breath. "Shall you play—play the game? It will be a grand finale to the many—er—comfortable games we have played together. Well? Thirteen 'Jackpots,' John—yes?"

"And—and if I consented—mind, I only say 'if.'" The rancher's face twitched nervously.

"You would stand to win a fortune—and also one for your niece."

"Yes—yes. I might win. My luck may turn."

"It must—you cannot always lose."

"Quite right—I must win soon. It is a great offer—a splendid stake."

"It is."

"Yes—yes, Lablache, I will play. God, man! I will play you!"

Beads of sweat stood on John Allandale's forehead as he literally hurled his acceptance at his companion. He accepted in the manner of one who knows he is setting at defiance all honesty and right, urged to such a course by an all-mastering passion, which he is incapable of resisting.

Strange was the nature of this man. He knew himself as it is given to few weak men to know

themselves. He knew that he wished to do this thing. He knew, also, that he was doing wrong. Moreover he knew that he wished to stand by Jacky and be true to his great affection for her. He was under the influence of potent spirit, and yet his thoughts and judgment were clear upon the subject. His mania had possessed him and he would play from choice; and all the while he could hear the voice of conscience rating him. He would have preferred to play now, but then he remembered the quantity of spirit he had consumed. He must take no chances. When he played Lablache he must be sober. The delay of one night, however, he knew would bring him agonies of remorse, therefore he would settle everything now so that in the throes of conscience he could not refuse to play. He feared delay. He feared the vacillation which the solitary hours of the night might bring to him. He leant forward and thickly urged the money-lender.

"When shall it be? Quick, man, let us have no delay. The time, Lablache—the time and place."

Lablache wheezed unctuously.

"That's the spirit I like, John," he said, fingering his watch-chain with his fat hands. "To business. The place—er—yes." A moment's thought whilst the rancher waited with impatience. "Ah, I know. That implement shed on your fifty-acre pasture. Excellent. There is a living room in it. You used to keep a man there. It is disused now. It will suit us admirably. We can use that room. And the time—"

"To-morrow, Lablache. It must be to-morrow. I could not wait longer," broke in the other, in a voice husky with eagerness and liquor. "After dark, when no one can see us going out to the shed. No one must know, Lablache, mind—no one. Jacky will not dream of what we are doing."

"Very well. To-morrow, then. At eleven o'clock at night, John. And as you say in the meantime—mum."

Lablache was pleased with the rancher's suggestion. It quite fell in with his own ideas. Everything must be done quickly now. He must get away from Foss River without delay.

"Yes—yes. Mum's the word." "Poker" John indicated his approval with an upward leer as Lablache rose from his chair, and a grotesque pursing of his lips and his forefinger at the side of his nose. Then he, too, struggled to his feet, and, with unsteady hand, poured out two stiff "horns" of whisky.

He held one out to the money-lender and took the other himself.

"I drink to the game," he said haltingly. "May—fortune come my way."

Lablache nodded comprehensively and slowly raised his glass.

"Fortune is yours anyhow. Therefore I trust that I win the game."

The two men silently drank. After which Lablache turned to go. He paused at the French window and plunged his hand into his coat pocket.

The night was dark outside, and again he became a prey to his moral terror of the half-breed raider. He drew out his revolver and opened the chamber. The weapon was loaded. Then he turned to old John who was staring at him.

"It's risky for me to move about at night, John. I fear Retief has not done with me yet. Good-night," and he passed out on to the veranda.

Lablache was the victim of a foreboding. It is a custom to laugh at forebodings and set them down to the vagaries of a disordered stomach. We laugh too at superstition. Yet how often do we find that the portentous significance of these things is actually realized in fact. Lablache dreaded Retief.

What would the next twenty-four hours bring forth?

CHAPTER XXV - UNCLE AND NIECE

"Poker" John's remorse came swiftly, but not swiftly or strongly enough to make him give up the game. After Lablache had taken his departure the old rancher sat drinking far into the night. With each fresh potato his conscience became less persistent in its protest. He sought no bed that night, for gradually his senses left him and he slept where he sat, until, towards daybreak he awoke, partially sober and shivering with cold. Then he arose, and, wrapping himself in a heavy overcoat, flung himself upon a couch, where he again sought sobriety in sleep.

He awoke again soon after daylight. His head was racked with pain. He, at first, had only a dim recollection of what had occurred the night before. There was a vague sense of something unpleasant having happened, but he did not attempt to recall it. He went to his bedroom and douched himself with cold water. Then he set out for the kitchen in search of coffee with which to slack his burning thirst. It was not until he had performed his ablutions that the whole truth of his interview with Lablache came back to him. Immediately, now that the effect of the liquor had passed off, he became a prey to terrible remorse.

Possibly had Jacky been at hand at that moment, the whole course of events might have been altered. Her presence, a good breakfast, and occupation might have given him strength to carry out the rejection of Lablache's challenge which his remorse suggested. However, none of these things were at hand, and John Allandale set out, from force of habit, to get his morning "Collins" down at "old man" Smith's. Something to pull him together before he encountered his niece, he told himself.

It was a fatal delusion. "Old man" Smith sold drink for gain. The more he sold the better he liked it. John Allandale's "Collins" developed, as it always did now, into three or four potent drinks. So that by the time he returned to the ranch for breakfast his remorse was pushed well into the background, and with feverish craving he lodged for the fateful game.

In spite of his devotion to the bottle John Allandale usually made a hearty breakfast. But this morning the sight of Jacky presiding at his table upset him, and he left his food almost untasted. Remorse was deadened but conscience was yet unsilenced within him. Every time she spoke to him, every time he encountered her piercing gray eyes he felt himself to be a worse than Judas. In his rough, exaggerated way he told himself that he was selling this girl as surely as did the old slave owners sell their slaves in bygone days. He endeavored to persuade himself that what he was doing was for the best, and certainly that it was forced upon him. He would not admit that his mania for poker was the main factor in his acceptance of Lablache's terms. Gradually, however, his thoughts became intolerable to him, and when Jacky at last remarked on the fact that he was eating nothing and drinking only his coffee, he could stand it no longer. He pushed his chair back and rose from the table, and, muttering an excuse, fled from the room.

Her uncle's precipitate flight alarmed Jacky. She had seen, as anybody with half an eye could see, that he had had a heavy night. The bleared eyes, the puffed lids, the working, nervous face were simple enough evidence. She knew, too, that he had already been drinking this morning. But these things were not new to her, only painful facts which she was unable to alter; but his strange behavior and lack of appetite were things to set her thinking.

She was a very active-minded girl. It was not her way to sit wondering and puzzling over anything she could not understand. She had a knack of setting herself to unravel problems which required explanation in the most common-sense way. After giving her uncle time to leave the house—intuition told her that he would do so—she rose and rang the bell. Then she moved to the window while she waited for an answer to her summons. She saw the burly figure of her uncle walking swiftly down towards the settlement and in the direction of the saloon.

She turned with a sigh as a servant entered.

"Did any one call last night while I was out?" she asked.

"Not for you, miss."

"Oh!"

"No, miss, but Mr. Lablache was here. He was with your uncle for a long time—in the office."

"Did he come in with Mr. Allandale?"

"Oh, no, miss, the master didn't go out. At least not that I know of. Mr. Lablache didn't call exactly. I think he just came straight to the office. I shouldn't have known he was there, only I was passing the door and heard his voice—and the master's."

"Oh, that will do—just wait a moment, though. Say, is Silas around? Just find him and send him right along. Tell him to come to the veranda."

The servant departed, and Jacky sat down at a writing-table and wrote a note to "Lord" Bill. The note was brief but direct in its tone.

"Can you see me this afternoon? Shall be in after tea."

That was all she put, and added her strong, bold signature to it. Silas came to the window and she gave him the note with instructions to deliver it into the hands of the Hon. Bunning-Ford.

The letter dispatched she felt easier in her mind.

What had Lablache been closeted with her uncle for? This was the question which puzzled—nay, alarmed her. She had seen her uncle early on the previous evening, and he had seemed happy enough. She wished now, when she had returned from visiting Mrs. Abbot, that she had thought to see if her uncle was in. It had become such a custom for him lately to be out all the evening that she had long ceased her childhood's custom of saying "Good-night" to him before retiring to bed. One thing was certain, she felt her uncle's strange behavior this morning was in some way due to Lablache's visit. She meant to find out what that visit meant.

To this end several plans occurred to her, but in each case were abandoned as unsuitable.

"No," she murmured at last, "I guess I'll tax him with it. He'll tell me. If Lablache means war, well—I've a notion he'll get a hustling he don't consider."

Then she left the sitting-room that she might set about her day's work. She would see her uncle at dinner-time.

Foss River had not yet risen to the civilized state of late dinners and indigestion. Early rising and hard work demanded early meals and hearty feeding. Dinner generally occurred at noon—an hour at which European society thinks of taking its *déjeuner*. By rising late society can thus avoid what little fresh, wholesome air there is to be obtained in a large city. Civilization jibs at early rising. Foss River was still a wild and savage country.

