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Author: Henry Herbert Knibbs

Illustrator: R. M. Brinkerhoff

Illustrator: Stanley L. Wood

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[Frontispiece: The Ridin' Kid]

THE RIDIN' KID FROM POWDER RIVER

By

HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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Drawn by R. M. Brinkerhoff

The Ridin' Kid from Powder River

CHAPTER I

YOUNG PETE

With the inevitable pinto or calico horse in his string the horse-trader drifted toward the distant town of Concho, accompanied by a lazy cloud of dust, a slat-ribbed dog, and a knock-kneed foal that insisted on getting in the way of the wagon team. Strung out behind this indolently moving aggregation of desert adventurers plodded an indifferent lot of cayuses, their heads lowered and their eyes filled with dust.

Young Pete, perched on a saddle much too large for him, hazed the tired horses with a professional "Hi! Yah! Git in there, you doggone, onnery, three-legged pole-cat you!" A gratuitous

command, for the three-legged pole-cat referred to had no other ambition than to shuffle wearily along behind the wagon in the hope that somewhere ahead was good grazing, water, and chance shade.

The trader was lean, rat-eyed, and of a vicious temper. Comparatively, the worst horse in his string was a gentleman. Horse-trading and whiskey go arm-in-arm, accompanied by their copartners, profanity and tobacco-chewing. In the right hand of the horse-trader is guile and in his left hand is trickery. And this squalid, slovenly-booted, and sombrero'd gentleman of the outlands lived down to and even beneath all the vicarious traditions of his kind, a pariah of the waste places, tolerated in the environs of this or that desert town chiefly because of Young Pete, who was popular, despite the fact that he bartered profanely for chuck at the stores, picketed the horses in pasturage already preempted by the natives, watered the horses where water was scarce and for local consumption only, and lied eloquently as to the qualities of his master's caviaryard when a trade was in progress. For these manful services Young Pete received scant rations and much abuse.

Pete had been picked up in the town of Enright, where no one seemed to have a definite record of his immediate ancestry. He was quite willing to go with the trader, his only stipulation being that he be allowed to bring along his dog, another denizen of Enright whose ancestry was as vague as were his chances of getting a square meal a day. Yet the dog, despite lean rations, suffered less than Young Pete, for the dog trusted no man. Consequently he was just out of reach when the trader wanted to kick something. Young Pete was not always so fortunate. But he was not altogether unhappy. He had responsibilities, especially when the trader was drunk and the horses needed attention. Pete learned much profanity without realizing its significance. He also learned to chew tobacco and realized its immediate significance. He mastered the art, however, and became in his own estimation a man grown—a twelve-year-old man who could swear, chew, and show horses to advantage when the trader could not, because the horses were not afraid of Young Pete.

When Pete got kicked or cuffed he cursed the trader heartily. Once, after a brutal beating, Young Pete backed to the wagon, pulled the rifle from beneath the seat, and threatened to kill the trader. After that the rifle was never left loaded. In his tough little heart Pete hated his master, but he liked the life, which offered much variety and promised no little romance of a kind.

Pete had barely existed for twelve years. When the trader came along with his wagon and ponies and cajoled Pete into going with him, Pete gladly turned his face toward wider horizons and the great adventure. Yet for him the great adventure was not to end in the trading of horses and drifting from town to town all his life.

Old man Annersley held down a quarter-section on the Blue Mesa chiefly because he liked the country. Incidentally he gleaned a living by hard work and thrift. His homestead embraced the only water for miles in any direction, water that the upland cattlemen had used from time immemorial. When Annersley fenced this water he did a most natural and necessary thing. He had gathered together a few head of cattle, some chickens, two fairly respectable horses, and enough timber to build a comfortable cabin. He lived alone, a gentle old hermit whose hand was clean to every man, and whose heart was tender to all living things despite many hard years in desert and range among men who dispensed such law as there was with a quick forefinger and an uncompromising eye. His gray hairs were honorable in that he had known no wastrel years. Nature had shaped him to a great, rugged being fitted for the simplicity of mountain life and toil. He had no argument with God and no petty dispute with man. What he found to do he did heartily. The horse-trader, camped near Concho, came to realize this.

Old man Annersley was in need of a horse. One of his team had died that winter. So he unhooked the pole from the buckboard, rigged a pair of shafts, and drove to Concho, where he heard of the trader and finally located that worthy drinking at Tony's Place. Young Pete, as usual, was in camp looking after the stock. The trader accompanied Annersley to the camp. Young Pete, sniffing a customer, was immediately up and doing. Annersley inspected the horses and finally chose a horse which Young Pete roped with much swagger and unnecessary language, for the horse was gentle, and quite familiar with Young Pete's professional vocabulary.

"This here animal is sound, safe, and a child could ride him," asserted Young Pete as he led the languid and underfed pony to the wagon. "He's got good action." Pete climbed to the wagon-wheel and mounted bareback. "He don't pitch, bite, kick, or balk." The horse, used to being shown, loped a few yards, turned and trotted back. "He neck-reins like a cow-hoss," said Pete, "and he can turn in a ten-cent piece. You can rope from him and he'll hold anything you git your rope on."

"Reckon he would," said Annersley, and his eyes twinkled. "'Specially a hitchin'-rail. Git your rope on a hitchin'-rail and I reckon that hitchin'-rail would never git away from him."

"He's broke right," reasserted Young Pete. "He's none of your ornery, half-broke cayuses. You ought to seen him when he was a colt! Say, 't wa'n't no time afore he could outwork and outrun any hoss in our bunch."

"How old be you?" queried Annersley.

"Twelve, goin' on thirteen."

"Uh-huh. And the hoss?"

"Oh, he's got a little age on him, but that don't hurt him none."

Annersley's beard twitched. "He must 'a' been a colt for quite a spell. But I ain't lookin' for a cow-hoss. What I want is a hoss that I can work. How does he go in harness?"

"Harness! Say, mister, this here hoss can pull the kingpin out of a wagon without sweatin' a hair. Hook him onto a plough and he sure can make the ole plough smoke."

Annersley shook his head. "That's a mite too fast for me, son. I'd hate to have to stop at the end of every furrow and pour water on that there plough-point to keep her cool."

"'Course if you're lookin' for a *cheap* hoss," said Young Pete, nothing abashed, "why, we got 'em. But I was showin' you the best in the string."

"Don't know that I want him. What you say he was worth?"

"He's worth a hundred, to any man. But we're sellin' him cheap, for cash—forty dollars."

"Fifty," said the trader, "and if he ain't worth fifty, he ain't worth puttin' a halter on. Fifty is givin' him to you."

"So? Then I reckon I don't want him. I wa'n't lookin' for a present. I was lookin' to buy a hoss."

The trader saw a real customer slipping through his fingers. "You can put a halter on him for forty—cash."

"Nope. Your pardner here said forty,"—and Annersley smiled at Young Pete. "I'll look him over ag'in for thirty."

Young Pete knew that they needed money badly, a fact that the trader was apt to ignore when he was drinking. "You said I could sell him for forty, or mebby less, for cash," complained Young Pete, slipping from the pony and tying him to the wagon-wheel.

"You go lay down!" growled the trader, and he launched a kick that jolted Pete into the smouldering camp-fire. Pete was used to being kicked, but not before an audience. Moreover, the hot ashes had burned his hands. Pete's dog, hitherto asleep beneath the wagon, rose bristling, anxious to defend his young master, but afraid of the trader. The cowering dog and the cringing boy told Annersley much.

Young Pete, brushing the ashes from his over-alls, rose and shaking with rage, pointed a trembling finger at the trader. "You're a doggone liar! You're a doggone coward! You're a doggone thief!"

"Just a minute, friend," said Annersley as the trader started toward the boy. "I reckon the boy is right—but we was talkin' hosses. I'll give you just forty dollars for the hoss—and the boy."

"Make it fifty and you can take 'em. The kid is no good, anyhow."

This was too much for Young Pete. He could stand abuse and scant rations, but to be classed as "no good," when he had worked so hard and lied so eloquently, hurt more than mere kick or blow. His face quivered and he bit his lip. Old man Annersley slowly drew a wallet from his overalls and counted out forty dollars. "That hoss ain't sound," he remarked and he recounted the money. He's got a couple of wind-puffs, and he's old. He needs feedin' and restin' up. That boy your boy?"

"That kid! Huh! I picked him up when he was starvin' to death over to Enright. I been feedin' him and his no-account dog for a year, and neither of 'em is worth what he eats."

"So? Then I reckon you won't be missin' him none if I take him along up to my place."

The horse-trader did not want to lose Young Pete, but he did want Annersley's money. "I'll leave it to him," he said, flattering himself that Pete dare not leave him.

"What do you say, son?"—and old man Annersley turned to Pete. "Would you like to go along up with me and help me to run my place? I'm kind o' lonesome up there, and I was thinkin' o' gettin' a pardner."

"Where do you live?" queried Pete, quickly drying his eyes.

"Why, up in those hills, which don't no way smell of liquor and are tellin' the truth from sunup to sunup. Like to come along and give me a hand with my stock?"

"You bet I would!"

"Here's your money," said Annersley, and he gave the trader forty dollars. "Git right in that buckboard, son."

"Hold on!" exclaimed the trader. "The kid stays here. I said fifty for the outfit."

"I'm goin'," asserted Young Pete. "I'm sick o' gettin' kicked and cussed every time I come near him. He licked me with a rawhide last week."

"He did, eh? For why?"

"'Cause he was drunk—that's why!"

"Then I reckon you come with me. Such as him ain't fit to raise young 'uns."

Young Pete was enjoying himself. This was indeed revenge—to hear some one tell the trader what he was, and without the fear of a beating. "I'll go with you," said Pete. "Wait till I git my blanket."

"Don't you touch nothin' in that wagon!" stormed the trader.

"Git your blanket, son," said Annersley.

The horse-trader was deceived by Annersley's mild manner. As Young Pete started toward the wagon, the trader jumped and grabbed him. The boy flung up his arms to protect his face. Old man Annersley said nothing, but with ponderous ease he strode forward, seized the trader from behind, and shook that loose-mouthed individual till his teeth rattled and the horizon line grew dim.

"Git your blanket, son," said Annersley, as he swung the trader round, deposited him face down in the sand, and sat on him. "I'm waitin'."

"Goin' to kill him?" queried Young Pete, his black eyes snapping.

"Shucks, no!"

"Kin I kick him—jest onct, while you hold him down?"

"Nope, son. That's too much like his way. You run along and git your blanket if you're goin' with me."

Young Pete scrambled to the wagon and returned with a tattered blanket, his sole possession, and his because he had stolen it from a Mexican camp near Enright. He scurried to the buckboard and hopped in.

Annersley rose and brought the trader up with him as though the latter were a bit of limp tie-rope.

"And now we'll be driftin'," he told the other.

Murder burned in the horse-trader's narrow eyes, but immediate physical ambition was lacking.

Annersley bulked big. The horse-trader cursed the old man in two languages. Annersley climbed into the buckboard, gave Pete the lead-rope of the recent purchase, and clucked to his horse, paying no attention whatever to the volley of invectives behind him.

"He'll git his gun and shoot you in the back," whispered Young Pete.

"Nope, son. He'll jest go and git another drink and tell everybody in Concho how he's goin' to kill me—some day. I've handled folks like him frequent."

"You sure kin fight!" exclaimed Young Pete enthusiastically.

"Never hit a man in my life. I never dast to," said Annersley.

"You jest set on 'em, eh?"

"Jest set on 'em," said Annersley. "You keep tight holt to that rope. That fool hoss acts like he wanted to go back to your camp."

Young Pete braced his feet and clung to the rope, admonishing the horse with outland eloquence. As they crossed the arroyo, the led horse pulled back, all but unseating Young Pete.

"Here, you!" cried the boy. "You quit that—afore my new pop takes you by the neck and the—pants and sits on you!"

"That's the idea, son. Only next time, jest tell him without cussin'."

"He always cusses the hosses," said Young Pete. "Everybody cusses 'em."

"Most everybody. But a man what cusses a hoss is only cussin' hisself. You're some young to git that—but mebby you'll recollect I said so, some day."

"Didn't you cuss him when you set on him?" queried Pete.

"For why, son?"

"Wa'n't you mad?"

"Shucks, no."

"Don't you ever cuss?"

"Not frequent, son. Cussin' never pitched any hay for me."

Young Pete was a bit disappointed. "Didn't you never cuss in your life?"

Annersley glanced down at the boy.

"Well, if you promise you won't tell nobody, I did cuss onct, when I struck the plough into a yellow-jacket's nest which I wa'n't aimin' to hit, nohow. Had the reins round my neck, not expectin' visitors, when them hornets come at me and the hoss without even ringin' the bell. That team drug me quite a spell afore I got loose. When I got enough dirt out of my mouth so as I could holler, I set to and said what I thought."

"Cussed the hosses and the doggone ole plough and them hornets—and everything!" exclaimed Pete.

"Nope, son, I cussed myself for hangin' them reins round my neck. What you say your name was?"

"Pete."

"What was the trader callin' you—any other name besides Pete?"

"Yes, I reckon he was. When he is good 'n' drunk he would be callin' me a doggone little—"

"Never mind, I know about that. I was meanin' your other name."

"My other name? I ain't got none. I'm Pete."

Annersley shook his head. "Well, pardner, you'll be Pete Annersley now. Watch out that hoss don't jerk you out o' your jacket. This here hill is a enterprisin' hill and leads right up to my place. Hang on! As I was sayin', we're pardners, you and me. We're goin' up to my place on the Blue and tend to the critters and git washed up and have supper, and mebby after supper we'll mosey around so you kin git acquainted with the ranch. Where'd you say your pop come from?"

"I dunno. He ain't my real pop."

Annersley turned and looked down at the lean, bright little face. "You hungry, son?"

"You bet!"

"What you say if we kill a chicken for supper—and celebrate."

"G'wan, you're joshin' me!"

"Nope. I like chicken. And I got one that needs killin'; a no-account ole hen what won't set and won't lay."

"Then we'll ring her doggone head off, eh?"

"Somethin' like that—only I ain't jest hatin' that there hen. She ain't no good, that's all."

Young Pete pondered, watching Annersley's grave, bearded face. Suddenly he brightened. "I know! Nobody kin tell when you're joshin' 'em, 'cause your whiskers hides it. Guess I'll grow some whiskers and then I kin fool everybody."

Old man Annersley chuckled, and spoke to the horses. Young Pete, happier than he had ever been, wondered if this good luck would last—if it were real, or just a dream that would vanish, leaving him shivering in his tattered blanket, and the horse-trader telling him to get up and rustle wood for the morning fire.