At noon Jacky came in to dinner. She had not seen her uncle since breakfast. The old man had not returned from the settlement. Truth to tell he wished to avoid his niece as much as possible for to-day. As dinner-time came round he grew nervous and uncomfortable, and was half inclined to accept "old man" Smith's invitation to dine at the saloon. Then he realized that this would only alarm Jacky and set her thinking. Therefore he plucked up the shattered remains of his moral courage and returned to the ranch. When a man loses his last grip on his self-respect he sinks with cruel rapidity. "Poker" John told himself that he was betraying his niece's affection, and with this assurance he told himself that he was the lowest-down cur in the country. The natural consequence to a man of his habit and propensity was—drink. The one time in his life when he should have refrained from indulgence he drank; and with each drink he made the fatal promise to himself that it should be the last.

When Jacky saw him swaying as he came up towards the house she could have cried out in very anguish. It smote her to the heart to see the old man whom she so loved in this condition. Yet when he lurched on to the veranda she smiled lovingly up into his face and gave no sign that she had any knowledge of his state.

"Come right along, uncle," she said gayly, linking her arm within his, "dinner is on. You must be good and hungry, you made such a poor breakfast this morning."

"Yes, child, I wasn't very well," he mumbled thickly. "Not very well—now."

"You poor dear, come along," and she led him in through the open window.

During the meal Jacky talked incessantly. She talked of everything but what had upset her uncle. She avoided any reference to Lablache with great care. But, in spite of her cheerfulness, she could not rouse the degenerate old man. Rather it seemed that, as the meal progressed, he became gloomier. The truth was the girl's apparent light-heartedness added to his self-revilings and made him feel more criminal than ever. He ate his food mechanically, and he drank glass after glass of ale.

Jacky heaved a sigh of relief when the meal was over. She felt that she could not much longer have kept up her light-hearted talk. Her uncle was about to move from the table. The girl stayed him with a gesture. He had eaten a good dinner and she was satisfied. Now she would question him.

It is strange how a woman, in whatever relationship she may stand, loves to see a man eat well. Possibly she understands the effect of a good dinner upon the man in whom she centers her affection; possibly it is the natural maternal instinct for his well-being.

"Uncle, what did Lablache come to see you for last night?"

The question was abrupt. It had the effect of bringing the rancher back to his seat with a drunken lurch.

"Eh?" he queried, blinking nervously.

"What did he come for?" Jacky persisted.

The girl could be relentless even with her uncle.

"Lablache—oh—er—talk bus—bus'ness, child—bus'ness," and he attempted to get up from his chair again.

But Jacky would not let him go.

"Wait a moment, uncle dear, I want to talk to you. I sha'n't keep you long." The old man looked anywhere but at his companion. A cold sweat was on his forehead, and his cheek twitched painfully under the steady gaze of the girl's somber eyes. "I don't often get a chance of talking to you now," she went on, with a slight touch of bitterness. "I just want to talk about that skunk, Lablache. I guess he didn't pass the evening talking of Retief—and what he intends to do towards his capture? Say, uncle, what was it about?"

The old man grasped at the suggestion.

"Yes—yes, child. It was Retief."

He kept his eyes averted. The girl was not deceived.

"All the time?"

"Poker" John remained silent. He would have lied but could not.

"Uncle!"

Her tone was a moral pressure. The old man turned for relief to his avuncular authority.

"I must go. You've no right—question me," he stuttered. "I refu—"

"No, uncle, you won't refuse me." The girl had risen and had moved round to where the old man sat. She fondled him lovingly and his attempt at angry protest died within him. "Come, dear, tell me all about it. You are worried and I can help you. What did he threaten you with? I suppose he wants money," contemptuously. "How much?"

The old drunkard was powerless to resist her loving appeal.

He was cornered. Another might have lied and so escaped, but John Allandale's weakness was such that he had not the courage to resort to subterfuge. Moreover, there was a faint spark of honor nickered deep down in his kindly heart. The girl's affectionate display was surely fanning that spark into a flame. Would the flame grow or would it sparkle up for one brief moment and then go out from pure lack of fuel? Suddenly something of the truth of the cause of her uncle's distress flashed across Jacky's mind. She knew Lablache's wishes in regard to herself. Perhaps she was the subject of that interview.

"Uncle, it is I who am causing you this trouble. What is it that Lablache wants of me?" She asked the question with her cheek pressed to the old man's face. His whisky-laden breath reeked in her nostrils.

Her question took him unawares, and he started up pushing her from him.

"Who—who told you, girl?" His bleared eyes were now turned upon her, and they gazed fearfully into hers.

"I thought so," she exclaimed, smiling back into the troubled face. "No one told me, uncle, I guess that beast wants to marry me. Say, uncle, you can tell me everything right here. I'll help you. He's smart, but he can't mate with me."

"But—but—" He struggled to collect his thoughts.

"No 'buts,' dear. I've refused Lablache once. I guess I can size up the racket he thinks to play. Money—money! He'd like to buy me, I take it. Say, uncle, can't we frolic him some? Now—what did he say?"

"I—can't tell you, child," the old man protested desperately. Then he weakened further before those deep, steadfast eyes. "Don't—press me. Don'—press me." His voice contained maudlin tears. "I'm a vill'n, girl. I'm worse. Don'—look a' me—like that. Ja'y—Ja'y—I've—sol'—you!"

The miserable old man flung himself back in his chair and his head bowed until his chin sank heavily upon his chest. Two great tears welled into his bloodshot eyes and trickled slowly down his seared old cheeks. It was a pitiable sight. Jacky looked on silently for a moment. Her eyes took in every detail of that picture of despair. She had heard the old man's words but took no heed of them. She was thinking very hard. Suddenly she seemed to arrive at a decision. Her laugh rang out, and she came and knelt at her uncle's side.

"So you've sold me, you old dear, and not a bad thing too. What's the price?"

Her uncle raised his bowed head. Her smiling face dried his tears and put fresh heart into him. He had expected bitter invective, but instead the girl smiled.

Jacky's task now became a simple one. A mere matter of pumping. Sharp questions and rambling replies. Bit by bit she learned the story of Lablache's proposal and the manner in which an acceptance had been forced upon her uncle. She did not relinquish her task until the minutest detail had been gleaned. At last she was satisfied with her cross-examination.

She rose to her feet and passed her hand with a caressing movement over her uncle's head, gazing the while out of the window. Her mind was made up. Her uncle needed her help now. That help should be his. She condoned his faults; she saw nothing but that which was lovable in his weakness. Hers was now the strength to protect him, who, in the days of his best manhood had sheltered her from the cruel struggles of a life in the half-breed camp, for such, at the death of her impecunious father, must otherwise have been her lot.

Now she looked down into that worn, old face, and her brisk, business-like tones roused him into new life.

"Uncle, you must meet Lablache and play—the game. For the rest, leave it to me. All I ask is—no more whisky to-day. Stay right here and have a sleep. Guess you might go an' lie down. I'll call you for supper. Then you'll be fit. One thing you must remember; watch that ugly-faced cur when you play. See he don't cheat any. I'll tell you more before you start out. Come right along now and have that sleep."

The old man got up and the girl led him from the room. She saw him to his bedroom and then left him. She decided that, for herself, she would not leave the house until she had seen Bill. She must get her uncle sober before he went to meet Lablache.

CHAPTER XXVI - IN WHICH MATTERS REACH A CLIMAX

Foss River Settlement was, at the time, a very small place, and of practically no importance. It was brought into existence by the neighborhood of one or two large ranches; these ranches employed considerable labor. Foss River might be visited by an earthquake, and, provided the earthquake was not felt elsewhere, the world would not be likely to hear of it for weeks. The newspapers of the Western cities were in their infancy, and contented themselves with the news of their own towns and feverish criticisms of politics which were beyond the understanding of their editors. Progress in the West was very slow—almost at a standstill.

After the death of Horrocks the police had withdrawn to report and to receive augmentation. No one felt alarm at their absence. The inhabitants of Foss River were a self-reliant people—accustomed to look to themselves for the remedy of a grievance. Besides, Horrocks, they said, had shown himself to be a duffer—merely a tracker, a prairie-man and not the man to bring relief to justice. Already the younger members of the settlement and district were forming themselves into a vigilance committee. The elders—those to whom the younger looked for a lead in such matters—had chosen to go to the police; now the younger of the settlement decided to act for themselves.

This was the condition and feeling in Foss River at the time of the death of Horrocks; this was the state of affairs when the *insouciant* Bill leisurely strolled into the sitting-room at the Foss River Ranch, about the time that Joaquina Allandale had finished her tea. With the familiarity of the West, Bill entered by the French window. His lazy smile was undisturbed. He might have been paying an ordinary call instead of answering a summons which he knew must be a matter of emergency, for it was understood between these two that private meetings were tabooed, except when necessity demanded them.

Jacky's greeting was not reassuring, but her lover's expression remained unchanged, except that his weary eyelids further unclosed.

"Guess we're side-tracked, Bill," she said meaningly. "The line's blocked. Signals dead against us."

Bill looked into her eyes; then he turned and closed the window, latching it securely. The door was closed. His keen eyes noted this.

"What do you mean?"

The girl shrugged.

"The next twelve hours must finish our game."

"Ah!"

"Yes," the girl went on, "it is Lablache's doing. We must settle our reckoning with him to-night."

Bill flung himself into a chair.

"Will you explain?—I don't understand. May I smoke?"

Jacky smiled. The request was so unnecessary. She always liked Bill's nonchalance. It conveyed such a suggestion of latent power.

"Yes, smoke, Bill; smoke and get your thinking box in order. My yarn won't take a deal of time to tell. But it'll take a deal of thought to upset Lablache's last move, without—shootin'."

"Um—shooting's an evil, but sometimes—necessary. What's his racket?"

The girl told her story quickly. She forgot nothing. She never allowed herself to fall into the womanly mistake of omitting details, however small.

Bill fully appreciated her cleverness in this direction. He could trust what she said implicitly. At the conclusion of the story he sat up and rolled another cigarette.

"And your uncle is upstairs in bed?"

"Yes, when he wakes I guess he'll need a bracer. He'll be sober. He must play. Lablache means to win."

"Yes, he means to win. He has had a bad scare."

"What are we going to do?"

The girl eyed her lover keenly. She saw by his manner that he was thinking rapidly.

"The game must be interrupted—with another scare."

"What?"

Bill shrugged and laughed.

"What are you going to do?"

"Burn him out—his store. And then—"

"And then?" eagerly.

"Retief will be present at the game. Tell him what has happened and—if he doesn't leave Foss River—shoot him. Mortgages and all records of debts, etc., are in his store."

"Good."

After expressing her approval the girl sat gazing into her lover's face. They talked a little longer, then Bill rose to go.

"Eleven o'clock to-night you say is the appointed hour?"

"Yes. I shall meet you at the gate of the fifty-acre pasture."

"Better not."

"Yes, I am going to be there," with a decisive nod. "One cannot be sure. You may need me."

"Very well. Good-by, little woman." "Lord" Bill bent and kissed her. Then something very like a sigh escaped him. "I think with you this game is nearly up. To-night will settle things one way or the other."

"Yes. Trouble is not far off. Say, Bill, when it comes, I want to be with you."

Bill looked tenderly down into the upturned face.

"Is that why you insist on coming to-night?"

"Yes."

Another embrace and Bill left the house.

He sauntered leisurely down the avenue of pines. He kept straight on towards the muskeg. Then he turned away from the settlement, and was soon lost behind the rising ground which shored the great mire. Once out of sight of the house he quickened his pace, gradually swinging away from the keg, and heading towards the half-breed camp.

Foss River might have been deserted for all signs of life he encountered. The prairie was calmly silent. Not even the call of the birds broke the stillness around. The heat of the afternoon had lulled all nature to repose.

He strode on swiftly until he came to a small bluff. Here he halted and threw himself full length upon the ground in a welcome shade. He was within sight of the half-breed camp. He shifted his position until his head was in the sun. In this way he could see the scattered dwellings of the prairie outcasts. Then he drew a small piece of looking-glass from his pocket and held it out in the sun. Turning and twisting it in the direction of the camp, as might a child who wishes to dazzle a play-fellow's eyes. For several minutes he thus manipulated his impromptu heliograph. Then, as he suddenly beheld an answering flash in the distance, he desisted, and returned the glass to his pocket. Now he drew back in the shade and composed himself to smoke.

The half-closed eyes of the recumbent man gazed steadily out towards the camp. He had nearly finished his third cigarette when his quick ears caught the sound of footsteps. Instantly he sat up. The steps grew louder and then round the sheltering bush came the thick-set form of Gautier. He was accompanied by an evil-looking dog which growled sulkily as it espied the white man.

"Ugh! Hot walkin'," said the newcomer, by way of greeting.

"Not so hot as it'll be to-night," said the white man, quietly. "Sit down."

"More bonfires, boss?" said the half-breed, with a meaning grin, seating himself as he spoke.

"More bonfires. See you, I want six of the boys at Lablache's store to-night at eleven o'clock. We are going to burn his place. It will be quite easy. Lablache will be away, and only his clerks on the premises. The cellar underneath the building is lit by barred windows, two under the front, and two under the office at the back. All you have to do is to break the glass of the window at the back and pour in a couple of gallons of coal oil. Then push in some straw, and then light a piece of oil-soaked rope and drop it in. The cellar is full of cases of goods and barrels of oil. The fire will be unextinguishable. Directly it is well lit see that the clerks are warned. We want no lives lost. You understand? The stables are adjacent and will catch fire too. I sha'n't be there until later. There will be no risk and lots of loot. Savee?"

The cunning face of the half-breed was lit by an unholy grin. He rubbed his hands with the unctuous anticipation of a shop-walker. Truly, he thought, this white man was a man after his own heart. He grinned his head in approval.

"Easy—easy? It is childlike," he said in ecstasy. "I have long thought of it, sure. An' thar is a big store of whisky thar, eh, boss? Good—good! And what time will you come?"

"When the fire is lit. I go to deal with Lablache. Look you here, Gautier, you owe that man a grudge. You would kill him but you don't dare. I may pay off that grudge for you. Pay it by a means that is better than killing."

"Torture," grinned the half-breed.

Bill nodded.

"Now see and be off. And don't make any mistake, or we may all swing for it. Tell Baptiste he must go over the keg at once and bring Golden Eagle to my shack at about half-past ten. Tell him to be punctual. Now scoot. No mistakes, or—" and Bill made a significant gesture.

The man understood and hurried away. "Lord" Bill was satisfied that his orders would be carried out to the letter. The service he demanded of this man was congenial service, in so far that it promised loot in plenty and easily acquired. Moreover, the criminal side of the half-breed's nature was tickled. A liberal reward for honesty would be less likely to secure good service from such as Gautier than a chance of gain for shady work. It was the half-breed nature.

After the departure of the half-breed, Bill remained where he was for some time. He sat with his hands clasped round his knees, gazing thoughtfully out towards the camp. He was reviewing his forces and mentally struggling to penetrate the pall which obscured the future. He felt himself to be playing a winning game; at least, that his vengeance and chastisement of Lablache had been made ridiculously easy for him. But now he had come to that point when he wondered what must be the outcome of it all as regarded himself and the girl he loved. Would his persecution drive Lablache from Foss River to the security of Calford, where he would be able to follow him and still further prosecute his inexorable vengeance? Or would he still choose to remain? He knew Lablache to be a strong man, but he also knew, by the money-lender's sudden determination to force Jacky into marriage with him, that he had received a scare. He could not decide on the point. But he inclined to the belief that Lablache must go after to-night. He would not spare him. He had yet a trump card to play. He would be present at the game of cards, and—well, time would show.

He threw away his mangled cigarette end and rose from the ground. One glance of his keen eyes told him that no one was in sight. He strolled out upon the prairie and made his way back to the settlement. He need not have troubled himself about the future. The future would work itself out, and no effort of his would be capable of directing its course. A higher power than man's was governing the actions of the participants in the Foss River drama.

For the rest of the day "Lord" Bill moved about the settlement in his customary idle fashion. He visited the saloon; he showed himself on the market-place. He discussed the doings of Retief with the butcher, the smith, Dr. Abbot. And, as the evening closed in and the sun's power lessened, he identified himself with others as idle as himself, and basked in the warmth of its feeble, dying rays.

When darkness closed in he went to his shack and prepared his evening meal with a simple directness which no thoughts of coming events could upset. Bill was always philosophical. He ate to live, and consequently was not particular about his food. He passed the evening between thought and tobacco, and only an occasional flashing of his lazy eyes gave any sign of the trend of his mental effort.

At a few minutes past ten he went into his bedroom and carefully locked the door. Then he drew from beneath his bed a small chest; it was an ammunition chest of very powerful make. The small sliding lid was securely padlocked. This he opened and drew from within several articles of apparel and a small cardboard box.

Next he divested himself of his own tweed clothes and donned the things he had taken from the box. These consisted of a pair of moleskin trousers, a pair of chaps, a buckskin shirt and a battered Stetson hat. From the cardboard box he took out a tin of greasy-looking stuff and a long black wig made of horse hair. Stepping to a glass he smeared his face with the grease, covering his own white flesh carefully right down to the chest and shoulders, also his hands. It was a brownish ocher and turned his skin to the copperish hue of the Indian. The wig was carefully adjusted and secured by sprigs to his own fair hair. This, with the hat well jammed down upon his head, completed the transformation, and out from the looking-glass peered the strong, eagle face of the redoubtable half-breed, Retief.

He then filled the chest with his own clothes and relocked it. Suddenly his quick ear caught the sound of some one approaching. He looked at his watch; it wanted two minutes to half-past ten. He waited.

Presently he heard the rattle of a stick down the featheredged boarding of the outer walls of the hut. He picked up his revolver belt and secured it about his waist, and then, putting out the light, unlocked the back door which opened out of his bedroom.