The buckboard topped the rise and leveled to the tree-girdled mesa. Young Pete stared. This was the most beautiful spot he had ever seen. Ringed round by a great forest of spruce, the Blue Mesa lay shimmering in the sunset like an emerald lake, beneath a cloudless sky tinged with crimson, gold, and amethyst. Across the mesa stood a cabin, the only dwelling in that silent expanse. And this was to be his home, and the big man beside him, gently urging the horse, was his partner. He had said so. Surely the great adventure had begun.

Annersley glanced down. Young Pete's hand was clutched in the old man's coat-sleeve, but the boy was gazing ahead, his bright black eyes filled with the wonder of new fortunes and a real home. Annersley blinked and spoke sharply to the horse, although that good animal needed no urging as he plodded sturdily toward the cabin.

CHAPTER II

FIREARMS AND NEW FORTUNES

For a few days the old man had his hands full. Young Pete, used to thinking and acting for himself, possessed that most valuable but often dangerous asset, initiative. The very evening that he arrived at the homestead, while Annersley was milking the one tame cow out in the corral, Young Pete decided that he would help matters along by catching the hen which Annersley had pointed out to him when he drove into the yard. Milking did not interest Young Pete; but chasing chickens did.

The hen, a slate-colored and maternal-appearing biddy, seemed to realize that something unusual was afoot. She refused to be driven into the coop, perversely diving about the yard and circling the out-buildings until even Young Pete's ambition flagged. Out of breath he marched to the house. Annersley's rifle stood in the corner. Young Pete eyed it longingly, finally picked it up and stole gingerly to the doorway. The slate-colored hen had cooled down and was at the moment contemplating the cabin with head sideways, exceedingly suspicious and ruffled, but standing still. Just as Young Pete drew a bead on her, the big red rooster came running to assure her that all was well—that he would protect her; that her trepidation was unfounded. He blustered and strutted, declaring himself Lord High Protector of the hen-yard and just about the handsomest thing in feathers—*Bloom!* Young Pete blinked, and rubbed his shoulder. The slate-colored hen sprinted for parts unknown. The big red rooster flopped once or twice and then gave up the ghost. He had strutted across the firing line just as Young Pete pulled the trigger. The cow jumped and kicked over the milk-pail. Old Annersley came running. But Young Pete, the lust of the chase spurring him on, had disappeared around the corner of the cabin after the hen. He routed her out from behind the haystack, herded her swiftly across the clearing to the lean-to stable, and corralled her, so to speak, in a manger. Just as Annersley caught up with him, Pete leveled and fired—at close range. What was left of the hen—which was chiefly feathers, he gathered up and held by the remaining leg. "I got her!" he panted.

Annersley paused to catch his breath. "Yes—you got her. Gosh-A'mighty, son—I thought you had started in to clean out the ranch! You downed my rooster and you like to plugged me an' that heifer there. The bullit come singin' along and plunked into the rain-bar'l and most scared me to death. What in the ole scratch started you on the war-path, anyhow?"

Pete realized that he had overdone the matter slightly. "Why, nothin'—only you said we was to eat that hen for supper, an' I couldn't catch the dog-gone ole squawker, so I jest set to and plugged her. This here gun of yours kicks somethin' fierce!"

"Well, I reckon you was meanin' all right. But Gosh-A'mighty! You might 'a' killed the cow or me or somethin'!"

"Well, I got her, anyhow. I got her plumb center."

"Yes—you sure did." And the old man took the remains of the hen from Pete and "hefted" those remains with a critical finger and thumb. "One laig left, and a piece of the breast." He sighed heavily. Young Pete stared up at him, expecting praise for his marksmanship and energy. The old man put his hand on Pete's shoulder. "It's all right this time, son. I reckon you wasn't meanin' to murder that rooster. I only got one, and—"

"He jest run right in front of the hen when I cut loose. He might 'a' knowed better."

"We'll go see." And Annersley plodded to the yard, picked up the defunct rooster and entered the cabin.

Young Pete cooled down to a realization that his new pop was not altogether pleased. He followed Annersley, who told him to put the gun back in the corner.

"Got to clean her first," asserted Young Pete.

"You look out you don't shoot yourself," said Annersley from the kitchen.

"Huh," came from the ambitious, young hunter of feathered game, "I know all about guns—and this here ole musket sure needs cleanin' bad. She liked to kicked my doggone head off."

They ate what was left of the hen, and a portion of the rooster. After supper Annersley sat outside with the boy and talked to him kindly. Slowly it dawned upon Young Pete that it was not considered good form in the best families of Arizona to slay law-abiding roosters without explicit directions and permission from their owners. The old man concluded with a promise that if Young Pete liked to shoot, he should some day have a gun of his own if he, in turn, would agree to do no shooting without permission. The promise of a real gun of his own touched Young Pete's tough little heart. He stuck out his hand. The compact was sealed.

"Git a thirty-thirty," he suggested.

"What do you know about thirty-thirties?"

"Huh, I know lots. My other pop was tellin' me you could git a man with a thirty a whole heap farther than you could with any ole forty-four or them guns. I shot heaps of rabbits with his."

"Well, we'll see. But you want to git over the idee of gettin' a man with any gun. That goes with horse-tradin' and liquor and such. But we sure aim to live peaceful, up here."

Meanwhile, Young Pete, squatting beside Annersley, amused himself by spitting tobacco juice at a procession of red ants that trailed from nowhere in particular toward the doorstep.

"Makes 'em sick," he chuckled as a lucky shot dissipated the procession.

"It's sure wastin' cartridges on mighty small game," remarked Annersley.

"Don't cost nothin' to spit on 'em," said Young Pete.

"Not now. But when you git out of chewin'-tobacco, then where you goin' to git some more?"

"To the store, I reckon."

"Uh-huh. But where you goin' to git the money?"

"He was givin' me all the chewin' I wanted," said Pete.

"Uh-huh. Well, I ain't got no money for chewin'-tobacco. But I tell you what, Pete. Now, say I was to give you a dollar a week for—for your wages. And say I was to git you one of them guns like you said; you couldn't shoot chewin'-tobacco in that gun, could you?"

"Most anybody knows that!" laughed Pete.

"But you could buy cartridges with that dollar—an' shoot lots."

"Would you lick me if I bought chewin'?"

"Shucks, no! I was jest leavin' it to you."

"When do I git that dollar—the first one?"

Annersley smiled to himself. Pete was shrewd and in no way inclined to commit himself carelessly. Horse-trading had sharpened his wits to a razor-edge and dire necessity and hunger had kept those wits keen. Annersley was amused and at the same time wise enough in his patient, slow way to hide his amusement and talk with Pete as man to man. "Why, you ain't been workin' for me a week yet! And come to think—that rooster was worth five dollars—every cent! What you say if I was to charge that rooster up to you? Then after five weeks you was to git a dollar, eh?"

Pete pondered this problem. "Huh!" he exclaimed suddenly. "You et more 'n half that rooster—and some of the hen."

"All right, son. Then say I was to charge you two dollars for what you et?"

"Then, I guess beans is good enough for me. Anyhow, I never stole your rooster. I jest shot him."

"Which is correct. Reckon we'll forgit about that rooster and start fresh." The old man fumbled in his pocket and brought up a silver dollar. "Here's your first week's wages, son. What you aim to do with it?"

"Buy cartridges!" exclaimed Pete. "But I ain't got no gun."

"Well, we'll be goin' to town right soon. I'll git you a gun, and mebbby a scabbard so you can carry it on the saddle."

"Kin I ride that hoss I seen out there?" queried Pete.

"What about ridin' the hoss you sold me? From what you said, I reckon they ain't no hoss can touch him, in this country."

Pete hesitated on the thin edge of committing himself, tottered and almost fell, but managed to retain his balance. "Sure, he's a good hoss! Got a little age on him, but that don't hurt none. I was thinkin' mebbe you'd like that other cayuse of yours broke right. Looks to me like he needs some handlin' to make a first-class saddle-hoss."

The old man smiled broadly. Pete, like a hungry mosquito, was hard to catch.

"You kin ride him," said Annersley. "'Course, if he pitches you—" And the old man chuckled.

"Pitch me? Say, pardner, I'm a ridin' son-of-a-gun from Powder River and my middle name is 'stick.' I kin ride 'm comin' and goin'—crawl 'm on the run and bust 'm wide open every time they bit the dirt. Turn me loose and hear me howl. Jest give me room and see me split the air! You want to climb the fence when I 'm a-comin'!"

"Where did you git that little song?" queried Annersley.

"Why—why, that's how the fellas shoot her over to the round-up at Magdalena and Flag. Reckon I been there!"

"Well, don't you bust ole Apache too hard, son. He's a mighty forgivin' hoss—but he's got feelin's."

"Huh! You're a-joshin' me agin. I seen your whiskers kind o' wiggle. You think I'm scared o' that hoss?"

"Just a leetle mite, son. Or you wouldn't 'a' sung that there high-chin song. There's some good riders that talk lots. But the best riders I ever seen, jest rode 'em—and said nothin'."

"Like when you set on my other pop, eh?"

"That's the idee."

Pete, used to a rough-and-tumble existence, was deeply impressed by the old man's quiet outlook and gentle manner. While not altogether in accord with Annersley's attitude in regard to profanity and chewing tobacco—still, Young Pete felt that a man who could down the horse-trader and sit on him and suffer no harm was somehow worth listening to.

CHAPTER III

A WARNING

That first and unforgettable year on the homestead was the happiest year of Pete's life. Intensely active, tireless, and resourceful—as are most youngsters raised in the West—he learned to milk the tame cow, manipulate the hay-rake, distinguish potato-vines from weeds and hoe accordingly, and through observation and Annersley's thrifty example, take care of his clothing and few effects. The old man taught Pete to read and to write his own name—a painful process, for Young Pete cared nothing for that sort of education and suffered only that he might please his venerable partner. When it came to the plaiting of rawhide into bridle-reins and reatas, the handling of a rope, packing for a hunting trip, reading a dim trail when tracking a stray horse, or any of the many things essential to life in the hills, Young Pete took hold with boyish enthusiasm, copying Annersley's methods to the letter. Pete was repaid a thousand-fold for his efforts by the old man's occasional:

"Couldn't 'a' done it any better myself, pardner."

For Annersley seldom called the boy "Pete" now, realizing that "pardner" meant so much more to him.

Pete had his rifle—an old carbine, much scratched and battered by the brush and rock—a thirty-thirty the old man had purchased from a cowboy in Concho.

Pete spent most of his spare time cleaning and polishing the gun. He had a fondness for firearms that almost amounted to a passion. Evenings, when the work was done and Annersley sat smoking in the doorway, Young Pete invariably found excuse to clean and oil his gun. He invested heavily in cartridges and immediately used up his ammunition on every available target until there was not an unpunctured tin can on the premises. He was quick and accurate, finally scorning to shoot at a stationary mark and often riding miles to get to the valley level where there were rabbits and "Jacks," that he occasionally bowled over on the run. Once he shot a coyote, and his cup of happiness brimmed—for the time being.

All told, it was a most healthful and happy life for a boy, and Young Pete learned,

unconsciously, to "ride, shoot, and Tell the Truth," as against "Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic," for which he cared nothing. Pete might have gone far—become a well-to-do cattleman or rancher—had not Fate, which can so easily wipe out all plans and precautions in a flash, stepped in and laid a hand on his bridle-rein.

That summer occasional riders stopped at the cabin, were fed and housed and went on their way. They came chiefly from the T-Bar-T ranch—some few from Concho, a cattle outfit of the lower country. Pete intuitively disliked these men, despite the fact that they rode excellent horses, sported gay trappings, and "joshed" with him as though he were one of themselves. His instinct told him that they were not altogether friendly to Annersley. They frequently drifted into warm argument as to water-rights and nesters in general—matters that did not interest Young Pete at the time, who failed, naturally, to grasp the ultimate meaning of the talk. But the old man never seemed perturbed by these arguments, declining, in his good-natured way, to take them seriously, and feeling secure in his own rights, as a hard-working citizen, to hold and cultivate the allotment he had earned from the Government.

The T-Bar-T outfit especially grudged him the water that they had previously used to such good advantage. This water was now under fence. To make this water available to cattle would disrupt the homestead. It was at this time that Young Pete first realized the significance of these hard-riding visitors. He was cleaning his much-polished carbine, sitting cross-legged round the corner of the cabin, when two of the chance visitors, having washed and discarded their chaps, strolled out and squatted by the doorway. Old man Annersley was at the back of the cabin preparing supper.

One of the riders, a man named Gary, said something to his companion about "running the old man out of the country."

Young Pete paused in his task.

"You can't bluff him so easy," offered the companion.

"But a thirty-thirty kin talk business," said the man Gary, and he laughed.

Pete never forgot the remark nor the laugh. Next day, after the riders had departed, he told his pop what he had heard. The old man made him repeat the conversation. He shook his head. "Mostly talk," he said.

"They dassent to start runnin' *us* off—dast they?" queried Young Pete.

"Mostly talk," reiterated Annersley; but Pete saw that his pop was troubled.

"They can't bluff us, eh, pop?"

"I reckon not, son. How many cartridges you got?"

Young Pete thrilled to the question. "Got ten out of the last box. You got any?"

"Some. Reckon we'll go to town to-morrow."

"To git some cartridges?"

"Mebby."

This was Young Pete's first real intimation that there might be trouble that would occasion the use of cartridges. The idea did not displease him. They drove to town, bought some provisions and ammunition, and incidentally the old man visited the sheriff and retailed the conversation that Pete had overheard.

"Bluff!" said the sheriff, whose office depended upon the vote of the cattlemen. "Just bluff, Annersley. You hang on to what you got and they won't be no trouble. I know just how far those boys will go."

"Well, I don't," said Annersley. "So I was jest puttin' what you call bluff on record, case anything happened."

The sheriff, secretly in league with the cattlemen to crowd Annersley off the range, took occasion to suggest to the T-Bar-T foreman that the old man was getting cold feet—which was a mistake, for Annersley had simply wished to keep within the law and avoid trouble if possible. Thus it happened that Annersley brought upon himself the very trouble that he had honorably tried to avoid. Let the most courageous man even seem to turn and run and how soon his enemies will take up the chase!

But nothing happened that summer, and it was not until the following spring that the T-Bar-T outfit gave any hint of their real intent. The anonymous letter was a vile screed—because it was anonymous and also because it threatened, in innuendo, to burn out a homestead held by one man and a boy.

Annersley showed the letter to Pete and helped him spell it out. Then he explained gravely

his own status as a homesteader, the law which allowed him to fence the water, and the labor which had made the land his. It was typical of Young Pete that when a real hazard threatened he never said much. In this instance the boy did not know just what to do. That evening Annersley missed him and called, "What you doin', pardner?"

From the cabin—Annersley, as usual, was seated outside, smoking—came the reply: "Countin' my cartridges."