A horse was standing outside, and a man held the bridle reins looped upon his arm.

"That you, Baptiste?"

"Yup."

"Good, you are punctual."

"It's as well."

"Yes."

"I go to join the boys," the half-breed said slowly. "And you?"

"I—oh, I go to settle a last account with Lablache," replied Bill, with a mirthless laugh.

"Where?"

Bill looked sharply at the man. He understood the native distrust of the Breed. Then he nodded vaguely in the direction of the Foss River Ranch.

"Yonder. In old John's fifty-acre pasture. Lablache and John meet at the tool-shed there to-night. Why?"

"And you go not to the fire?" Baptiste's voice had a surprised ring in it.

"Not until later. I must be at the meeting soon after eleven."

The half-breed was silent for a minute. He seemed to be calculating. At length he spoke. His words conveyed resolve.

"It is good. Guess you may need assistance. I'll be there—and some of the boys. We ain't goin' ter interfere—if things goes smooth."

Bill shrugged.

"You need not come."

"No? Nuthin' more?"

"Nothing. Keep the boys steady. Don't burn the clerks in the store."

"No."

"S'long."

"S'long."

"Lord" Bill vaulted into the saddle, and Golden Eagle moved restively away.

It was as well that Foss River was a sleepy place. "Lord" Bill's precautions were not elaborate. But then he knew the ways of the settlement.

Dr. Abbot chanced to be standing in the doorway of the saloon. Bill's shack was little more than a hundred yards away. The doctor was about to step across to see if he were in, for the purpose of luring his friend into a game. Poker was not so plentiful with the doctor now since Bill had dropped out of Lablache's set.

He saw the dim outline of a horseman moving away from the back of "Lord" Bill's hut. His curiosity was aroused. He hastened across to the shack. He found it locked up, and in darkness. He turned away wondering. And as he turned away he found himself almost face to face with Baptiste. The doctor knew the man.

"Evening, Baptiste."

"Evening," the man growled.

The doctor was about to speak again but the man hurried away.

"Damned funny," the medical man muttered. Then he moved off towards his own home. Somehow he had forgotten his wish for poker.

CHAPTER XXVII - THE LAST GAMBLE

The fifty-acre pasture was situated nearly a quarter of a mile away to the left of John Allandale's house. Then, too, the whole length of it must be crossed before the implement shed be reached. This would add another half a mile to the distance, for the field was long and narrow, skirting as it did the hay slough which provided the ranch with hay. The pasture was on the sloping side of the slough, and on the top of the ridge stretched a natural fence of pines nearly two miles in extent.

The shed was erected for the accommodation of mowers, horse-rakes, and the necessary appurtenances for haying. At one end, as Lablache had said, was a living-room. It was called so by courtesy. It was little better than the rest of the building, except that there was a crazy door to it—also a window; a rusty iron stove, small, and—when a fire burned in it—fierce, was crowded into a corner. Now, however, the stove was dismantled, and lengths of stove pipe were littered about the floor around it. A rough bed, supported on trestles, and innocent of bedding, filled one end of this abode; a table made of packing cases, and two chairs of the Windsor type, one fairly sound and the other minus a back, completed the total of rude furniture necessary for a "hired man's" requirements.

A living-room, the money-lender had said, therefore we must accept his statement.

A reddish, yellow light from a dingy oil lamp glowed sullenly, and added to the cheerlessness of the apartment. At intervals black smoke belched from the chimney top of the lamp in response to the draughts which blew through the sieve-like boarding of the shed. One must feel sorry for the

hired man whose lot is cast in such cheerless quarters.

It was past eleven. Lablache and John Allandale were seated at the table. The lurid light did not improve the expression of their faces.

"Poker" John was eager—keenly eager now that Jacky had urged him to the game. Moreover, he was sober—sober as the proverbial "judge." Also he was suspicious of his opponent. Jacky had warned him. He looked very old as he sat at that table. His senility appeared in every line of his face; in every movement of his shaking hands; in every glance of his bleared eyes.

Lablache, also, was changed slightly, but it was not in the direction of age; he showed signs of elation, triumph. He felt that he was about to accomplish the object which had long been his, and, at the same time, outwit the half-breed who had so lately come into his life, with such disastrous results to his, the money-lender's, peaceful enjoyment of his ill-gotten wealth.

Lablache turned his lashless eyes in the direction of the window. It was a square aperture of about two feet in extent.

"We are not likely to be interrupted," he said wheezily, "but it never does to chance anything. Shall we cover the window? A light in this room is unusual—"

"Yes, let us cover it." "Poker" John chafed at the delay. "No one is likely to come this way, though."

Lablache looked about for something which would answer his purpose. There was nothing handy. He drew out his great bandanna and tried it. It exactly covered the window. So he secured it. It would serve to darken the light to any one who might chance to be within sight of the shed. He returned to his seat. He bulged over it as he sat down, and its legs creaked ominously.

"I have brought three packs of cards," he said, laying them upon the table.

"So have I."

"Poker" John looked directly into the other's bilious eyes.

"Ah—then we have six packs."

"Yes—six."

"Whose shall we—" Lablache began.

"We'll cut for it. Ace low. Low wins."

The money-lender smiled at the rancher's eagerness. The two men cut in silence. Lablache cut a "three"; "Poker" John, a "queen."

"We will use your cards, John." The money-lender's face expressed an unctuous benignity.

The rancher was surprised, and his tell-tale cheek twitched uncomfortably.

"For deal," said Lablache, stripping one of John's packs and passing it to his companion. The rancher shuffled and cut—Lablache cut. The deal went to the latter.

"We want something to score on," the money-lender said. "My memorandum pad—"

"We'll have nothing on the table, please." John had been warned.

Lablache shrugged and smiled. He seemed to imply that the precaution was unnecessary. "Poker" John was in desperate earnest.

"A piece of chalk—on the wall." The rancher produced the chalk and set it on the floor close by the wall and returned to his seat.

Lablache shuffled clumsily. His fingers seemed too gross to handle cards. And yet he could shuffle well, and his fingers were, in reality, most sensitive. John Allandale looked on eagerly. The money-lender, contrary to his custom, dealt swiftly—so swiftly that the bleared eyes of his opponent could not follow his movements.

Both men picked up their cards. The old instincts of poker were not so pronounced in the rancher as they used to be. Doubtless the game he was now playing did not need such mask-like impassivity of expression as an ordinary game would. After all, the pot opened, it merely became a question of who held the best hand. There would be no betting. John's eyes lighted up as he glanced at the index numerals. He held two "Jacks."

"Can you?" Lablache's husky voice rasped in the stillness.

"Yes."

The dealer eyed his opponent for a second. His face was that of a graven image.

"How many?"

"Three."

The money-lender passed three cards across the table. Then he discarded two cards from his own hand and drew two more.

"What have you got?" he asked, with a grim pursing of his sagging lips.

"Two pairs. Jacks up."

Lablache laid his own cards on the table, spreading them out face upwards for the rancher to see. He held three "twos."

"One to you," said John Allandale; and he went and chalked the score upon the wall.

There was something very business-like about these two men when they played cards. And possibly it was only natural. The quiet way in which they played implied the deadly earnestness of their game. Their surroundings, too, were impressive when associated with the secrecy of their doings.

Each man meant to win, and in both were all the baser passions fully aroused. Neither would spare the other, each would do his utmost. Lablache was sure. John was consumed with a deadly nervousness. But John Allandale at cards was the soul of honor. Lablache was confident in his superior manipulation—not play—of cards. He knew that, bar accidents, he must win. The mystery of being able to deal himself "three of a kind" and even better was no mystery to him. He preferred his usual method—the method of "reflection," as he called it; but in the game he was now playing such a method would be useless for obvious reasons. First of all, knowing his opponent's cards would only be of advantage where betting was to ensue. Now he needed the clumsier, if more sure, method of dealing himself a hand. And he did not hesitate to adopt it.

"Poker" John dealt The pot was not opened. Lablache again dealt. Still the hand passed without the pot being opened. The next time John dealt Lablache opened the pot and was promptly beaten. He drew to two queens and missed. John drew to a pair of sevens and got a third. The game was one all. After this Lablache won three pots in succession and the game stood four—one, in favor of the money-lender.

The old rancher's face more than indicated the state of the game. His features were gray and drawn. Already he saw his girl married to the man opposite to him. For an instant his weakness led him to think of refusing to play further—to defy Lablache and bid him do his worst. Then he remembered that the girl herself had insisted that he must see the game through—besides, he might yet win. He forced his thoughts to the coming hand. He was to deal.

The deal, as far as he was concerned, was successful, His spirits rose.

Four—two.

Lablache took up the cards to deal. John was watching as though his life depended upon what he saw. Lablache's clumsy shuffle annoyed him. The lashless eyes of the money-lender were bent upon the cards, but he had no difficulty in observing the old man's attention. This unusual attention he set down to a natural excitement. He had not the smallest idea that the old man suspected him. He passed the cards to be cut. The rancher cut them carelessly. He had a natural cut. The pack was nearly halved. Lablache had prepared for this.

The hand was dealt, and the money-lender won with three aces, all of which he had drawn in a five-card draw. He had discarded a pair of nines to make the heavy draw. It was clumsy, but he had been forced to it. The position of the aces in the pack he had known, and—well, he meant to win.

Five—two.

The clumsiness of that deal was too palpable. Old John suspected, but held his tongue. His anger rose, and the drawn face flushed with the suddenness of lightning. He was in a dangerous mood. Lablache saw the flush, and a sudden fear gripped his heart. He passed the cards to the other, and then, involuntarily, his hand dropped into the right-hand pocket of his coat. It came in contact with his revolver—and stayed there.

The next hand passed without the pot being opened—and the next. Lablache was a little cautious. The next deal resulted in favor of the rancher.

Five—three.

Lablache again took the cards. This time he meant to get his hand in the deal. At that moment the money-lender would have given a cool thousand had a bottle of whisky been on the table. He had not calculated on John being sober. He shuffled deliberately and offered the pack to be cut. John cut in the same careless manner, but this time he did it purposely. Lablache picked up the bottom half of the cut. There was a terrible silence in the room, and a deadly purpose was expressed in "Poker" John's eyes.

The money-lender began to deal. In an instant John was on his feet and lurched across the table. His hand fell upon the first card which Lablache had dealt to himself.

"The ace of clubs," shouted the rancher, his eyes blazing and his body fairly shaking with fury. He turned the card over. It was the ace of clubs.

"Cheat!" he shouted.

He had seen the card at the bottom of the pack as the other had ceased to shuffle.

There was an instant's thrilling pause. Then Lablache's hand flew to his pocket. He had heard the click of a cocking revolver.

For the moment the rancher's old spirit rose superior to his senile debility.

"God in heaven! And this is how you've robbed me, you—you bastard!"

"Poker" John's seared face was at that moment the face of a maniac. He literally hurled his fury at the money-lender, who was now standing confronting him.

"It is the last time, if—if I swing for it. Prairie law you need, and, Hell take you, you shall have it!"

He swung himself half round. Simultaneously two reports rang out. They seemed to meet in one deafening peal, which was exaggerated by the smallness of the room. Then all was silence.

Lablache stood unmoved, his yellow eyeballs gleaming wickedly. For a second John Allandale swayed while his face assumed a ghastly hue. Then in deathly silence he slowly crumpled up, as it were. No sound passed his lips and he sank in a heap upon the floor. His still smoking pistol dropped beside him from his nerveless fingers.

The rancher had intended to kill Lablache, but the subtle money-lender had been too quick. The lashless eyes watched the deathly fall of the old man. There was no expression in them but that of vengeful coldness. He was accustomed to the unwritten laws of the prairie. He knew that he had saved his life by a hair's-breadth. His right hand was still in his coat pocket. He had fired through the cloth of the coat.

Some seconds passed. Still Lablache did not move. There was no remorse in his heart—only annoyance. He was thinking with the coolness of a callous nerve. He was swiftly calculating the effect of the catastrophe as regarded himself. It was the worst thing that could have happened to him. Shooting was held lightly on the prairie, he knew, but—Then he slowly drew his pistol from his pocket and looked thoughtfully at it. His caution warned him of something. He withdrew the empty cartridge case and cleaned out the barrel. Then he put a fresh cartridge in the chamber and returned the pistol to his pocket. He was very deliberate, and displayed no emotion. His asthmatical breathing, perhaps, might have been more pronounced than usual. Then he gathered up the cards from floor and table, and wiped out the score upon the wall. He put the cards in his pocket. After that he stirred the body of his old companion with his foot. There was no sound from the prostrate rancher. Then the money-lender gently lowered himself to his knees and placed his hand over his victim's heart. It was still. John Allandale was dead.

It was now for the first time that Lablache gave any sign of emotion. It was not the emotion of sorrow—merely fear—superstitious fear. As he realized that the other was dead his head suddenly turned. It was an involuntary movement. And his fishy eyes gazed fearfully behind him. It was his first realization of guilt. The brand of Cain must inevitably carry with it a sense of horror to him who falls beneath its ban. He was a murderer—and he knew it.

Now his-movements became less deliberate. He felt that he must get away from that horrid sight. He rose swiftly, with a display of that agility which the unfortunate Horrocks had seen. He glanced about the room and took his bearings. He strode to the lamp and put it out. Then he groped his way to the window and took down his bandanna; stealthily, and with a certain horror, he felt his way in the darkness to the door. He opened it and passed out.

CHAPTER XXVIII - SETTLING THE RECKONING

Jacky stood at the gate of the fifty-acre pasture. She had been standing there for some minutes. The night was quite dark; there was no moon. Her horse, Nigger, was standing hitched to one of the fence posts a few yards away from her and inside the pasture. The girl was waiting for "Lord" Bill.

Not a sound broke the stillness of the night as she stood listening. A wonderful calmness was over all. From her position Jacky had seen the light shining through the window of the implement shed. Now the shed was quite dark—the window had been covered. She knew that her uncle and Lablache were there. She was growing impatient.

Every now and then she would turn her face from the contemplation of the blackness of the distant end of the field to the direction of the settlement, her ears straining to catch the sound of her dilatory lover's coming. The minutes passed all too swiftly. And her impatience grew and found vent in irritable movements and sighs of vexation.

Suddenly her ears caught the sound of distant cries coming from the settlement. She turned in the direction. A lurid gleam was in the sky. Then, as she watched, the glare grew brighter, and sparks shot up in a great wreathing cloud of smoke. The direction was unmistakable. She knew that Lablache's store had been fired.

"Good," she murmured, with a sigh of relief. "I guess Bill'll come right along now. I wish he'd come. They've been in that shack ten minutes or more. Why don't he come?"

The glare of the fire fascinated her, and her eyes remained glued in the direction of it. The

reflection in the sky was widespread and she knew that the great building must be gutted, for there was no means of putting the fire out. Then her thoughts turned to Lablache, and she smiled as she thought of the surprise awaiting him. The sky in the distance grew brighter. She could only see the lurid reflection; a rising ground intervened between her and the settlement.

Suddenly against the very heart of the glare the figure of a horseman coming towards her was silhouetted as he rode over the rising ground. One glance sufficed the girl. That tall, thin figure was unmistakable—her lover was hastening towards her. She turned to her horse and unhitched the reins from the fence post.

Presently Bill came up and dismounted. He led Golden Eagle through the gate. The greeting was an almost silent one between these two. Doubtless their thoughts carried them beyond mere greetings. They stood for a second.

"Shall we ride?" said Jacky, inclining her head in the direction of the shed.

"No, we will walk. How long have they been there?"

"A quarter of an hour, I guess."

"Come along, then."

They walked down the pasture leading their two horses.

"I see no light," said Bill, looking straight ahead of him.

"It is covered—the window, I mean. What are you going to do, Bill?"

The man laughed.

"Lots—but I shall be guided by circumstances. You must remain outside, Jacky; you can see to the horses."

"P'r'aps."

The man turned sharply.

"P'r'aps?"

"Yes, one never knows. I guess it's no use fixing things when—guided by circumstances."

They relapsed into silence and walked steadily on. Half the distance was covered when Jacky halted.

"Will Golden Eagle stand 'knee-haltering,' Bill?"

"Yes, why?"

"We'll 'knee-halter' 'em."

Bill stood irresolute.

"It'll be better, I guess," the girl pursued. "We'll be freer."

"All right," replied Bill. "But," after a pause, "I'd rather you didn't come further, little woman—there may be shooting—"

"That's so. I like shootin'. What's that?"

The girl had secured her horse, Bill was in the act of securing his. Jacky raised her hand in an attitude of attention and turned her face to windward. Bill stood erect and listened.

"Ah!—it's the boys. Baptiste said they would come."

There was a faint rustling of grass near by. Jacky's keen ears had detected the stealing sound at once. To others it might have passed for the effect of the night breeze.

They listened for a few seconds longer, then Bill turned to the girl.

"Come—the horses are safe. The boys will not show themselves. I fancy they are here to watch only—me."

They continued on towards the shed. They were both wrapt in silent thought. Neither was prepared for what was to come. They were still nearly a quarter of a mile from the building. Its outline was dimly discernible in the darkness. And, too, now the light from the oil lamp could be seen dimly shining through the red bandanna which was stretched over the window.

Now the sound of "Poker" John's voice raised in anger reached them. They stood still with one accord. It was astonishing how the voice traveled all that distance. He must be shouting. A sudden fear gripped their hearts. Bill was the first to move. With a whispered "Wait here," he ran forward. For an instant Jacky waited, then, on a sudden impulse, she followed her lover.

The girl had just started. Suddenly the sharp report of firearms split the air. She came up with Bill, who had paused at the sound.

"Hustle, Bill. It's murder," the girl panted.

"Yes," and he ran forward with set face and gleaming eyes.

Murder—and who was the victim? Bill wondered, and his heart misgave him. There was no longer any sound of voices. The rancher had been silenced. He thought of the girl behind him. Then his whole mind suddenly centered itself upon Lablache. If he had killed the rancher no mercy should be shown to him.