Annersley knew that the anonymous letter would be followed by some hostile act if he did not vacate the homestead. He wasted no time worrying as to what might happen—but he did worry about Young Pete. If the cattlemen raided his place, it would be impossible to keep that young and ambitious fire-eater out of harm's way. So the old man planned to take Pete to Concho the next morning and leave him with the storekeeper until the difficulty should be solved, one way or the other.

This time they did not drive to Concho, but saddled up and rode down the hill trail. And during the journey Young Pete was unusually silent, wondering just what his pop planned to do.

At the store Annersley privately explained the situation to the storekeeper. Then he told Young Pete that he would leave him there for a few days as he was "goin' over north a spell."

Young Pete studied the old man with bright, blinking eyes that questioned the truth of this statement. His pop had never lied to him, and although Pete suspected what was in the wind, he had no ground for argument. Annersley was a trifle surprised that the boy consented to stay without demur. Annersley might have known that Young Pete's very silence was significant; but the old man was troubled and only too glad to find his young partner so amenable to his suggestion. When Annersley left the store Young Pete's "So-long, pop," was as casual as sunshine, but his tough little heart was thumping with restrained excitement. He knew that his pop feared trouble and wished to face it alone.

Pete allowed a reasonable length of time to elapse and then approached the storekeeper. "Gimme a box of thirty-thirties," he said, fishing up some silver from his overall pocket.

"Where'd you get all that money, Pete?"

"Why, I done stuck up the fo'man of the T-Bar-T on pay-day and made him shell out," said Pete.

The storekeeper grinned. "Here you be. Goin' huntin'?"

"Uh-huh. Huntin' snakes."

"Honest, now! Where'd you git the change?"

"My wages!" said Young Pete proudly. "Pop is givin' me a dollar a week for helpin' him. We're pardners."

"Your pop is right good to you, ain't he?"

"You bet! And he can lick any ole bunch of cow-chasers in this country. Somebody's goin' to git hurt if they monkey with him!"

"Where 'd you get the idea anybody was going to monkey with your dad?"

Young Pete felt that he had been incautious. He refused to talk further, despite the storekeeper's friendly questioning. Instead, the boy roamed about the store, inspecting and commenting upon saddlery, guns, canned goods, ready-made clothing, and showcase trinkets, his ears alert for every word exchanged by the storekeeper and a chance customer. Presently two cowboys clumped in, joshed with the store-keeper, bought tobacco and ammunition—a most usual procedure, and clumped out again. Young Pete strolled to the door and watched them enter the adobe saloon across the way—Tony's Place—the rendezvous of the riders of the high mesas. Again a group of cowboys arrived, jesting and roughing their mounts. They entered the store, bought ammunition, and drifted to the saloon. It was far from pay-day, as Pete knew. It was also the busy season. There was some ulterior reason for so many riders assembling in town. Pete decided to find out just what they were up to.

After supper he meandered across to the saloon, passed around it, and hid in an empty barrel near the rear door. He was uncomfortable, but not unhappy. He listened for a chance word that might explain the presence of so many cowboys in town that day. Frequently he heard Gary's name mentioned. He had not seen Gary with the others. But the talk was casual, and he learned nothing until some one remarked that it was about time to drift along. They left in a body, taking the mesa trail that led to the Blue. This was significant. They usually left in groups of two or three, as their individual pleasure dictated. And there was a business-like alertness about their movements that did not escape Young Pete.

The Arizona stars were clear and keen when he crept round to the front of the saloon and pattered across the road to the store. The storekeeper was closing for the night. Young Pete,

restlessly anxious to follow the T-Bar-T men, invented an excuse to leave the storekeeper, who suggested that they go to bed.

"Got to see if my hoss is all right," said Pete. "The ole fool's like to git tangled up in that there drag-rope I done left on him. Reckon I'll take it off."

"Why, your dad was tellin' me you was a reg'lar buckaroo. Thought you knew better than to leave a rope on a hoss when he's in a corral."

"I forgot," invented Pete. "Won't take a minute."

"Then I'll wait for you. Run along while I get my lantern."

The storekeeper's house was but a few doors down the street, which, however, meant quite a distance, as Concho straggled over considerable territory. He lighted the lantern and sat down on the steps waiting for the boy. From the corral back of the store came the sound of trampling hoofs and an occasional word from Young Pete, who seemed to be a long time at the simple task of untying a drag-rope. The store-keeper grew suspicious and finally strode back to the corral. His first intimation of Pete's real intent was a glimpse of the boy astride the big bay and blinking in the rays of the lantern.

"What you up to?" queried the storekeeper.

Young Pete's reply was to dig his heels into the horse's ribs. The storekeeper caught hold of the bridle. "You git down and come home with me. Where you goin' anyhow?"

"Take your hand off that bridle," blustered Young Pete.

The trader had to laugh. "Got spunk, ain't you? Now you git down and come along with me, Pete. No use you riding back to the mesa to-night. Your dad ain't there. You can't find him to-night."

Pete's lip quivered. What right had the store-keeper, or any man, to take hold of his bridle?

"See here, Pete, where do you think you're goin'?"

"Home!" shrilled Pete as he swung his hat and fanned the horse's ears. It had been many years since that pony had had his ears fanned, but he remembered early days and rose to the occasion, leaving the storekeeper in the dust and Young Pete riding for dear life to stay in the saddle. Pete's hat was lost in the excitement, and next to his rifle, the old sombrero inherited from his pop was Pete's dearest possession. But even when the pony had ceased to pitch, Pete dared not go back for it. He would not risk being caught a second time.

He jogged along up the mesa trail, peering ahead in the dusk, half-frightened and half-elated. If the T-Bar-T outfit were going to run his pop out of the country, Young Pete intended to be in at the running. The feel of the carbine beneath his leg gave him courage. Up to the time Annersley had adopted him, Pete had had to fight and scheme and dodge his way through life. He had asked no favors and expected none. His pop had stood by him in his own deepest trouble, and he would now stand by his pop. That he was doing anything especially worthy did not occur to him. Partners always "stuck."

The horse, anxious to be home, took the long grade quickly, restrained by Pete, who felt that it would be poor policy to tread too closely upon the heels of the T-Bar-T men. That they intended mischief was now only too evident. And Pete would have been disappointed had they not. Although sophisticated beyond his years and used to the hazards of a rough life, *this* adventure thrilled him. Perhaps the men would set fire to the outbuildings and the haystack, or even try to burn the cabin. But they would have a sorry time getting to the cabin if his pop were really there.

Up the dim, starlit trail he plodded, shivering and yet elate. As he topped the rise he thought he could see the vague outlines of horses and men, but he was not certain. That soft glow against the distant timber was real enough, however! There was no mistaking that! The log stable was on fire!

The horse fought the bit as Young Pete reined him into the timber.

Pete could see no men against the glow of the burning building, but he knew that they were there somewhere, bushed in the brush and waiting. Within a few hundred yards of the cabin he was startled by the flat crack of a rifle. He felt frightened and the blood sang in his ears. But he could not turn back now! His pop might be besieged in the cabin, alone and fighting a cowardly bunch of cow-punchers who dare not face him in the open day. But what if his pop were not there? The thought struck him cold. What would he do if he made a run for the cabin and found it locked and no one there? All at once Pete realized that it was *his* home and *his* stock and hay that were in danger. Was he not a partner in pop's homestead? Then a thin red flash from the cabin window told him that Annersley was there. Following the flash came the rip and roar of the old rifle. Concealed in the timber, Pete could see the flames licking up the stable. Presently a long tongue of yellow shot up the haystack. "The doggone snakes done fired our hay!" he cried, and his voice caught in a sob. This was too much. Hay was a precious commodity in the high country.

Pete yanked out his carbine, loosed a shot at nothing in particular, and rode for the cabin on the run. "We're coming pop," he yelled, followed by his shrill "Yip! Yip! We're all here!"

Several of the outlying cow-punchers saw the big bay rear and stop at the cabin as Young Pete flung out of the saddle and pounded on the door. "It's me, pop! It's Pete! Lemme in!"

Annersley's heart sank. Why had the boy come? How did he know? How had he managed to get away?

He flung open the door and dragged Pete in.

"What you doin' here?" he challenged.

"I done lost my hat," gasped Pete. "I—I was lookin' for it."

"Your hat? You gone loco? Git in there and lay down!" And though it was dark in the cabin Young Pete knew that his pop had gestured toward the bed. Annersley had never spoken in that tone before, and Young Pete resented it.

Pete was easily led, but mighty hard to drive.

"Nothin' doin'!" said Pete. "You can't boss me 'round like that! You said we was pardners, and that we was both boss. I knowed they was comin' and I fanned it up here to tell you. I reckon we kin lick the hull of 'em. I got plenty cartridges."

Despite the danger, old man Annersley smiled as he choked back a word of appreciation for Pete's stubborn loyalty and grit. When he spoke again Pete at once caught the change in tone.

"You keep away from the window," said Annersley. "Them coyotes out there 'most like aim to rush me when the blaze dies down. Reckon they'll risk settin' fire to the cabin. I don't want to kill nobody—but—you keep back—and if they git me, you stay right still in here. They won't hurt you."

"Not if I git a bead on any of 'em!" said Young Pete, taking courage from his pop's presence. "Did you shoot any of 'em yet, pop?"

"I reckon not. I cut loose onct or twict, to scare 'em off. You keep away from the window."

Young Pete had crept to the window and was gazing out at the sinking flames. "Say, ain't we pardners?" he queried irritably. "You said we was when you brung me up here. And pardners stick, don't they? I reckon if it was my shack that was gittin' rushed, you 'd stick, and not go bellyin' under the bunk and hidin' like a dog-gone prairie-dog."



"SAY, AIN'T WE PARDNERS?"

[Illustration: "Say, ain't we pardners?"]

"That's all right," said Annersley. "But there's no use takin' chances. You keep back till we find out what they're goin' to do next."

Standing in the middle of the room, well back from the southern window, the old man gazed out upon the destruction of his buildings and carefully hoarded hay. He breathed hard. The riders knew that he was in the cabin—that they had not bluffed him from the homestead. Probably they would next try to fire the cabin itself. They could crawl up to it in the dark and set fire to the place before he was aware of it. Well, they would pay high before they got him. He had fed and housed these very men—and now they were trying to run him out of the country because he had fenced a water-hole which he had every right to fence. He had toiled to make a home for himself, and the boy, he thought, as he heard Young Pete padding about the cabin. The cattlemen had written a threatening letter hinting of this, yet they had not dared to meet him in the open and have it out face to face. He did not want to kill, yet such men were no better than wolves. And as wolves he thought of them, as he determined to defend his home.

Young Pete, spider-like in his quick movements, scurried about the cabin making his own plan of battle. It did not occur to him that he might get hurt—or that his pop would get hurt. They were safe enough behind the thick logs. All he thought of was the chance of a shot at what he considered legitimate game. While drifting about the country he had heard many tales of gunmen and border raids, and it was quite evident, even to his young mind, that the man who suffered attack by a gun was justified in returning the compliment in kind. And to this end he carefully arranged his cartridges on the floor, knelt and raised the window a few inches and cocked the old carbine. Annersley realized what the boy was up to and stepped forward to pull him away from the window. And in that brief moment Young Pete's career was shaped—shaped beyond all question or argument by the wanton bullet that sung across the open, cut a clean hole in the window, and dropped Annersley in his tracks.

The distant, flat report of the shot broke the silence, fired more in the hope of intimidating Annersley than anything else, yet the man who had fired it must have known that there was but one place in the brush from where the window could be seen—and to that extent the shot was premeditated, with the possibility of its killing some one in the cabin.

Young Pete heard his pop gasp and saw him stagger in the dim light. In a flash Pete was at his side. "You hit, pop?" he quavered. There came no reply. Annersley had died instantly. Pete fumbled at his chest in the dark, called to him, tried to shake him, and then, realizing what had happened threw himself on the floor beside Annersley and sobbed hopelessly. Again a bullet whipped across the clearing. Glass tinkled on the cabin floor. Pete cowered and hid his face in his arms. Suddenly a shrill yell ripped the silence. The men were rushing the cabin! Young Pete's fighting blood swelled his pulse. He and pop had been partners. And partners always "stuck." Pete crept cautiously to the window. Halfway across the clearing the blurred hulk of running horses loomed in the starlight. Young Pete rested his carbine on the window-sill and centered on the bulk. He fired and thought he saw a horse rear. Again he fired. This was much easier than shooting deer. He heard a cry and the drumming of hoofs. Something crashed against the door. Pete whirled and fired point-blank. Before he knew what had happened men were in the cabin. Some one struck a match. Young Pete cowered in a corner, all the fight oozing out of him as the lamp was lighted and he saw several men masked with bandannas. "The old man's done for," said one of them, stooping to look at Annersley. Another picked up the two empty shells from Annersley's rifle. "Where's the kid?" asked another. "Here, in the corner," said a cowboy. "Must 'a' been him that got Wright and Bradley. The old man only cut loose twict—afore the kid come. Look at this!" And dragging Young Pete to his feet, the cowboy took the carbine from him and pointed to the three thirty-three shells on the cabin floor.

The men were silent. Presently one of them laughed. Despite Pete's terror, he recognized that laugh. He knew that the man was Gary, he who had once spoken of running Annersley out of the country.

"It's a dam' bad business," said one of the men. "The kid knows too much. He'll talk."

"Will you keep your mouth shut, if we don't kill you?" queried Gary.

"Cut that out!" growled another. "The kid's got sand. He downed two of us—and we take our medicine. I'm for fannin' it."

Pete, stiff with fear, saw them turn and clump from the cabin.

As they left he heard one say something which he never forgot. "Must 'a' been Gary's shot that downed the ole man. Gary knowed the layout and where he could get a line on the window."

Pete dropped to the floor and crawled over to Annersley. "Pop!" he called again and again. Presently he realized that the kindly old man who had made a home for him, and who had been more like a real father than his earlier experiences had ever allowed him to imagine, would never again answer. In the yellow haze of the lamp, Young Pete rose and dragging a blanket from the bed, covered the still form and the upturned face, half in reverence for the dead and half in fear that those dead lips might open and speak.

CHAPTER IV

JUSTICE

Dawn bared the smouldering evidence of that dastardly attack. The stable and the lean-to, where Annersley had stored his buckboard and a few farm implements when winter came, the corral fence, the haystack, were feathery ashes, which the wind stirred occasionally as a raw red sun shoved up from behind the eastern hills. The chicken-coop, near the cabin, had not been touched by the fire. Young Pete, who had fallen asleep through sheer exhaustion, was awakened by the cackling of the hens. He jumped up. It was time to let those chickens out. Strange that his pop had not called him! He rubbed his eyes, started suddenly as he realized that he was dressed—and then he remembered...