Bill was rapidly nearing the building, and it was wrapped in an ominous silence.

For a second he again came to a stand. He wanted to make sure. He could hear Jacky's speeding footfalls from behind. And he could hear the stealthy movements of those others. These were the only sounds that reached him. He went on again. He came to the building. The window was directly in front of him. He tried to look into the room but the handkerchief effectually hid the interior. Suddenly the light went out. He knew what this meant. Turning away from the window he crept towards the door. Jacky had come up. He motioned her into the shadow. Then he waited.

The door opened and a great figure came out. It was Lablache. Even in the darkness Bill recognized him. His heavy, asthmatical breathing must have betrayed the money-lender if there had been no other means of identification.

Lablache stepped out on to the prairie utterly unconscious of the figures crouching in the darkness. He stepped heavily forward. Four steps—that was all. A silent spring—an iron grip round the money-lender's throat, from behind. A short, sharp struggle—a great gasping for breath. Then Lablache reeled backwards and fell to the ground with Bill hanging to his throat like some tiger. In the fall the money-lender's pistol went off. There was a sharp report, and the bullet tore up the ground. But no harm was done. Bill held on. Then came the swish of a skirt. Jacky was at her lover's side. She dragged the money-lender's pistol from his pocket. Then Bill let go his hold and stood panting over the prostrate man. The whole thing was done in silence. No word was spoken.

Lablache sucked in a deep whistling breath. His eyes rolled and he struggled into a sitting posture. He was gazing into the muzzle of Bill's pistol.

"Get up!" The stern voice was unlike Bill's, but there was nothing of the twang of Retief about it.

The money-lender stared, but did not move—neither did he speak. Jacky had darted into the hut. She had gone to light the lamp and learn the truth.

"Get up!" The chilling command forced the money-lender to rise. He saw before him the tall, thin figure of his assailant.

"Retief!" he gasped, and then stood speechless.

Now the re-lighted lamp glowed through the doorway. Bill pointed towards the door.

"Go inside!" The relentless pistol was at Lablache's head.

"No—no! Not inside." The words whistled on a gasping breath.

"Go inside!"

Cowed and fearful, Lablache obeyed the mandate.

Bill followed the money-lender into the miserable room. His keen eyes took in the scene in one swift glance. He saw Jacky kneeling beside the prostrate form of her uncle. She was not weeping. Her beautiful face was stonily calm. She was just looking down at that still form, that drawn gray face, the staring eyes and dropped jaw. Bill saw and understood. Lablache might expect no mercy.

The murderer himself was now looking in the direction of—but not at—the body of his victim. He was gazing with eyes which expressed horrified amazement at the sight of the crouching figure of Jacky Allandale. He was trying to fathom the meaning of her association with Retief.

Bill closed the door. Now he came forward towards the table, always keeping Lablache in front of him.

"Is he dead?" Bill's voice was solemn.

Jacky looked up. There was a look as of stone in her somber eyes.

"He is dead—dead."

"Ah! For the moment we will leave the dead. Come, let us deal with the living. It is time for a final reckoning."

There was a deadly chill in the tone of Bill's voice—a chill which was infinitely more dreadful to Lablache's ears than could any passionate outburst have been.

The door opened gently. No one noticed it, so absorbed were they in the ghastly matter before them. Wider the door swung and several dusky faces appeared in the opening.

The money-lender stood motionless. His gaze ignored the dead. He watched the living. He wondered what "Lord" Bill's preamble portended. He shook himself like one rousing from some dreadful nightmare. He summoned his courage and tried to face the consequences of his act with

an outward calm. Struggle as he might a deadly fear was ever present.

It was not the actual fear of death—it was the moral dread of something intangible. He feared at that moment not that which was to come. It was the presence of the dusky-visaged raider and—the girl. He feared mostly the icy look on Jacky's face. However, his mind was quite clear. He was watching for a loophole of escape. And he lost no detail of the scene before him.

A matter which puzzled him greatly was the familiar voice of the raider. Retief, as he knew him, spoke with a pronounced accent, but now he only heard the ordinary tones of an Englishman.

Bill had purposely abandoned his exaggerated Western drawl. Now he removed the scarf from his neck and proceeded to wipe the yellow grease from his face and neck. Lablache, with dismay in his heart, saw the white skin which had been concealed beneath the paint. The truth flashed upon him instantly. And before Bill had had time to remove his wig his name had passed the money-lender's lips.

"Bunning-Ford?" he gasped. And in that expression was a world of moral fear.

"Yes, Bunning-Ford, come to settle his last reckoning with you."

Bill eyed the murderer steadily and Lablache felt his last grip on his courage relax. A terrible fear crept upon him as his courage ebbed. Slowly Bill turned his eyes in the direction of the still kneeling Jacky. The girl's eyes met his, and, in response to some mute understanding which passed between them, she rose to her feet.

Bill did not speak. He merely looked at his pistol. Jacky spoke as if answering some remark of his.

"Yes, this is my affair."

Then she turned upon the money-lender. There was no wrath in her face, no anger in her tones; only that horrid, stony purpose which Lablache dreaded. He wished she would hurl invective at him. He felt that it would have been better so.

"The death which you have dealt to that poor old man is too good for you—murderer," she said, her deep, somber eyes seeming to pass through and through the mountain of flesh she was addressing. "I take small comfort in the thought that he had no time to suffer bodily pain. You will suffer—later." Bill gazed at her wonderingly. "Liar!—cheat!—you pollute the earth. You thought to cozen that poor, harmless old man out of his property—out of me. You thought to ruin him as you have ruined others. Your efforts will avail you nothing. From the moment Bill discovered the use of your memorandum pad"—Lablache started—"your fate was sealed. We swore to confiscate your property. For every dollar you took from us you should pay ten. But now the matter is different. There is a justice on the prairie—a rough, honest, uncorruptible justice. And that justice demands your life. You shall scourge Foss River no longer. You have murdered. You shall die!—"

Jacky was about to go further with her inexorable denunciation when the door of the shed was flung wide, and eight Breeds, headed by Gautier and Baptiste, came in. They came in almost noiselessly, their moccasined feet giving out scarcely any sound upon the floor of the room.

"Lord" Bill turned, startled at the sudden apparition. Jacky hesitated. Here was a contingency which none had reckoned upon. One glance at those dark, cruel faces warned all three that these prairie outcasts had been silent witnesses of everything that had taken place. It was a supreme moment, and the deadly pallor which had assumed a leadenish hue on Lablache's face told of one who appreciated the horror of that silent coming.

Baptiste stepped over to where Jacky stood. He looked at her, and then his gaze passed to the dead man upon the floor. His beady, black eyes turned fiercely upon the cowering money-lender.

"Ow!" he grunted. And his tone was the fierce expression of an Indian roused to homicidal purpose.

Then he turned back to Jacky, and the look on his face changed to one of sympathy and even love.

"Not you, missie—and the white man—no. The prairie is the land of the Breed and his forefathers—the Red Man. Guess the law of the prairie'll come best from such as he. You are one of us," he went on, surveying the girl's beautiful face in open admiration. "You've allus been mostly one of us—but I take it y'are too white. No, guess you ain't goin' ter muck yer pretty hands wi' the filthy blood of yonder," pointing to Lablache. "These things is fur the likes o' us. Jest leave this skunk to us. Death is the sentence, and death he's goin' ter git—an' it'll be somethin' ter remember by all who behold. An' the story shall go down to our children. This poor dead thing was our best frien'—an' he's dead—murdered. So, this is a matter for the Breed."

Then the half-breed turned away. Seeing the chalk upon the floor he stooped and picked it up.

"Let's have the formalities. It is but just—"

Bill suddenly interrupted. He was angry at the interference of Baptiste.

"Hold on!"

Baptiste swung round. The white man got no further. The Breed broke in upon him with animal ferocity.

"Who says hold on? Peace, white man, peace! This is for us. Dare to stop us, an'—"

Jacky sprang between her lover and the ferocious half-breed.

"Bill, leave well alone," she said. And she held up a warning finger.

She knew these men, of a race to which she, in part, belonged. As well baulk a tiger of its prey. She knew that if Bill interfered his life would pay the forfeit. The sanguinary lust of these human devils once aroused, they cared little how it be satisfied.

Bill turned away with a shrug, and he was startled to see that he had been noiselessly surrounded by the rest of the half-breeds. Had Jacky's command needed support, it would have found it in this ominous movement.

Fate had decreed that the final act in the Foss River drama should come from another source than the avenging hands of those who had sealed their compact in Bad Man's Hollow.

Baptiste turned away from "Lord" Bill, and, at a sign from him, Lablache was brought round to the other side of the table—to where the dead rancher was lying. Baptiste handed him the chalk and then pointed to the wall, on which had been written the score of old John's last gamble.

"Write!" he said, turning back to his prisoner.

Lablache gazed fearfully around. He essayed to speak, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth.

"Write—while I tell you." The Breed still pointed to the wall.