He trembled, fearful of what he would see when he stepped into the other room. "Pop!" he whispered. The hens cackled loudly. From somewhere in the far blue came the faint whistle of a hawk. A board creaked under his foot and he all but cried out. He stole to the window, scrambled over the sill, and dropped to the ground. Through habit he let the chickens out. They rushed from the coop and spread over the yard, scratching and clucking happily. Pete was surprised that the chickens should go about their business so casually. They did not seem to care that his pop had been killed.

He was back to the cabin before he realized what he was doing. From the doorway he saw that still form shrouded in the familiar old gray blanket. Something urged him to lift a corner of the blanket and look—something stronger held him back. He tip-toed to the kitchen and began building a fire. "Pop would be gettin' breakfast," he whispered. Pete fried bacon and made coffee. He ate hurriedly, occasionally turning his head to glance at that still figure beneath the blanket. Then he washed the dishes and put them carefully away, as his pop would have done. That helped to occupy his mind, but his most difficult task was still before him. He dared not stay in the cabin—and yet he felt that he was a coward if he should leave. Paradoxically he reasoned that if his pop were alive, he would know what to do. Pete knew of only one thing to do—and that was to go to Concho and tell the sheriff what had happened. Trying his best to ignore the gray blanket, he picked up all the cartridges he could find, and the two rifles, and backed from the room. He felt ashamed of the fear that drove him from the cabin. He did not want his pop to think that he was a coward. Partners always "stuck," and yet he was running away. "Good-bye, pop," he quavered. He choked and sobbed, but no tears came. He turned and went to look for the horses.

Then he remembered that the corral fence was burned, that there had been no horses there when he went to let the chickens out. He followed horse-tracks to the edge of the timber and then turned back. The horses had been stampeded by the flames and the shooting. Pete knew that they might be miles from the cabin. He cut across the mesa to the trail and trudged down toward Concho. His eyes burned and his throat ached. The rifles grew heavy, but he would not leave them. It was significant that Pete thought of taking nothing else from the cabin, neither clothing, food, nor the money that he knew to be in Annersley's wallet in the bedroom. The sun burned down upon his unprotected head, but he did not feel it. He felt nothing save the burning ache in his throat and a hope that the sheriff would arrest the men who had killed his pop. He had great faith in the sheriff, who, as Annersley had told him, was the law. The law punished evildoers. The men who had killed pop would be hung—Pete was sure of that!

Hatless, burning with fever and thirst, he arrived at the store in Concho late in the afternoon. A friendly cowboy from the low country joshed him about his warlike appearance. Young Pete was too exhausted to retort. He marched into the store, told the storekeeper what had happened, and asked for the sheriff. The storekeeper saw that there was something gravely wrong with Pete. His face was flushed and his eyes altogether too bright. He insisted on going at once to the sheriff's office.

"Now, you set down and rest. Just stay right here and keep your eye on things out front—and I'll go get the sheriff." And the storekeeper coaxed and soothed Pete into giving up his rifles. Promising to return at once, the storekeeper set out on his errand, shaking his head gravely. Annersley had been a good man, a man who commanded affection and respect from most persons. And now the T-Bar-T men "had got him." The storekeeper was not half so surprised as he was grieved. He had had an idea that something like this might happen. It was a cattle country, and Annersley had been the only homesteader within miles of Concho. "I wonder just how much of this the sheriff knows already," he soliloquized. "It's mighty tough on the kid."

When Sheriff Sutton and the storekeeper entered the store they found Young Pete in a stupor from which he did not awaken for many hours. He was put to bed and a doctor summoned from a distant town. It would have been useless, even brutal, to have questioned Pete, so the sheriff simply took the two rifles and the cartridges to his office, with what information the storekeeper could give him. The sheriff, who had always respected Annersley, was sorry that this thing had

happened. Yet he was not sorry that Young Pete could give no evidence. The cattlemen would have time to pretty well cover up their tracks. Annersley had known the risks he was running when he took up the land. The sheriff told his own conscience that "it was just plain suicide." His conscience, being the better man, told him that it was "just plain murder." The sheriff knew—and yet what could he do without evidence, except visit the scene of the shooting, hold a post-mortem, and wait until Young Pete was well enough to talk?

One thing puzzled Sheriff Sutton. Both rifles had been used. So the boy had taken a hand in the fight? Several shots must have been fired, for Annersley was not a man to suffer such an outrage in silence. And the boy was known to be a good shot. Yet there had been no news of anyone having been wounded among the raiders. Sutton was preparing to ride to the Blue and investigate when a T-Bar-T man loped up and dismounted. They talked a minute or two. Then the cowboy rode out of town. The sheriff was no longer puzzled about the two rifles having been used. The cowboy had told him that two of the T-Bar-T men had been killed. That in each instance a thirty-thirty, soft-nosed slug had done the business. Annersley's rifle was an old forty-eighty-two, shooting a solid lead bullet.

When Sheriff Sutton arrived at the cabin he found the empty shells on the floor, noted the holes in the window, and read the story of the raid plainly. "Annersley shot to scare 'em off—but the kid shot to kill," he argued. "And dam' if I blame him."

Later, when Young Pete was able to talk, he was questioned by the sheriff. He told of the raid, of the burning of the outbuildings, and how Annersley had been killed. When questioned as to his own share in the proceedings, Pete refused to answer. When shown the two guns and asked which was his, he invariably replied, "Both of 'em," nor could he be made to answer otherwise. Finally Sheriff Sutton gave it up, partly because of public opinion, which was in open sympathy with Young Pete, and partly because he feared that in case arrests were made, and Pete were called as a witness, the boy would tell in court more than he had thus far divulged. The sheriff thought that Pete was able to identify one or more of the men who had entered the cabin, if he cared to do so. As it was, Young Pete was crafty. Already he distrusted the sheriff's sincerity. Then, the fact that two of the T-Bar-T men had been killed rather quieted the public mind, which expressed itself as pretty well satisfied that old man Annersley's account was squared. He or the boy had "got" two of the enemy. In fact, it was more or less of a joke on the T-Bar-T outfit—they should have known better.

An inquest decided that Annersley had come to his death at the hands of parties unknown. The matter was eventually shunted to one of the many legal sidings along the single-track law that operated in that vicinity. Annersley's effects were sold at auction and the proceeds used to bury him. His homestead reverted to the Government, there being no legal heir. Young Pete was again homeless, save for the kindness of the storekeeper, who set him to work helping about the place.

In a few months Pete was seemingly over his grief, but he never gave up the hope that some day he would find the man who had killed his pop. In cow-camp and sheep-camp, in town and on the range, he had often heard reiterated that unwritten law of the outlands: "If a man tried to get you—run or fight. But if a man kills your friend or your kin—get him." A law perhaps not as definitely worded in the retailing of incident or example, but as obvious nevertheless as was the necessity to live up to it or suffer the ever-lasting scorn of one's fellows.

Some nine or ten months after the inquest Young Pete disappeared. No one knew where he had gone, and eventually he was more or less forgotten by the folk of Concho. But two men never forgot him—the storekeeper and the sheriff. One of them hoped that the boy might come back some day. He had grown fond of Pete. The other hoped that he would not come back.

Meanwhile the T-Bar-T herds grazed over Annersley's homestead. The fence had been torn down, cattle wallowed in the mud of the water-hole, and drifted about the place until little remained as evidence of the old man's patient toil save the cabin. That Young Pete should again return to the cabin and there unexpectedly meet Gary was undreamed of as a possibility by either of them; yet fate had planned this very thing—"otherwise," argues the Fatalist, "how could it have happened?"

CHAPTER V

A CHANGE OF BASE

To say that Young Pete had any definite plan when he left Concho and took up with an old Mexican sheep-herder would be stretching the possibilities. And Pete Annersley's history will have to speak for itself as illustrative of a plan from which he could not have departed any more than he could have originated and followed to its final ultimatum.

Life with the storekeeper had been tame. Pete had no horse; and the sheriff, taking him at his word, had refused to give up either one of the rifles unless Pete would declare which one he had used that fateful night of the raid. And Pete would not do that. He felt that somehow he had been cheated. Even the storekeeper Roth discouraged him from using fire-arms, fearing that the boy might some day "cut loose" at somebody without word or warning. Pete was well fed and did not have to work hard, yet his ideas of what constituted a living were far removed from the conventions of Concho. He wanted to ride, to hunt, to drive team, to work in the open with lots of elbow-room and under a wide sky. His one solace while in the store was the array of rifles and six-guns which he almost revered for their suggestive potency. They represented power, and the only law that he believed in.

Some time after Pete had disappeared, the store-keeper, going over his stock, missed a heavy-caliber six-shooter. He wondered if the boy had taken it. Roth did not care so much for the loss of the gun as for the fact that Pete might have stolen it. Later Roth discovered a crudely printed slip of paper among the trinkets in the showcase. "I took a gun and cartridges for my waggas. You never giv me Wages." Which was true enough, the storekeeper figuring that Pete's board and lodging were just about offset by his services. In paying Pete a dollar a week, Annersley had established a precedent which involved Young Pete's pride as a wage-earner. In making Pete feel that he was really worth more than his board and lodging, Annersley had helped the boy to a certain self-respect which Pete subconsciously felt that he had lost when Roth, the storekeeper, gave him a home and work but no pay. Young Pete did not dislike Roth, but the contrast of Roth's close methods with the large, free-handed dealings of Annersley was ever before him. Pete was strong for utility. He had no boyish sense of the dramatic, consciously. He had never had time to play. Everything he did, he did seriously. So when he left Concho at dusk one summer evening, he did not "run away" in any sense. He simply decided that it was time to go elsewhere—and he went.

The old Mexican, Montoya, had a band of sheep in the high country. Recently the sheep had drifted past Concho, and Pete, alive to anything and everything that was going somewhere, had waited on the Mexican at the store. Sugar, coffee, flour, and beans were packed on the shaggy burros. Pete helped carry the supplies to the doorway and watched him pack. The two sharp-nosed sheep-dogs interested Pete. They seemed so alert, and yet so quietly satisfied with their lot. The last thing the old Mexican did was to ask for a few cartridges. Pete did not understand just what kind he wanted. With a secretiveness which thrilled Pete clear to the toes, the old herder, in the shadowy rear of the store, drew a heavy six-shooter from under his arm and passed it stealthily to Pete, who recognized the caliber and found cartridges for it. Pete's manner was equally stealthy. This smacked of adventure! Cattlemen and sheepmen were not friendly, as Pete knew. Pete had no love for the "woolies," yet he hated cattlemen. The old Mexican thanked him and invited him to visit his camp below Concho. Possibly Pete never would have left the storekeeper—or at least not immediately—had not that good man, always willing to cater to Pete's curiosity as to guns and gunmen, told him that old Montoya, while a Mexican, was a dangerous man with a six-gun; that he was seldom molested by the cattlemen, who knew him to be absolutely without fear and a dead shot.

"Huh! That old herder ain't no gun-fighter!" Pete had said, although he believed the storekeeper. Pete wanted to hear more.

"Most Mexicans ain't," replied Roth, for Pete's statement was half a challenge, half a question. "But José Montoya never backed down from a fight—and he's had plenty."

Pete was interested. He determined to visit Montoya's camp that evening. He said nothing to Roth, as he intended to return.

Long before Pete arrived at the camp he saw the tiny fire—a dot of red against the dark—and he heard the muffled trampling of the sheep as they bedded down for the night. Within a few yards of the camp the dogs challenged him, charging down the gentle slope to where he stood. Pete paid no attention to them, but marched up to the fire. Old Montoya rose and greeted him pleasantly. Another Mexican, a slim youth, bashfully acknowledged Pete's presence and called in the dogs. Pete, who had known many outland camp-fires, made himself at home, sitting cross-legged and affecting a mature indifference. The old Mexican smoked and studied the youngster, amused by his evident attempt to appear grown-up and disinterested.

"That gun, he poke you in the rib, hey?"—and Montoya chuckled.

Pete flushed and glanced down at the half-concealed weapon beneath his arm. "Tied her on with string—ain't got no shoulder holster," Pete explained in an offhand way.

"What you do with him?" The old Mexican's deep-set eyes twinkled. Pete studied Montoya's face. This was a direct but apparently friendly query. Pete wondered if he should answer evasively or directly. The fact was that he did not know just why he had taken the gun—or what he intended to do with it. After all, it was none of Montoya's business, yet Pete did not wish to offend the old man. He wanted to hear more about gun-fights with the cattlemen.

"Well, seein' it's you, señor,"—Pete adopted the grand air as most befitting the occasion,—"I'm packin' this here gun to fight cow-punchers with. Reckon you don't know some cow-punchers killed my dad. I was just a kid then. [Pete was now nearly fourteen.] Some day I'm goin'

to git the man what killed him."

Montoya did not smile. This muchacho evidently had spirit. Pete's invention, made on the spur of the moment, had hit "plumb center," as he told himself. For Montoya immediately became gracious, proffered Pete tobacco and papers, and suggested coffee, which the young Mexican made while Pete and the old man chatted. Pete was deeply impressed by his reception. He felt that he had made a hit with Montoya—and that the other had taken him seriously. Most men did not, despite the fact that he was accredited with having slain two T-Bar-T cowboys. A strange sympathy grew between this old Mexican and the lean, bright-eyed young boy. Perhaps Pete's swarthy coloring and black eyes had something to do with it. Possibly Pete's assurance, as contrasted with the bashfulness and timidity of the old Mexican's nephew, had something to do with Montoya's immediate friendliness. In any event, the visit ended with an invitation to Pete to become a permanent member of the sheep-camp, Montoya explaining that his nephew wanted to go home; that he did not like the loneliness of a herder's life.

Pete had witnessed too many horse-trades to accept this proposal at once. His face expressed deep cogitation, as he flicked the ashes from his cigarette and shook his head. "I dunno. Roth is a pretty good boss. 'Course, he ain't no gun-fighter—and that's kind of in your favor—"

"What hombre say I make fight with gun?" queried Montoya.

"Why, everybody! I reckon they's mighty few of 'em want to stack up against you."

Montoya frowned. "I don' talk like that," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

Pete felt that he was getting in deep—but he had a happy inspiration. "You don't have to talk. Your ole forty-four does the talking I reckon."

"You come and cook?" queried Montoya, coming straight to the point.

"I dunno, amigo. I'll think about it."

"Bueno. It is dark, I will walk with you to Concho."

"You think I'm a kid?" flared Pete. "If was dark when I come over here and it ain't any darker now. I ain't no doggone cow-puncher what's got to git on a hoss afore he dast go anywhere."

Montoya laughed. "You come to-morrow night, eh?"

"Reckon I will."

"Then the camp will be over there—in the cañon. You will see the fire."

"I'll come over and have a talk anyway," said Pete, still unwilling to let Montoya think him anxious. "Buenos noches!"

Montoya nodded. "He will come," he said to his nephew. "Then it is that you may go to the home. He is small—but of the very great courage."

The following evening Pete appeared at the herder's camp. The dogs ran out, sniffed at him, and returned to the fire. Montoya made a place for him on the thick sheepskins and asked him if he had eaten. Yes, he had had supper, but he had no blankets. Could Montoya let him have a blanket until he had earned enough money to buy one?

The old herder told him that he could have the nephew's blankets; Pedro was to leave camp next day and go home. As for money, Montoya did not pay wages. Of course, for tobacco, or a coat or pants, he could have the money when he needed them.

Pete felt a bit taken aback. He had burnt his bridges—he could not return to Concho—yet he wanted a definite wage. "I kin pack—make and break camp—and sure cook the frijoles. Pop learned me all that; but he was payin' me a dollar a week. He said I was jest as good as a man. A dollar a week ain't much."

The old herder shook his head. "Not until I sell the wool can I pay."

"When do you sell that wool?"

"When the pay for it is good. Sometimes I wait."

"Well, I kin see where I don't get rich herdin' sheep."

"We shall see. Perhaps, if you are a good boy—"

"You got me wrong, señor. Roth he said I was the limit—and even my old pop said I was a tough kid. I ain't doin' this for my health. I hooked up with you 'cause I kinda thought—"

"Si?"

"Well, Roth was tellin' as how you could make a six-gun smoke faster than most any hombre

a-livin'. Now, I was figurin' if you would show me how to work this ole smoke-wagon here"—and Pete touched the huge lump beneath his shirt—"why, that would kinda be like wages—but I ain't got no money to buy cartridges."

"I, José de la Crux Montoya, will show you how to work him. It is a big gun for such a chico."

"Oh, I reckon I kin hold her down. When do we start the shootin' match?"

Montoya smiled.

"Mañana, perhaps."

"Then that's settled!" Pete heaved a sigh. "But how am I goin' to git them cartridges?"

"From the store."

"That's all right. But how many do I git for workin' for you?"

Montoya laughed outright. "You will become a good man with the sheep. You will not waste the flour and the beans and the coffee and the sugar, like Pedro here. You will count and not say—'Oh, I think it's so much'—and because of that I will buy you two boxes of cartridges."

"Two boxes—a hundred a month?"

"Even so. You will waste many until you learn."

"Shake!" said Pete. "That suits me! And if any doggone ole brush-cats or lion or bear come pokin' around this here camp, we'll sure smoke 'em up. And if any of them cow-chasers from the mountain or the Concho starts monkeyin' with our sheep, there's sure goin' to be a cowboy funeral in these parts! You done hired a good man when you hired me!"

"We shall see," said Montoya, greatly amused. "But there is much work to be done as well as the shooting."

"I'll be there!" exclaimed Pete. "What makes them sheep keep a-moanin' and a-bawlin' and a-shufflin' round? Don't they never git to sleep?"

"Si, but it is a new camp. To-morrow night they will be quiet. It is always so."

"Well, they sure make enough noise. When do we git goin'?"

"Pedro, he will leave mañana. In two days we will move the camp."

"All right. I don't reckon Roth would be lookin' for me in any sheep-camp anyhow." Young Pete was not afraid of the storekeeper, but the fact that he had taken the gun troubled him, even though he had left a note explaining that he took the gun in lieu of wages. He shared Pedro's blankets, but slept little. The sheep milled and bawled most of the night. Even before daybreak Pete was up and building a fire. The sheep poured from the bedding-ground and pattered down to the cañon stream. Later they spread out across the wide cañon-bottom and grazed, watched by the dogs.

Full-fed and happy, Young Pete helped Pedro clean the camp-utensils. The morning sun, pushing up past the cañon-rim, picked out the details of the camp one by one—the smouldering fire of cedar wood, the packs, saddles and ropes, the water-cask, the lazy burros waiting for the sun to warm them to action, the blankets and sheepskin bedding, and farther down the cañon a still figure standing on a slight rise of ground and gazing into space—the figure of José de la Crux Montoya, the sheep-herder whom Roth had said feared no man and was a dead shot.

Pete knew Spanish—he had heard little else spoken in Concho—and he thought that "Joseph of the Cross" was a strange name for a recognized gunman. "But Mexicans always stick crosses over graves," soliloquized Pete. "Mebby that's why he's got that fancy name. Gee! But this sure beats tendin' store!"

CHAPTER VI

NEW VISTAS

Much that Annersley had taught Pete was undone in the lazy, listless life of the sheep-camp. There was a certain slow progressiveness about it, however, that saved it from absolute monotony. Each day the sheep grazed out, the distance being automatically adjusted by the coming of night, when they were bunched and slowly drifted back to the bedding-ground. A day

or two—depending on the grazing—and they were bedded in a new place as the herder worked toward the low country followed by a recurrent crispness in the air that presaged the coming of winter in the hills. Pete soon realized that, despite their seeming independence, sheep-men were slaves of the seasons. They "followed the grass" and fled from cold weather and snow. At times, if the winter was severe in the lower levels, they even had to winter-feed to save the band. Lambs became tired or sick—unable to follow the ewes—and Pete often found some lone lamb hiding beneath a clump of brush where it would have perished had he not carried it on to the flock and watched it until it grew stronger. He learned that sheep were gregarious—that a sheep left alone on the mesa, no matter how strong, through sheer loneliness would cease to eat and slowly starve to death. Used to horses, Pete looked upon sheep with contempt. They had neither individual nor collective intelligence. Let them once become frightened and if not immediately headed off by the dogs, they would stampede over the brink of an arroyo and trample each other to death. This all but happened once when Montoya was buying provisions in town and Pete was in charge of the band. The camp was below the rim of a cañon. The sheep were scattered over a mile or so of mesa, grazing contentedly. The dogs, out-posted on either side of the flock, were resting, but alert. To the left, some distance from the sheep, was the cañon-rim and a trail, gatewayed by two huge boulders, man-high, with about enough space between them for a burro to pass. A horse could hardly have squeezed through. Each night the sheep were headed for this pass and worked through, one at a time, stringing down the trail below which was steep and sandy. At the cañon bottom was water and across the shallows were the bedding-grounds and the camp. Pete, drowsing in the sun, occasionally glanced up at the flock. He saw no need for standing up, as Montoya always did when out with the band. The sheep were all right—and the day was hot. Presently Pete became interested in a mighty battle between a colony of red ants which seemed to be attacking a colony of big black ants that had in some way infringed on some international agreement, or overstepped the color-line. Pete picked up a twig and hastily scraped up a sand barricade, to protect the red ants, who, despite their valor, seemed to be getting the worst of it. Black ants scurried to the top of the barricade to be grappled by the tiny red ants, who fought valiantly. Pete saw a red ant meet one of the enemy who was twice his size, wrestle with him and finally best him. Evidently this particular black ant, though deceased, was of some importance, possibly an officer, for the little red ant seized him and bore him bodily to the rear where he in turn collapsed and was carried to the adjoining ant-hill by two of his comrades evidently detailed on ambulance work. "Everybody scraps—even the bugs," said Pete. "Them little red cusses sure ain't scared o' nothin'." Stream after stream of red ants hastened to reinforce their comrades on the barricade. The battle became general. Pete grew excited. He was scraping up another barricade when he heard one of the dogs bark. He glanced up. The sheep, frightened by a buzzard that had swooped unusually close to them, bunched and shot toward the cañon in a cloud of dust. Pete jumped to his feet and ran swiftly toward the rock gateway to head them off. He knew that they would make for the trail, and that those that did not get through the pass would trample the weaker sheep to death. The dog on the cañon side of the band raced across their course, snapping at the foremost in a sturdy endeavor to turn them. But he could not. He ran, nipped a sheep, and then jumped back to save himself from being cut to pieces by the blundering feet. Young Pete saw that he could not reach the pass ahead of them. Out of breath and half-sobbing as he realized the futility of his effort, he suddenly recalled an incident like this when Montoya, failing to head the band in a similar situation, had coolly shot the leader and had broken the stampede.

Pete immediately sat down, and rested the barrel of his six-shooter on his knee. He centered on the pass. A few seconds—and a big ram, several feet ahead of the others, dashed into the notch. Pete grasped his gun with both hands and fired. The ram reared and dropped just within the rocky gateway. Pete saw another sheep jump over the ram and disappear. Pete centered on the notch again and as the gray mass bunched and crowded together to get through, he fired. Another sheep toppled and fell. Still the sheep rushed on, crowding against the rocks and trampling each other in a frantic endeavor to get through. Occasionally one of the leaders leaped over the two dead sheep and disappeared down the trail. But the first force of their stampede was checked. Dropping his gun, Pete jumped up and footed it for the notch, waving his hat as he ran. Bleating and bawling, the band turned slowly and swung parallel to the cañon-rim. The dogs, realizing that they could now turn the sheep back, joined forces, and running a ticklish race along the very edge of the cañon, headed the band toward the safe ground to the west. Pete, as he said later, "cussed 'em a plenty." When he took up his station between the band and the cañon, wondering what Montoya would say when he returned.

When the old Mexican, hazing the burros across the mesa, saw Pete wave his hat, he knew that something unusual had happened. Montoya shrugged his shoulders as Pete told of the stampede.

"So it is with the sheep," said Montoya casually. "These we will take away, for the sheep will smell the blood and not go down the trail." And he pointed to the ram and the ewe that Pete had shot. "I will go to the camp and unpack. You have killed two good sheep, but you have saved many."

Pete said nothing about the battle of the ants. He knew that he had been remiss, but he thought that in eventually turning the sheep he had made up for it.

And because Pete was energetic, self-reliant, and steady, capable of taking the burros into town and packing back provisions promptly—for Pete, unlike most boys, did not care to loaf about

town—the old herder became exceedingly fond of him, although he seldom showed it in a direct way. Rather, he taught Pete Mexican—colloquialisms and idioms that are not found in books—until Pete, who already knew enough of the language to get along handily, became thoroughly at home whenever he chanced to meet a Mexican—herder, cowboy, or storekeeper. Naturally, Pete did not appreciate the value of this until later—when his familiarity with the language helped him out of many a tight place. But what Pete did appreciate was the old herder's skill with the six-gun—his uncanny ability to shoot from any position on the instant and to use the gun with either hand with equal facility. In one of the desert towns Pete had traded a mountain-lion skin for a belt and holster and several boxes of cartridges to boot, for Pete was keen at bargaining. Later the old Mexican cut down the belt to fit Pete and taught him how to hang the gun to the best advantage. Then he taught Pete to "draw," impressing upon him that while accuracy was exceedingly desirable, a quick draw was absolutely essential. Pete practiced early and late, more than disgusted because Montoya made him practice with an empty gun. He "threw down" on moving sheep, the dogs, an occasional distant horseman, and even on Montoya himself, but never until the old herder had examined the weapon and assured himself that he would not be suddenly bumped off into glory by his ambitious assistant. As some men play cards, partly for amusement and partly to keep their hands in, so Pete and Montoya played the six-gun game, and neither seemed to tire of the amusement. Montoya frequently unloaded his own gun and making sure that Pete had done likewise, the old herder would stand opposite him and count—"Una, duo, tres," and the twain would "go for their guns" to see who would get in the first theoretical shot. At first Pete was slow. His gun was too heavy for him and his wrist was not quick. But he stuck to it until finally he could draw and shoot almost as fast as his teacher. Later they practiced while sitting down, while reclining propped on one elbow, and finally from a prone position, where Pete learned to roll sideways, draw and shoot even as a side-winder of the desert strikes without coiling. Montoya taught him to throw a shot over his shoulder, to "roll" his gun, to pretend to surrender it, and, handing it out butt first, flip it over and shoot the theoretical enemy. He also taught him one trick which, while not considered legitimate by most professional gunmen, was exceedingly worth while on account of its deadly unexpectedness—and that was to shoot through the open holster without drawing the gun. Such practice allowed of only a limited range, never higher than a man's belt, but as Montoya explained, a shot belt-high and center was most effective.

Pete took an almost vicious delight in perfecting himself in this trick. He knew of most of the other methods—but shooting with the gun in the holster was difficult and for close-range work, and just in proportion to its difficulty Pete persevered.

He was fond of Montoya in an offhand way, but with the lessons in gunmanship his fondness became almost reverence for the old man's easy skill and accuracy. Despite their increasing friendliness, Pete could never get Montoya to admit that he had killed a man—and Pete thought this strange, at that time.

Pete's lessons were not always without grief. Montoya, ordinarily genial, was a hard master to please. Finally, when Pete was allowed to use ammunition in his practice, and insisted on sighting at an object, Montoya reproved him sharply for wasting time. "It is like this," he would say; illustrating on the instant he would throw a shot into the chance target without apparent aim. Once he made Pete put down his gun and take up a handful of stones. "Now shoot," he said. Pete, much chagrined, pelted the stones rapidly at the empty can target. To his surprise he missed it only once. "Now shoot him like that," said Montoya. Pete, chafing because of this "kid stuff," as he called the stone-throwing, picked up his gun and "threw" five shots at the can. He was angry and he shot fast, but he hit the can twice. From that minute he "caught on." Speed tended toward accuracy, premising one was used to the "feel" of a gun. And accuracy tended toward speed, giving one assurance. Even as one must throw a stone with speed to be accurate, so one must shoot with speed. It was all easy enough—like everything else—when you had the hang of it.

How often a hero of fiction steps into a story—or rides into it—whose deadly accuracy, lightning-like swiftness, appalling freedom from accident, ostrich-like stomach and camel-like ability to go without water, earn him the plaudits of a legion of admiring readers. Apropos of such a hero, your old-timer will tell you, "that there ain't no such animal." If your old-timer is a friend—perchance carrying the never-mentioned scars of cattle-wars and frontier raids—he may tell you that many of the greatest gunmen practiced early and late, spent all their spare money on ammunition, never "showed-off" before an audience, always took careful advantage of every fighting chance, saved their horses and themselves from undue fatigue when possible, never killed a man when they could avoid killing him, bore themselves quietly, didn't know the meaning of Romance, but were strong for utility, and withal worked as hard and suffered as much in becoming proficient in their vocation as the veriest artisan of the cities. Circumstances, hazard, untoward event, even inclination toward excitement, made some of these men heroes, but never in their own eyes. There were exceptions, of course, but most of the exceptions were buried.