Lablache held out the chalk.

"I kill John Allandale," dictated Baptiste.

Lablache wrote.

"Now, sign. So."

Lablache signed. Jacky and Bill stood looking on silent and wondering.

"Now," said Baptiste, with all the solemnity of a court official, "the execution shall take place. Lead him out!"

At this instant Jacky laid her hand upon the half-breed's arm.

"What—what is it?" she asked. And from her expression something of the stony calmness had gone, leaving in its place a look of wondering not untouched with horror.

"The Devil's Keg!"

CHAPTER XXIX - THE MAW OF THE MUSKEG

Down the sloping shore to the level of the great keg, the party of Breeds—and in their midst the doomed money-lender—made their way. Jacky and "Lord" Bill, on their horses, brought up the rear.

The silent *cortège* moved slowly on, out on to the oozing path across the mire. Lablache was now beyond human aid.

The right and wrong of their determination troubled the Breeds not one whit. But it was different with the two white people. What thoughts Bill had upon the matter he kept to himself. He certainly felt that he ought to interfere, but he knew how worse than useless his interference would be. Besides, the man should die. The law of Judge Lynch was the only law for such as he. Let that law take its course. Bill would have preferred the stout tree and a raw-hide lariat. But—and he shrugged his shoulders.

Jacky felt more deeply upon the subject. She saw the horror in all its truest lights, and yet she had flouted her lover's suggestion that she should not witness the end. Bad and all as Lablache was—cruel as was his nature, murderer though he be, surely no crime, however heinous, could deserve the fate to which he was going. She had remonstrated—urged Baptiste to forego his wanton cruelty, to deal out justice tempered with a mercy which should hurl the money-lender to oblivion without suffering—with scarce time to realize the happening. Her efforts were unavailing. As well try to turn an ape from its mischief—a man-eater from its mania for human blood. The inherent love of cruelty had been too long fostered in these Breeds of Foss River. Lablache had too long swayed their destinies with his ruthless hand of extortion. All the pent-up hatred, stored in the back cells of memory, was now let loose. For all these years in Foss River they had been forced to look to Lablache as the ruler of their destinies. Was he not the great—the wealthy man of the place? When he held up his finger they must work—and his wage was the wage of a dog. When money was scarce among them, would he not drive them starving from his great store? When their children and women were sick, would he not refuse them drugs—food—nourishment of any sort, unless the money was down? They had not even the privilege of men who owned land. There was no credit for the Breeds—outcasts. Baptiste and his fellows remembered all these things. Their time had come. They would pay Lablache—and their score of

interest should be heavy.

On their way from the shed to the muskeg Lablache had seen the reflection of the fire at his store in the sky. Gautier had taken devilish satisfaction in telling the wretched man of what had been done—mouthing the details in the manner of one who finds joy in cruelty. He remembered past injuries, and reveled in the money-lender's agony.

After a toilsome journey the Breeds halted at the point where the path divided into three. Jacky and Bill sat on their horses and watched the scene. Then, slowly, something of Baptiste's intention was borne in upon them.

Jacky reached out and touched her lover's arm.

"Bill, what are they going to do?"

She asked the question. But the answer was already with her. Her companion remained silent. She did not repeat her question.

Then she heard Baptiste's raucous tones as he issued his commands.

"Loose his hands!"

Jacky watched Lablache's face in the dim starlight. It was ghastly. The whole figure of the man seemed to have shrunk. The wretched man stood free, and yet more surely a prisoner than any criminal in a condemned cell.

The uncertain light of the stars showed only the dark expanse of the mire upon all sides. In the distance, ahead, the mountains were vaguely outlined against the sky; behind and around, nothing but that awful death-trap. Jacky had lived all her life beside the muskeg, but never, until that moment, had she realized the awful terror of its presence.

Now Baptiste again commanded.

"Prepare for death."

It seemed to the listening girl that a devilish tone of exultation rang in his words. She roused herself from her fascinated attention. She was about to urge her horse forward. But a thin, powerful hand reached out and gripped her by the arm. It was "Lord" Bill. His hoarse whisper sung in her ears.

"Your own words—Leave well alone."

And she allowed her horse to stand.

Now she leaned forward in her saddle and rested her elbows upon the horn in front of her. Again she heard Baptiste speak. He seemed to be in sole command.

"We'll give yer a chance fur yer life—"

Again the fiendish laugh underlaid the words.

"It's a chance of a dog—a yellow dog," he pursued. Jacky shuddered. "But such a chance is too good fur yer likes. Look—look, those hills. See the three tall peaks—yes, those three, taller than the rest. One straight in front; one to the right, an' one away to the left. Guess this path divides right hyar—in three, an' each path heads for one of those peaks. Say, jest one trail crosses the keg—one. Savee? The others end sudden, and then—the keg."

The full horror of the man's meaning now became plain to the girl. She heaved a great gasp, and turned to Bill. Her lover signed a warning. She turned again to the scene before her.

"Now, see hyar, you scum," Baptiste went on. "This is yer chance. Choose yer path and foller it. Guess yer can't see it no more than yer ken see this one we're on, but you've got the lay of it. Guess you'll travel the path yer choose to—the end. If yer don't move—an' move mighty slippy—you'll be dumped headlong into the muck. Ef yer git on to the right path an' cross the keg safe, yer ken sling off wi' a whole skin. Guess you'll fin' it a ticklish job—mebbe you'll git through. But I've a notion yer won't. Now, take yer dog's chance, an' remember, its death if yer don't, anyway."

The man ceased speaking. Jacky saw Lablache shake his great head. Then something made him look at the mountains beyond. There were the three dimly-outlined peaks. They were clear enough to guide him. Jacky, watching, saw the expression of his face change. It was as though a flicker of hope had risen within him. Then she saw him turn and eye Baptiste. He seemed to read in that cruel, dark face a vengeful purpose. He seemed to scent a trick. Presently he turned again to the hills.

How plainly the watching girl read the varying emotions which beset him. He was trying to face this chance calmly, but the dark expanse of the surrounding mire wrung his heart with terror. He could not choose, and yet he knew he must do so or—

Baptiste spoke again.

"Choose!"

Lablache again bent his eyes upon the hills. But his lashless lids would flicker, and his vision became impaired. He turned to the Breed with an imploring gesture. Baptiste made no

movement. His relentless expression remained unchanged. The wretched man turned away to the rest of the Breeds.

A pistol was leveled at his head and he turned back to Baptiste. The only comfort he obtained was a monosyllabic command.

"Choose!"

"God, man, I can't." Lablache gasped out the words which seemed literally to be wrung from him.

"Choose!" The inexorable tone sent a shudder over the distraught man. Even in the starlight the expression of the villain's face was hideous to behold.

Baptiste's voice again rang out on the still night air.

"Move him!"

A pistol was pushed behind his ear.

"Do y' hear?"

"Mercy—mercy!" cried the distraught man. But he made no move.

There was an instant's pause. Then the loud report of the threatening pistol rang out. It had been fired through the lobe of his ear.

"Oh, God!"

The exclamation was forced from Jacky. The torture—the horror nearly drove her wild. She lifted her reins as though to ride to the villain's aid. Then something—some cruel recollection—stayed her. She remembered her uncle and her heart hardened.

The merciless torture of the Breed was allowed to pass.

To the wretched victim it seemed that his ear-drum must be split for the shot had left him almost stone deaf. The blood trickled from the wound. He almost leapt forward. Then he stood all of a tremble as he felt the ground shake beneath him. A cold sweat poured down his great face.

"Choose!" Baptiste followed the terror-stricken man up.

"No—no! Don't shoot! Yes, I'll go—only—don't shoot."

The abject cowardice the great man now displayed was almost pitiable. Bill's lip curled in disdain. He had expected that this man would have shown a bold front.

He had always believed Lablache to be, at least, a man of courage. But he did not allow for the circumstances—the surroundings. Lablache on the safe ground of the prairie would have faced disaster very differently. The thought of that sucking mire was too terrible. The oily maw of that death-trap was a thing to strike horror into the bravest heart.

"Which path?" Baptiste spoke, waving his hand in the direction of the mountains.

Lablache moved cautiously forward, testing the ground with his foot as he went. Then he paused again and eyed the mountains.

"The right path," he said at last, in a guttural whisper.

"Then start." The words rang out cuttingly upon the night air.

Lablache fixed his eyes upon the distant peak of the mountain which was to be his guide. He advanced slowly. The Breeds followed, Jacky and Bill bringing up the rear. The ground seemed firm and the money-lender moved heavily forward. His breath came in gasps. He was panting, not with exertion, but with terror. He could not test the ground until his weight was upon it. An outstretched foot pressed on the grassy path told him nothing. He knew that the crust would hold until the weight of his body was upon it. With every successful step his terror increased. What would the next bring forth?

His agony of mind was awful.