And Young Pete, least of all, dreamed of becoming a hero. He liked guns and all that pertained to them. The feel of a six-shooter in his hand gave him absolute pleasure. The sound of a six-shooter was music to him, and the potency contained in the polished cylinder filled with blunt-nosed slugs was something that he could appreciate. He was a born gunman, as yet only in love with the tools of his trade, interested more in the manipulation than in eventual results. He wished to become expert, but in becoming expert he forgot for the time being his original intent

of eventually becoming the avenger of Annersley. Pride in his ability to draw quick and shoot straight, with an occasional word of praise from old Montoya, pretty well satisfied him. When he was not practicing he was working, and thought only of the task at hand.

Pete was generally liked in the towns where he occasionally bought provisions. He was known as "Montoya's boy," and the townsfolk had a high respect for the old Mexican. One circumstance, however, ruffled the placid tenor of his way and tended to give him the reputation of being a "bronco muchacho"—a rough boy; literally a bad boy, as white folks would have called him.

Montoya sent him into town for some supplies. As usual, Pete rode one of the burros. It was customary for Pete to leave his gun in camp when going to town. Montoya had suggested that he do this, as much for Pete's sake as for anything else. The old man knew that slightly older boys were apt to make fun of Pete for packing such a disproportionately large gun—or, in fact, for packing any gun at all. And Montoya also feared that Pete might get into trouble. Pete was pugnacious, independent, and while always possessing enough humor to hold his own in a wordy argument, he had much pride, considering himself the equal of any man and quite above the run of youths of the towns. And he disliked Mexicans—Montoya being the one exception. This morning he did not pack his gun, but hung it on the cross-tree of the pack-saddle. There were many brush rabbits on the mesa, and they made interesting targets.

About noon he arrived at the town—Laguna. He bought the few provisions necessary and piled them on the ground near his burros. He had brought some cold meat and bread with him which he ate, squatted out in front of the store. Several young loafers gathered round and held high argument among themselves as to whether Pete was a Mexican or not. This in itself was not altogether pleasing to Pete. He knew that he was tanned to a swarthy hue, was naturally of a dark complexion, and possessed black hair and eyes. But his blood rebelled at even the suggestion that he was a Mexican. He munched his bread and meat, tossed the crumbs to a stray dog and rolled a cigarette. One of the Mexican boys asked him for tobacco and papers. Pete gladly proffered "the makings." The Mexican youth rolled a cigarette and passed the sack of tobacco to his companions. Pete eyed this breach of etiquette sternly, and received the sack back, all but empty. But still he said nothing, but rose and entering the store—a rambling, flat-roofed adobe—bought another sack of tobacco. When he came out the boys were laughing. He caught a word or two which drove the jest home. In the vernacular, he was "an easy mark."

"Mebby I am," he said in Mexican. "But I got the price to buy my smokes. I ain't no doggone loafer."

The Mexican youth who had asked for the tobacco retorted with some more or less vile language, intimating that Pete was neither Mexican nor white—an insult compared to which mere anathema was as nothing. Pete knew that if he started a row he would get properly licked—that the boys would all pile on him and chase him out of town. So he turned his back on the group and proceeded to pack the burros. The Mexican boys forgot the recent unpleasantness in watching him pack. They realized that he knew his business. But Pete was not through with them yet. When he had the burros in shape to travel he picked up the stick with which he hazed them and faced the group. What he said to them was enough with some to spare for future cogitation. He surpassed mere invective with flaming innuendos as to the ancestry, habits, and appearance of these special gentlemen and of Mexicans in general. He knew Mexicans and knew where he could hit hardest. He wound up with gentle intimation that the town would have made a respectable pigsty, but that a decent pig would have a hard time keeping his self-respect among so many descendants of the canine tribe. It was a beautiful, an eloquent piece of work, and even as he delivered it he felt rather proud of his command of the Mexican idiom. Then he made a mistake. He promptly turned his back and started the burros toward the distant camp. Had he kept half an eye on the boys he might have avoided trouble. But he had turned his back. They thought that he was both angry and afraid. They also made a slight mistake. The youth who had borrowed the tobacco and who had taken most of Pete's eloquence to heart—for he had inspired it—called the dog that lay back of them in the shade and set him on Pete and the burros. If a burro hates anything it is to be attacked by a dog. Pete whirled and swung his stick. The dog, a huge, lean, coyote-faced animal, dodged and snapped at the nearest burro's heels. That placid animal promptly bucked and ran. His brother burro took the cue and did likewise. Presently the immediate half-mile square was decorated with loose provisions—sugar, beans, flour, a few cans of tomatoes, and chiles broken from the sack and strung out in every direction. The burros became a seething cloud of dust in the distance. Pete chased the dog which naturally circled and ran back of the group of the store. Older Mexicans gathered and laughed. The boys, feeling secure in the presence of their seniors, added their shrill yelps of pleasure. Pete, boiling internally, white-faced and altogether too quiet, slowly gathered up what provisions were usable. Presently he came upon his gun, which had been bucked from the pack-saddle. The Mexicans were still laughing when he strode back to the store. The dog, scenting trouble, bristled and snarled, baring his long fangs and standing with one forefoot raised. Before the assembly realized what had happened, Pete had whipped out his gun. With the crash of the shot the dog doubled up and dropped in his tracks. The boys scattered and ran. Pete cut loose in their general direction. They ran faster. The older folk, chattering and scolding, backed into the store. "Montoya's boy was loco. He would kill somebody!" Some of the women crossed themselves. The storekeeper, who knew Pete slightly, ventured out. He argued with Pete, who blinked and nodded, but would not put up his gun. The Mexicans feared him for the very fact that he was a boy and might do

anything. Had he been a man he might have been shot. But this did not occur to Pete. He was fighting mad. His burros were gone and his provisions scattered, save a few canned tomatoes that had not suffered damage. The storekeeper started toward him. Pete centered on that worthy's belt-buckle and told him to stay where he was.

"I'll blow a hole in you that you can drive a team through if you come near me!" asserted Pete. "I come in here peaceful, and you doggone Cholas wrecked my outfit and stampeded my burros; but they ain't no Mexican can run a whizzer on me twict. I'm white—see!"

"It is not I that did this thing," said the storekeeper.

"No, but the doggone town did! I reckon when José Montoya comes in and wants his grub, you'll settle all right. And he's comin'!"

"Then you will go and not shoot any one?"

"When I git ready. But you kin tell your outfit that the first Chola that follows me is goin' to run up ag'inst a slug that'll bust him wide open. I'm goin'—but I'm comin' back."

Pete, satisfied that he had conducted himself in a manner befitting the occasion, backed away a few steps and finally turned and marched across the mesa. They had wrecked his outfit. He'd show 'em! Old Montoya knew that something was wrong when the burros drifted in with their pack-saddles askew. He thought that possibly some coyote had stampeded them. He righted the pack-saddles and drove the burros back toward Laguna. Halfway across the mesa he met Pete, who told him what had happened. Montoya said nothing. Pete had hoped that his master would rave and threaten all sorts of vengeance. But the old man simply nodded, and plodding along back of the burros, finally entered Laguna and strode up to the store. All sorts of stories were afloat, stories which Montoya discounted liberally, because he knew Pete. The owner of the dog claimed damages. Montoya, smiling inwardly, referred that gentleman to Pete, who stood close to his employer, hoping that he would start a real row, but pretty certain that he would not. That was Montoya's way. The scattered provisions as far as possible were salvaged and fresh supplies loaded on the burros. When Montoya was ready to leave he turned to the few Mexicans in front of the store: "When I send my boy in here for flour and the beans and the sugar, it will be well to keep the dogs away—and to remember that it is Jose de la Crux that has sent him. For the new provisions I do not pay. Adios, señors."

Pete thought that this was rather tame—but still Montoya's manner was decidedly business-like. No one controverted him—not even the storekeeper, who was the loser.

A small crowd had assembled. Excitement such as this was rare in Laguna. While still in plain sight of the group about the store, and as Montoya plodded slowly along behind the burros, Pete turned and launched his parthian shot—that eloquently expressive gesture of contempt and scorn wherein is employed the thumb, the nose, and the outspread fingers of one hand. He was still very much a boy.

About a year later—after drifting across a big territory of grazing land, winter-feeding the sheep near Largo, and while preparing to drive south again and into the high country—Pete met young Andy White, a clean-cut, sprightly cowboy riding for the Concho outfit. Andy had ridden down to Largo on some errand or other and had tied his pony in front of the store when Montoya's sheep billowed down the street and frightened the pony. Young Pete, hazing the burros, saw the pony pull back and break the reins, whirl and dash out into the open and circle the mesa with head and tail up. It was a young horse, not actually wild, but decidedly frisky. Pete had not been on a horse for many months. The beautiful pony, stamping and snorting in the morning sun, thrilled Pete clear to his toes. To ride—anywhere—what a contrast to plodding along with the burros! To feel a horse between his knees again! To swing up and ride—ride across the mesa to that dim line of hills where the sun touched the blue of the timber and the gold of the quaking-asp and burned softly on the far woodland trail that led south and south across the silent ranges! Pete snatched a rope from the pack and walked out toward the pony. That good animal, a bit afraid of the queer figure in the flapping overalls and flop-brimmed sombrero, snorted and swung around facing him. Dragging his rope, Pete walked slowly forward. The pony stopped and flung up its head. Pete flipped the loop and set back on his heels. The rope ran taut. Pete was prepared for the usual battle, but the pony, instead, "came to the rope" and sniffed curiously at Pete, who patted his nose and talked to him. Assured that his strange captor knew horses, the pony allowed him to slip the rope round his nose and mount without even sidling. Pete was happy. This was something like! As for Montoya and the sheep—they were drifting on in a cloud of dust, the burros following placidly.

"You sure caught him slick."

Pete nodded to the bright-faced young cowboy who had stepped up to him. Andy White was older than Pete, heavier and taller, with keen blue eyes and an expression as frank and fearless as the morning itself. In contrast, Young Pete was lithe and dark, his face was more mature, more serious, and his black eyes seemed to see everything at a glance—a quick, indifferent glance that told no one what was behind the expression. Andy was light-skinned and ruddy. Pete was swarthy and black-haired. For a second or so they stood, then White genially thrust out his hand. "Thanks!" he said heartily. "You sabe 'em."

It was a little thing to say and yet it touched Pete's pride. Deep in his heart he was a bit ashamed of consorting with a sheep-herder—a Mexican; and to be recognized as being familiar with horses pleased him more than his countenance showed. "Yes. I handled 'em some—tradin'—when I was a kid."

Andy glanced at the boyish figure and smiled. "You're wastin' good time with that outfit,"—and he gestured with his thumb toward the sheep.

"Oh, I dunno. José Montoya ain't so slow—with a gun."

Andy White laughed. "Old Crux ain't a bad old scout—but you ain't a Mexican. Anybody can see that!"

"Well, just for fun—suppose I was."

"It would be different," said Andy. "You're white, all right!"

"Meanin' my catchin' your cayuse. Well, anybody'd do that."

"They ain't nothin' to drink but belly-wash in this town," said Andy boyishly. "But you come along down to the store an' I'll buy."

"I'll go you! I see you're ridin' for the Concho."

"Uh-huh, a year."

Pete walked beside this new companion and Pete was thinking hard. "What's your name?" he queried suddenly.

"White—Andy White. What's yours?"

"Pete Annersley," he replied proudly.

They sat outside the store and drank bottled pop and swapped youthful yarns of the range and camp until Pete decided that he had better go. But his heart was no longer with the sheep.

He rose and shook hands with Andy. "If you git a chanct, ride over to our camp sometime. I'm goin' up the Largo. You can find us. Mebby"—and he hesitated, eying the pony—"mebby I might git a chanct to tie up to your outfit. I'm sick of the woolies."

"Don't blame you, amigo. If I hear of anything I'll come a-fannin' and tell you. So-long. She's one lovely mornin'."

Pete turned and plodded down the dusty road. Far ahead the sheep shuffled along, the dogs on either side of the band and old Montoya trudging behind and driving the burros. Pete said nothing as he caught up with Montoya, merely taking his place and hazing the burros toward their first camp in the cañon.

It was an aimless life, with little chance of excitement; but riding range—that was worth while! Already Pete had outgrown any sense of dependency on the old Mexican. He felt that he was his own man. He had been literally raised with the horses and until this morning he had not missed them so much. But the pony and the sprightly young cowboy, with his keen, smiling face and swinging chaps, had stirred longings in Young Pete's heart that no amount of ease or outdoor freedom with the sheep could satisfy. He wanted action. His life with Montoya had made him careless but not indolent. He felt a touch of shame, realizing that such a thought was disloyal to Montoya, who had done so much for him. But what sentiment Pete had, ceased immediately, however, when the main chance loomed, and he thought he saw his fortune shaping toward the range and the cow-ponies. He had liked Andy White from the beginning. Perhaps they could arrange to ride together if he (Pete) could get work with the Concho outfit. The gist of it all was that Pete was lonely and did not realize it. Montoya was much older, grave, and often silent for days. He seemed satisfied with the life. Pete, in his way, had aspirations—vague as yet, but slowly shaping toward a higher plane than the herding of sheep. He had had experiences enough for a man twice his age, and he knew that he had ability. As Andy White had said, it was wasting good time, this sheep-herding. Well, perhaps something would turn up. In the meantime there was camp to make, water to pack, and plenty of easy detail to take up his immediate time. Perhaps he would talk with Montoya after supper about making a change. Perhaps not. It might be better to wait until he saw Andy White again.

In camp that night Montoya asked Pete if he were sick. Pete shook his head; "Jest thinkin'," he replied.

Old Montoya, wise in his way, knew that something had occurred, yet he asked no further questions, but rolled a cigarette and smoked, wondering whether Young Pete were dissatisfied with the pay he gave him—for Pete now got two dollars a week and his meals. Montoya thought of offering him more. The boy was worth more. But he would wait. If Pete showed any disposition to leave, then would be time enough to speak. So they sat by the fire in the keen evening air, each busy with his own thoughts, while the restless sheep bedded down, bleating and shuffling, and the dogs lay with noses toward the fire, apparently dozing, but ever alert for a stampede;

alert for any possibility—even as were Montoya and Pete, although outwardly placid and silent.

Next morning, after the sheep were out, Pete picked up a pack-rope and amused himself by flipping the loop on the burros, the clumps of brush, stubs, and limbs, keeping at it until the old herder noticed and nodded. "He is thinking of the cattle," soliloquized Montoya. "I will have to get a new boy some day. But he will speak, and then I shall know."

While Pete practiced with the rope he was figuring how long it would take him to save exactly eighteen dollars and a half, for that was the price of a Colt's gun such as he had taken from the store at Concho. Why he should think of saving the money for a gun is not quite clear. He already had one. Possibly because they were drifting back toward the town of Concho, Pete wished to be prepared in case Roth asked him about the gun. Pete had eleven dollars pinned in the watch-pocket of his overalls. In three weeks, at most, they would drive past Concho. He would then have seventeen dollars. Among his personal effects he had two bobcat skins and a coyote-hide. Perhaps he could sell them for a dollar or two. How often did Andy White ride the Largo Cañon? The Concho cattle grazed to the east. Perhaps White had forgotten his promise to ride over some evening. Pete swung his loop and roped a clump of brush. "I'll sure forefoot you, you doggone longhorn!" he said. "I'll git my iron on you, you maverick! I'm the Ridin' Kid from Powder River, and I ride 'em straight up an' comin'." So he romanced, his feet on the ground, but his heart with the bawling herd and the charging ponies. "Like to rope a lion," he told himself as he swung his rope again. "Same as High-Chin Bob." Just then one of the dogs, attracted by Pete's unusual behavior, trotted up.

Pete's rope shot out and dropped. The dog had never been roped. His dignity was assaulted. He yelped and started straightway for Montoya, who stood near the band, gazing, as ever, into space. Just as the rope came taut, Pete's foot slipped and he lost the rope. The dog, frightened out of his wits, charged down on the sheep. The trailing rope startled them. They sagged in, crowding away from the terror-stricken dog. Fear, among sheep, spreads like fire in dry grass. In five seconds the band was running, with Montoya calling to the dogs and Pete trying to capture the flying cause of the trouble.

When the sheep were turned and had resumed their grazing, Montoya, who had caught the roped dog, strode to Pete. "It was a bad thing to do," he said easily. "Why did you rope him?"

Pete scowled and stammered. "Thought he was a lion. He came a-tearin' up, and I was thinkin' o' lions. So, I jest nacherally loops him. I was praticin'."

"First it was the gun. Now it is the rope," said Montoya, smiling. "You make a vaquero, some day, I think."

"Oh, mebby. But I sure won't quit you till you get 'em over the range, even if I do git a chanct to ride for some outfit. But I ain't got a job, yet."

"I would not like to have you go," said Montoya. "You are a good boy."

Pete had nothing to say. He wished Montoya had not called him "a good boy." That hurt. If Montoya had only scolded him for stampeding the sheep.... But Montoya had spoken in a kindly way.

CHAPTER VII

PLANS

Several nights later a horseman rode into Montoya's camp. Pete, getting supper, pretended great indifference until he heard the horseman's voice. It was young Andy White who had come to visit, as he had promised. Pete's heart went warm, and he immediately found an extra tin plate and put more coffee in the pot. He was glad to see White, but he was not going to let White know how glad. He greeted the young cowboy in an offhand way, taking the attitude of being so engrossed with cooking that he could not pay great attention to a stray horseman just then. But later in the evening, after they had eaten, the two youths chatted and smoked while Montoya listened and gazed out across the evening mesa. He understood. Pete was tired of the sheep and would sooner or later take up with the cattle. That was natural enough. He liked Pete; really felt as a father toward him. And the old Mexican, who was skilled in working leather, thought of the hand-carved holster and belt that he had been working on during his spare time—a present that he had intended giving Pete when it was completed. There was still a little work to do on the holster; the flower pattern in the center was not quite finished. To-morrow he would finish it—for he wanted to have it ready. If Pete stayed with him, he would have it—and if Pete left he should have something by which to remember José de la Cruz Montoya—something to remember him by, and something useful—for even then Montoya realized that if Young Pete survived the present hazards that challenged youth and an adventurous heart, some day, as a man grown, Pete would

thoroughly appreciate the gift. A good holster, built on the right lines and one from which a gun came easily, would be very useful to a man of Pete's inclinations. And when it came to the fit and hang of a holster, Montoya knew his business.

Three weeks later, almost to a day, the sheep were grazing below the town of Concho, near the camp where Pete had first visited Montoya and elected to work for him. On the higher levels several miles to the east was the great cattle outfit of the Concho; the home-buildings, corrals, and stables. Pete had seen some of the Concho boys—chance visitors at the homestead on the Blue—and he had been thinking of these as the sheep drifted toward Concho. After all, he was not equipped to ride, as he had no saddle, bridle, chaps, boots, and not even a first-class rope. Pete had too much pride to acknowledge his lack of riding-gear or the wherewithal to purchase it, even should he tie up with the Concho boys. So when Andy White, again visiting the sheep-camp, told Pete that the Concho foreman had offered no encouragement in regard to an extra hand, Pete nodded as though the matter were of slight consequence, which had the effect of stirring Andy to renewed eloquence anent the subject—as Pete had hoped. The boys discussed ways and means. There was much discussion, but no visible ways and means. Andy's entire wealth was invested in his own gay trappings. Pete possessed something like seventeen dollars. But there is nothing impossible to youth—for when youth realizes the impossible, youth has grown a beard and fears the fire.

Both boys knew that there were many poor Mexicans in the town of Concho who, when under the expansive influence of wine, would part with almost anything they or their neighbors possessed, for a consideration. There were Mexicans who would sell horse, saddle, and bridle for that amount, especially when thirsty—for seventeen dollars meant unlimited vino and a swaggering good time—for a time. Pete knew this only too well. He suggested the idea to Andy, who concurred with enthusiasm.

"Cholas is no good anyhow," blurted Andy. "You ain't robbin' nobody when you buy a Chola outfit. Let's go!"

Montoya, who sat by the fire, coughed.

"Course, I was meanin' some Cholas," said Andy.

The old herder smiled to himself. The boys amused him. He had been young once—and very poor. And he had ridden range in his youthful days. A mild fatalist, he knew that Pete would not stay long, and Montoya was big enough not to begrudge the muchacho any happiness.

"I'm goin' over to town for a spell," explained Pete.

Montoya nodded.

"I'm comin' back," Pete added, a bit embarrassed.

"Bueno. I shall be here."

Pete, a bit flustered, did not quite catch the mild sarcasm, but he breathed more freely when they were out of sight of camp. "He's sure a white Mexican," he told Andy. "I kind o' hate to leave him, at that."

"You ain't left him yet," suggested Andy with the blunt candor of youth.

Pete pondered. Tucked under his arm were the two bobcat skins and the coyote-hide. He would try to sell them to the storekeeper, Roth. All told, he would then have about twenty dollars. That was quite a lot of money—in Concho.

Roth was closing shop when they entered town. He greeted Pete heartily, remarked at his growth and invited him in. Pete introduced Andy, quite unnecessarily, for Andy knew the storekeeper. Pete gazed at the familiar shelves, boxes and barrels, the new saddles and rigs, and in fact at everything in the store save the showcase which contained the cheap watches, trinkets, and six-shooters.

"I got a couple o' skins here," he said presently. "Mebby you could buy 'em."

"Let's see 'em, Pete."

Pete unfolded the stiff skins on the counter.

"Why, I'll give you two dollars for the lot. The cat-skins are all right. The coyote ain't worth much."

"All right. I—I'm needin' the money right now," stammered Pete—"or I'd give 'em to you."

"How you making it?" queried Roth.

"Fine! But I was thinkin' o' makin' a change. Sheep is all right—but I'm sick o' the smell of 'em. Montoya is all right, too. It ain't that."

Roth gazed at the boy, wondering if he would say anything about the six-gun. He liked Pete and yet he felt a little disappointed that Pete should have taken him altogether for granted.

"Montoya was in—yesterday," said Roth.

"Uh-huh? Said he was comin' over here. He's back in camp. Me and Andy was lookin' for a Chola that wants to sell a hoss."

"Mighty poor lot of cayuses round here, Pete. What you want with a horse?"

"T ain't the hoss. It's the saddle an' bridle I'm after. If I were to offer to buy a saddle an' bridle I'd git stuck jest as much for 'em as I would if I was to buy the whole works. Might jest as well have the hoss. I could trade him for a pair of chaps, mebby."

"Goin' to quit the sheep business?"

"Mebby—if I can git a job ridin'."

"Well, good luck. I got to close up. Come over and see me before you break camp."

"I sure will! Thank you for the—for buyin' them hides."

Pete felt relieved—and yet not satisfied. He had wanted to speak about the six-shooter he had taken—but Andy was there, and, besides, it was a hard subject to approach gracefully even under the most favorable auspices. Perhaps, in the morning...

"Come on over to Tony's Place and mebby we can run into a Mex that wants to sell out," suggested Andy.

Pete said good-night to Roth.

"Don't you boys get into trouble," laughed Roth, as they left. He had not even hinted about the six-shooter. Pete thought that the storekeeper was "sure white."

The inevitable gaunt, ribby, dejected pony stood at the hitching-rail of the saloon. Pete knew it at once for a Mexican's pony. No white man would ride such a horse. The boys inspected the saddle, which was not worth much, but they thought it would do. "We could steal 'im," suggested Andy, laughing. "Then we could swipe the rig and turn the cayuse loose."

For a moment this idea appealed to Pete. He had a supreme contempt for Mexicans. But suddenly he seemed to see himself surreptitiously taking the six-shooter from Roth's showcase—and he recalled vividly how he had felt at the time—"jest plumb mean," as he put it. Roth had been mighty decent to him.... The Mexican, a wizened little man, cross-eyed and wrinkled, stumbled from the saloon.

"Want to sell your hoss?" Pete asked in Mexican.

"Si! How much you give?" said the other, coming right to the point.

"Ten dollars."

"He is a good horse—very fast. He is worth much more. I sell him for twenty dollars."

"Si."

Andy White put his hand on Pete's shoulder. "Say, Pete," he whispered, "I know this hombre. The poor cuss ain't hardly got enough sense to die. He comes into town reg'lar and gits drunk and he's got a whole corral full of kids and a wife, over to the Flats. I'm game, but it's kinda tough, takin' his hoss. It's about all he's got, exceptin' a measly ole dog and a shack and the clothes on his back. That saddle ain't worth much, anyhow."

Pete thought it over. "It's his funeral," he said presently.

"That's all right—but dam' if I want to bury him." And Andy, the sprightly, rolled a cigarette and eyed Pete, who stood pondering.

Presently Pete turned to the Mexican. "I was only joshin' you, amigo. You fork your cayuse and fan it for home."

Pete felt that his chance of buying cheap equipment had gone glimmering, but he was not unhappy. He gestured to Andy. Together they strode across to the store and sat on the rough wood platform. Pete kicked his heels and whistled a range tune. Andy smoked and wondered what Pete had in mind. Suddenly Pete rose and pulled up his belt. "Come on over to Roth's house," he said. "I want to see him."

"He's turned in," suggested Andy.

"That's all right. I got to see him."

"I'm on! You're goin' to pay somethin' down on a rig, and git him to let you take it on time. Great idee! Go to it!"

"You got me wrong," said Pete.

Roth had gone to bed, but he rose and answered the door when he heard Pete's voice. "Kin I see you alone?" queried Pete.

"I reckon so. Come right in."

Pete blinked in the glare of the lamp, shuffled his feet as he slowly counted out eighteen dollars and a half. "It's for the gun I took," he explained.

Roth hesitated, then took the money.

"All right, Pete. I'll give you a receipt. Just wait a minute."

Pete gazed curiously at the crumpled bit of paper that Roth fetched from the bedroom. "I took a gun an' cartriges for Wagges. You never giv me Wages."

Pete heaved a sigh. "I reckon we're square."

Roth grinned. "Knowed you'd come back some day. Reckon you didn't find a Mexican with a horse to sell, eh?"

"Yep. But I changed my mind."

"What made you change your mind?"

"I dunno."

"Well, I reckon I do. Now, see here, Pete. You been up against it 'most all your life. You ain't so bad off with old Montoya, but I sabe how you feel about herding sheep. You want to get to riding. But first you want to get a job. Now you go over to the Concho and tell Bailey—he's the foreman—that I sent you, and that if he'll give you a job, I'll outfit you. You can take your time paying for it."

Pete blinked and choked a little. "I ain't askin' nobody to *give* me nothin'," he said brusquely.

"Yes, you be. You're asking Bailey for a job. It's all right to ask for something you mean to pay for, and you'll pay for your job by workin'. That there rig you can pay for out of your wages. I was always intending to do something for you—only you didn't stay. I reckon I'm kind o' slow. 'Most everybody is in Concho. And seeing as you come back and paid up like a man—I'm going to charge that gun up against wages you earned when you was working for me, and credit you with the eighteen-fifty on the new rig. Now you fan it back to Montoya and tell him what you aim to do and then if you got time, come over to-morrow and pick out your rig. You don't have to take it till you get your job."

Pete twisted his hat in his hands. He did not know what to say. Slowly he backed from the room, turned, and strode out to Andy White. Andy wondered what Pete had been up to, but waited for him to speak.

Presently Pete cleared his throat. "I'm coming over to your wickiup to-morrow and strike for a job. I got the promise of a rig, all right. Don't want no second-hand rig, anyhow! I'm the Ridin' Kid from Powder River and I'm comin' with head up and tail a-rollin'."

"Whoopee!" sang Andy, and swung to his pony.

"I'm a-comin'!" called Pete as Andy clattered away into the night.

Pete felt happy and yet strangely subdued. The dim road flickered before him as he trudged back to the sheep-camp. "Pop would 'a' done it that way," he said aloud. And for a space, down the darkening road he walked in that realm where the invisible walk, and beside him trudged the great, rugged shape of Annersley, the spirit of the old man who always "played square," feared no man, and fulfilled a purpose in the immeasurable scheme of things. Pete knew that Annersley would have been pleased. So it was that Young Pete paid the most honorable debt of all, the debt to memory that the debtor's own free hand may pay or not—and none be the wiser, save the debtor. Pete had "played square." It was all the more to his credit that he hated like the dickens to give up his eighteen dollars and a half, and yet had done so.

CHAPTER VIII

SOME BOOKKEEPING

While it is possible to approach the foreman of a cattle outfit on foot and apply for work, it is—as a certain Ulysses of the outlands once said—not considered good form in the best families in Arizona. Pete was only too keenly conscious of this. There is a prestige recognized by both employer and tentative employee in riding in, swinging to the ground in that deliberate and easy fashion of the Western rider, and sauntering up as though on a friendly visit wherein the weather and grazing furnish themes for introduction, discussion, and the eventual wedge that may open up the way to employment. The foreman knows by the way you sit your horse, dismount, and generally handle yourself, just where you stand in the scale of ability. He does not need to be told. Nor does he care what you have been. Your saddle-tree is much more significant than your family tree. Still, if you have graduated in some Far Eastern riding academy, and are, perchance, ambitious to learn the gentle art of roping, riding them as they come, and incidentally preserving your anatomy as an undislocated whole, it is not a bad idea to approach the foreman on foot and clothed in unpretentious garb. For, as this same Ulysses of the outlands said:

"Rub grease on your chaps and look wise if you will,
But the odor of tan-bark will cling round you still."

This information alone is worth considerably more than twenty cents.