He covered about ten yards in this way. The sweat poured from him. His clothes stuck to him. He paused for a second and took fresh bearings. He turned his head and looked into the muzzle of Baptiste's revolver. He shuddered and turned again to the mountains. He pressed forward. Still the ground was firm. But this gave him no hope. Suddenly a frightful horror swept over him. It was something fresh; he had not thought of it before. The fact was strange, but it was so. The path—had he taken the wrong one? He had made his selection at haphazard and he knew that there was no turning back. Baptiste had said so and he had seen his resolve written in his face. A conviction stole over him that he was on the wrong path. He knew he was. He must be. Of course it was only natural. The center path must be the main one. He stood still. He could have cried out in his mental agony. Again he turned—and saw the pistol.

He put his foot out. The ground trembled at his touch. He drew back with a gurgling cry. He turned and tried another spot. It was firm until his weight rested upon it. Then it shook. He sought to return to the spot he had left. But now he could not be sure. His mind was uncertain. Suddenly he gave a jump. He felt the ground solid beneath him as he alighted. His face was

streaming. He passed his hand across it in a dazed way. His terror increased a hundredfold. Now he endeavored to take his bearings afresh. He looked out at the three mountains. The right one—yes, that was it. The right one. He saw the peak, and made another step forward. The path held. Another step and his foot went through. He drew back with a cry. He tripped and fell heavily. The ground shook under him and he lay still, moaning.

Baptiste's voice roused him and urged him on.

"Git on, you skunk," he said. "Go to yer death."

Lablache sat up and looked about. He felt dazed. He knew he must go on. Death—death which ever way he turned. God! did ever a man suffer so? The name of John Allandale came to his mind and he gazed wildly about, fancying some one had whispered it to him in answer to his thoughts. He stood up. He took another step forward with reckless haste. He remembered the pistol behind him. The ground seemed to shake under him. His distorted fancy was playing tricks with him. Another step. Yes, the ground was solid—no, it shook. The weight of his body came down on the spot. His foot went through. He hurled himself backwards again and clutched wildly at the ground. He shuddered and cried out. Again came Baptiste's voice.

"Git on, or—"

The distraught man struggled to his feet. He was becoming delirious with terror. He stepped forward again. The ground seemed solid and he laughed a horrid, wild laugh. Another step and another. He paused, breathing hard. Then he started to mutter,—

"On—on. Yes, on again or they'll have me. The path—this is the right one. I'll cheat 'em yet."

He strode out boldly. His foot sank in something soft He did not seem to notice it. Another step and his foot sank again in the reeking muck. Suddenly he seemed to realize. He threw himself back and obtained a foothold. He stood trembling. He turned and tried another direction. Again he sank. Again he drew back. His knees tottered and he feared to move. Suddenly a ring of metal pressed against his head from behind. In a state of panic he stepped forward on the shaking ground. It held. He paused, then stepped again, his foot coming down on a reedy tuft. It shook, but still held. He took another step. His foot sunk quickly, till the soft muck oozed round his ankle. He cried out in terror and turned to come back.

Baptiste stood with leveled pistol.

"On—on, you gopher. Turn again an' I wing yer. On, you bastard. You've chosen yer path, keep to it."

"Mercy—I'm sinking."

"Git on—not one step back."

Lablache struggled to release his sinking limb. By a great effort he drew it out only to plunge it into another yielding spot. Again he struggled, and in his struggle his other foot slipped from its reedy hold. It, too, sank. With a terrible cry he plunged forward. He lurched heavily as he sought to drag his feet from the viscid muck. At every effort he sank deeper. At last he hurled himself full length upon the surface of the reeking mire. He cried aloud, but no one answered him. Under his body he felt the yielding crust cave. He clutched at the surface grass, but he only plucked the tufts from their roots. They gave him no hold.

The silent figures on the path watched his death-struggle. It was ghastly—horrible. The expression of their faces was fiendish. They watched with positive joy. There was no pity in the hearts of the Breeds.

They hearkened to the man's piteous cries with ears deafened to all entreaty. They simply watched—watched and reveled in the watching—for the terrible end which must come.

Already the murderer's vast proportions were half buried in the slimy ooze, and, at every fresh effort to save himself, he sank deeper. But the death which the Breeds awaited was slow to come. Slow—slow. And so they would have it.

Like some hungry monster the muskeg mouths its victims with oozing saliva, supping slowly, and seemingly revels in anticipation of the delicate morsel of human flesh. The watchers heard the gurgling mud, like to a great tongue licking, as it wrapped round the doomed man's body, sucking him down, down. The clutch of the keg seemed like something alive; something so all-powerful—like the twining feelers of the giant cuttle-fish. Slowly they saw the doomed man's legs disappear, and already the slimy muck was above his middle.

The minutes dragged along—the black slime rose—it was at Lablache's breast. His arms were outspread, and, for the moment, they offered resistance to the sucking strength of the mud. But the resistance was only momentary. Down, down he was drawn into that insatiable maw. The dying man's arms canted upwards as his shoulders were dragged under.

He cried—he shrieked—he raved. Down, down he went—the mud touched his chin. His head was thrown back in one last wild scream. The watchers saw the staring eyes—the wide-stretched, lashless lids.

His cries died down into gurgles as the mud oozed over into his gaping mouth. Down he went to his dreadful death, until his nostrils filled and only his awful eyes remained above the muck. The

watchers did not move. Slowly—slowly and silently now—the last of him disappeared. Once his head was below the surface his limpened arms followed swiftly.

The Breeds reluctantly turned back from the horrid spectacle. The fearful torture was done. For a few moments no words were spoken. Then, at last, it was Baptiste who broke the silence. He looked round on the passion-distorted faces about him. Then his beady eyes rested on the horrified faces of Jacky and her lover. He eyed them, and presently his gaze dropped, and he turned back to his countrymen. He merely said two words.

"Scatter, boys."

The tragedy was over and his words brought down the curtain. In silence the half-breeds turned and slunk away. They passed back over their tracks. Each knew that the sooner he reached the camp again, the sooner would safety be assured. As the last man departed Baptiste stepped up to Jacky and Bill, who had not moved from their positions.

"Guess there's no cause to complain o' yer friends," he said, addressing Jacky, and leering up into her white, set face.

The girl shivered and turned away with a look of utter loathing on her face. She appealed to her lover.

"Bill—Bill, send him away. It's—it's too horrible."

"Lord" Bill fixed his gray eyes on the Breed.

"Scatter—we've had enough."

"Eh? Guess yer per-tickler."

There was a truculent tone in Baptiste's voice.

Bill's revolver was out like lightning.

"Scatter!"

And in that word Baptiste realized his dismissal.

His face looked very ugly, but he moved off under the covering muzzle of the white man's pistol.

Bill watched him until he was out of sight. Then he turned to Jacky.

"Well? Which way?"

Jacky did not answer for a moment. She gazed at the mountains. She shivered. It might have been the chill morning air—it might have been emotion. Then she looked back in the direction of Foss River. Dawn was already streaking the horizon.

She sighed like a weary child, and looked helplessly about. Her lover had never seen her vigorous nature so badly affected. But he realized the terrors she had been through.

Bill looked at her.

"Well?"

"Yonder." She pointed to the distant hills. "Foss River is no longer possible."

"The day that sees Lablache—"

"Yes—come."

Bill gazed lingeringly in the direction of the settlement. Jacky followed his gaze. Then she touched Nigger's flank with her spur. Golden Eagle cocked his ears, his head was turned towards Bad Man's Hollow. He needed no urging. He felt that he was going home.

Together they rode away across the keg.

Dr. Abbot had been up all night, as had most of Foss River. Everybody had been present at the fire. It was daylight when it was discovered that John Allandale and Jacky were missing. Lablache had been missed, but this had not so much interested people. They thought of Retief and waited for daylight.

Silas brought the news of "Poker" John's absence—also his niece's. Immediately was a "hue and cry" taken up. Foss River bustled in search.

It was noon before the rancher was found. Doctor Abbot and Silas had set out in search together. The fifty-acre pasture was Silas's suggestion. Dr. Abbot did not remember the implement shed.

They found the old man's body. They found Lablache's confession. Silas could not read. He took no stock in the writing and thought only of the dead man. The doctor had read, but he said nothing. He dispatched Silas for help.

When the foreman had gone Dr. Abbot picked up the black wig which Bill had used. He stood

looking at it for a while, then he put it carefully into his pocket.

"Ah! I think I understand something now," he said, slowly fingering the wig. "Um—yes. I'll burn it when I get home."

Silas returned with help. John Allandale was buried quietly in the little piece of ground set aside for such purposes. The truth of the disappearance of Lablache, Jacky and "Lord" Bill was never known outside of the doctor's house.

How much or how little Dr. Abbot knew would be hard to tell. Possibly he guessed a great deal. Anyway, whatever he knew was doubtless shared with "Aunt" Margaret. For when the doctor had a secret it did not remain his long. "Aunt" Margaret had a way with her. However, she was the very essence of discretion.

Foss River settled down after its nine days' wonder. It was astonishing how quickly the affair was forgotten. But then, Foss River was not yet civilized. Its people had not yet learned to worry too much over their neighbors' affairs.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STORY OF THE FOSS RIVER RANCH: A
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