Young Pete, who had not slept much, arose and prepared breakfast, making the coffee extra strong. Montoya liked strong coffee. After breakfast Pete made a diagonal approach to the subject of leaving. Could he go to Concho? Montoya nodded. Would it be all right if he made a visit to the Concho outfit over on the mesa? It would be all right. This was too easy. Pete squirmed internally. If Montoya would only ask why he wanted to go. Did Montoya think he could get another boy to help with the sheep? The old herder, who had a quiet sense of humor, said he didn't need another boy: that Pete did very well. Young Pete felt, as he expressed it to himself, "jest plumb mean." Metaphorically he had thrown his rope three times and missed each time. This time he made a wider loop.

"What I'm gittin' at is, Roth over to Concho said last night if I was to go over to Bailey—he's the fo'man of the Concho outfit—and ask him for a job, I could mebby land one. Roth, he said he'd outfit me and leave me to pay for it from my wages. Andy White, he's pluggin' for me over to the ranch. I ain't said nothin' to you, for I wa'n't sure—but Roth he says mebby I could git a job. I reckon I'm gettin' kind of *old* to herd sheep."

Montoya smiled. "Si; I am sixty years old."

"I know—but—doggone it! I want to ride a hoss and go somewhere!"

"I will pay you three dollars a week," said Montoya, and his eyes twinkled. He was enjoying Pete's embarrassment.

"It ain't the money. You sure been square. It ain't that. I reckon I jest got to go."

"Then it is that you go. I will find another to help. You have been a good boy. You do not like the sheep—but the horses. I know that you have been saving the money. You have not bought cartridges. I would give you—"

"Hold on—you give me my money day before yesterday."

"Then you have a little till you get your wages from the Concho. It is good."

"Oh, I'm broke all right," said Pete. "But that don't bother me none. I paid Roth for that gun I swiped—"

"You steal the gun?"

"Well, it wa'n't jest *stealin'* it. Roth he never paid me no wages, so when I lit out I took her along and writ him it was for wages."

"Then why did you pay him?"

Pete frowned. "I dunno."

Montoya nodded. He stooped and fumbled in a pack. Pete wondered what the old man was hunting for.

Presently, Montoya drew out the hand-carved belt and holster, held it up, and inspected it critically. He felt of it with his calloused hands, and finally gestured to Pete. "It is for you, muchacho. I made it. Stand so. There, it should hang this way." Montoya buckled the belt around Pete and stepped back. "A little to the front. Bueno! Tie the thong round your leg—so. That is well! It is the present from José Montoya. Sometimes you will remember—"

Montoya glanced at Pete's face. Pete was frowning prodigiously.

"Hah!" laughed Montoya. "You do not like it, eh?"

Pete scowled and blinked. "It's the best doggone holster in the world! I—I'm goin' to keep that there holster as long as I live! I—"

Montoya patted Pete's shoulder. "With the sheep it is quiet, so!"—and Montoya gestured to the band that grazed near by. "Where you will go there will be the hard riding and the fighting, perhaps. It is not good to kill a man. But it is not good to be killed. The hot word—the quarrel—and some day a man will try to kill you. See! I have left the holster open at the end. I have taught you that trick—but do not tie the holster down if you would shoot that way. There is no more to say."

Pete thought so, so far as he was concerned. He was angry with himself for having felt emotion and yet happy in that his break with Montoya had terminated so pleasantly withal. "I'm goin' to town," he said, "and git a boy to come out here. If I can't git a boy, I'll come back and stay till you git one."

Montoya nodded and strode out to where the sheep had drifted. The dogs jumped up and welcomed him. It was not customary for their master to leave them for so long alone with the flock. Their wagging tails and general attitude expressed relief.

Pete, topping the rise that hides the town of Concho from the northern vistas, turned and looked back. Far below, on a slightly rounded knoll stood the old herder, a solitary figure in the wide expanse of mesa and morning sunlight. Pete swung his hat. Montoya raised his arm in a gesture of good-will and farewell. Pete might have to come back, but Montoya doubted it. He knew Pete. If there was anything that looked like a boy available in Concho, Pete would induce that boy to take his place with Montoya, if he had to resort to force to do so.

Youth on the hilltop! Youth pausing to gaze back for a moment on a pleasant vista of sunshine and long, lazy days—Pete brushed his arm across his eyes. One of the dogs had left the sheep, and came frisking toward the hill where Pete stood. Pete had never paid much attention to the dogs, and was surprised that either of them should note his going, at this time. "Mebby the doggone cuss knows that I'm quittin' for good," he thought. The dog circled Pete and barked ingratiatingly. Pete, touched by unexpected interest, squatted down and called the dog to him. The sharp-muzzled, keen-eyed animal trotted up and nosed Pete's hand. "You 're sure wise!" said Pete affectionately. Pete was even more astonished to realize that it was the dog he had roped recently. "Knowed I was only foolin'," said Pete, patting the dog's head. The sheep-dog gazed up into Pete's face with bright, unblinking eyes that questioned, "Why was Pete leaving camp early in the morning—and without the burros?"

"I'm quittin' for good," said Pete.

The dog's waving tail grew still.

"That's right—honest!"—and Pete rose.

The sheep-dog's quivering joy ceased at the word. His alertness vanished. A veritable statue of dejection he stood as though pondering the situation. Then he lifted his head and howled—the long, lugubrious howl of the wolf that hungers.

"You said it all," muttered Pete, turning swiftly and trudging down the road. He would have liked to howl himself. Montoya's kindness at parting—and his gift—had touched Pete deeply, but he had fought his emotion then, too proud to show it. Now he felt a hot something spatter on his hand. His mouth quivered. "Doggone the dog!" he exclaimed. "Doggone the whole doggone outfit!" And to cheat his emotion he began to sing, in a ludicrous, choked way, that sprightly and inimitable range ballad;

"Way high up in the Mokiones, among the mountain-tops,
A lion cleaned a yearlin's bones and licked his thankful chops,
When who upon the scene should ride, a-trippin' down the slope,"

"Doggone the slope!" blurted Pete as he stubbed his toe on a rock.

But when he reached Concho his eyes had cleared. Like all good Americans he "turned a keen, untroubled face home to the instant need of things," and after visiting Roth at the store, and though sorely tempted to loiter and inspect saddlery, he set out to hunt up a boy—for Montoya.

None of the Mexican boys he approached cared to leave home. Things looked pretty blue for Pete. The finding of the right boy meant his own freedom. His contempt for the youth of Concho grew apace. The Mexicans were a lazy lot, who either did not want to work or were loath to leave home and follow the sheep. "Jest kids!" he remarked contemptuously as his fifth attempt failed. "I could lick the whole bunch!"

Finally he located a half-grown youth who said he was willing to go. Pete told him where to find Montoya and exacted a promise from the youth to go at once and apply for the place. Pete hastened to the store and immediately forgot time, place, and even the fact that he had yet to get a job riding for the Concho outfit, in the eager joy of choosing a saddle, bridle, blanket, spurs, boots and chaps, to say nothing of a new Stetson and rope. The sum total of these unpaid-for

purchases rather staggered him. His eighteen-odd dollars was as a fly-speck on the credit side of the ledger. He had chosen the best of everything that Roth had in stock. A little figuring convinced him that he would have to work several months before his outfit was paid for. "If I git a job I'll give you an order for my wages," he told Roth.

"That's all right, Pete; I ain't worryin'."

"Well—I be, some," said Pete. "Lemme see—fifty for the saddle, seven for the bridle—and she's some bridle!—and eighteen for the chaps—fifteen for the boots—that's ninety dollars. Gee whizz! Then there's four for that blanket and ten for them spurs. That's a hundred and four. 'Course I *could* git along without a new lid. Rope is three-fifty, and lid is ten. One hundred and seventeen dollars for four bits. Guess I'll make it a hundred and twenty. No use botherin' about small change. Gimme that pair of gloves."

Roth had no hesitation in outfitting Pete. The Concho cattlemen traded at his store. He had extended credit to many a rider whom he trusted less than he did Pete. Moreover, he was fond of the boy and wanted to see him placed where he could better himself. "I've got you on the books for a hundred and twenty," he told Pete, and Pete felt very proud and important. "Now, if I could borrow a hoss for a spell, I'd jest fork him and ride over to see Bailey," he asserted. "I sure can't pack this outfit over there."

Roth grinned. "Well, we might as well let the tail go with the hide. There's old Rowdy. He ain't much of a horse, but he's got three good legs yet. He starched a little forward, but he'll make the trip over and back. You can take him."

"Honest?"

"Go ahead."

Pete tingled with joyful anticipation as he strode from the store, his new rope in his hand. He would rope that cayuse and just about burn the ground for the Concho! Maybe he wouldn't make young Andy White sit up! The Ridin' Kid from Powder River was walking on air when—

"Thought you was goin' over to see Montoya!" he challenged as he saw the Mexican youth, whom he had tentatively hired, sitting placidly on the store veranda, employed solely in gazing at the road as though it were a most interesting spectacle. "Oh, mañana," drawled the Mexican.

"Mañana, nothin'!" volleyed Pete. "You're goin' now! Git a-movin'—if you have to take your hands and lift your doggone feet off the ground. Git a-goin'!"

"Oh, maybe I go mañana."

"You're dreamin', hombre." Pete was desperate. Again he saw his chance of an immediate job go glimmering down the vague vistas of many to-morrows.

"See here! What kind of a guy are you, anyhow? I come in here yesterday and offered you a job and you promised you'd git to work right away. You—"

"It was *to-day* you speak of Montoya," corrected the Mexican.

"You're dreamin'," reiterated Pete. "It was *yesterday* you said you would go mañana. Well, it's to-morrow, ain't it? You been asleep an' don't know it."

An expression of childish wonder crossed the Mexican youth's stolid face. Of a certainty it was but this very morning that Montoya's boy had spoken to him! Or was it yesterday morning? Montoya's boy had said it was yesterday morning. It must be so. The youth rose and gazed about him. Pete stood aggressively potent, frowning down on the other's hesitation.

"I go," said the Mexican.

Pete heaved a sigh of relief. "A fella's got to know how to handle 'em," he told the immediate vicinity. And because Pete knew something about "handlin' 'em," he did not at once go for the horse, but stood staring after the Mexican, who had paused to glance back. Pete waved his hand in a gesture which meant, "Keep goin'." The Mexican youth kept going.

"I ain't wishin' old José any hard luck," muttered Pete, "but I said I'd send a boy—and that there walkin' dream *looks* like one, anyhow. 'Oh, mañana!'" he snorted. "Mexicans is mostly figurin' out to-day what they 're goin' to do to-morrow, and they never git through figurin'. I dunno who my father and mother was, but I know one thing—they wa'n't Mexicans."

CHAPTER IX

ROWDY—AND BLUE SMOKE

It has been said that Necessity is the mother of Invention—well, it goes without saying that the cowboy is the father, and Pete was closely related to these progenitors of that most necessary adjunct of success. Moreover, he could have boasted a coat of arms had he been at all familiar with heraldry and obliged to declare himself.



[Illustration: Pete.]

A pinto cayuse rampant; a longhorn steer regardant; two sad-eyed, unbranded calves couchant—one in each corner of the shield to kind of balance her up; gules, several clumps of something representing sagebrush; and possibly a rattlesnake coiled beneath the sagebrush and described as "repellent" and holding in his open jaws a streaming motto reading, "I'm a-comin'."

Had it been essential that Pete's escutcheon should bear the bar sinister, doubtless he would have explained its presence with the easy assertion that the dark diagonal represented the vague ancestry of the two sad-eyed calves couchant. Anybody could see that the calves were part longhorn and part Hereford!

Pete rode out of Concho glittering in his new-found glory of shining bit and spur, wide-brimmed Stetson, and chaps studded with nickel-plated conchas. The creak of the stiff saddle-leather was music to him. His brand-new and really good equipment almost made up for the horse—an ancient pensioner that never seemed to be just certain when he would take his next step and seemed a trifle surprised when he had taken it. He was old, amiable, and willing, internally, but his legs, somewhat of the Chippendale order, had seen better days. Ease and good feeding had failed to fill him out. He was past taking on flesh. Roth kept him about the place for short trips. Roth's lively team of pintos were at the time grazing in a distant summer pasture.

Rowdy—the horse—seemed to feel that the occasion demanded something of him. He pricked his ears as they crossed the cañon bottom and breasted the ascent as bravely as his three good legs would let him. At the top he puffed hard. Despite Pete's urging, he stood stolidly until he had gathered enough ozone to propel him farther. "Git along, you doggone ole cockroach!" said Pete. But Rowdy was firm. He turned his head and gazed sadly at his rider with one mournful eye that said plainly, "I'm doing my level best." Pete realized that the ground just traveled was anything but level, and curbed his impatience. "I'll jest kind o' save him for the finish," he told himself. "Then I'll hook the spurs into him and ride in a-boilin'. Don't care what he does after that. He can set down and rest if he wants to. Git along, old soap-foot," he cried—"soap-foot" possibly because Rowdy occasionally slipped. His antique legs didn't always do just what he wanted them to do.

Topping the mesa edge, Pete saw the distant green that fringed the Concho home-ranch, topped by a curl of smoke that drifted lazily across the gold of the morning. Without urging, Rowdy broke into a stiff trot, that sounded Pete's inmost depths, despite his natural good seat in

the saddle. "Quit it!" cried Pete presently. "You'll be goin' on crutches afore night if you keep that up.—And so'll I," he added. Rowdy immediately stopped and turned his mournful eye on Pete.

If the trot had been the rhythmic *one, two, three, four*, Pete could have ridden and rolled cigarettes without spilling a flake of tobacco; but the trot was a sort of *one, two—almost three*, then, whump! *three* and a quick *four*, and so on, a decidedly irregular meter in Pete's lyrical journey toward new fields and fairer fortune. "I'll sure make Andy sit up!" he declared as the Concho buildings loomed beneath the cool, dark-green outline of the trees. He dismounted to open and close a gate. A half-mile farther he again dismounted to open and close another gate. From there on was a straightaway road to the ranch-buildings. Pete gathered himself together, pushed his hat down firmly—it was new and stiff—and put Rowdy to a high lope. This was something like it! Possibly Rowdy anticipated a good rest, and hay. In any event, he did his best, rounding into the yard and up to the house like a true cow-pony. All would have been well, as Pete realized later, had it not been for the pup. The pup saw in Rowdy a new playfellow, and charged from the door-step just as that good steed was mentally preparing to come to a stop. The pup was not mentally prepared in any way, and in his excitement he overshot the mark. He caromed into Rowdy's one recalcitrant leg—it usually happens that way—and Rowdy stepped on him. Pete was also not mentally prepared to dismount at the moment, but he did so as Rowdy crashed down in a cloud of dust. The pup, who imagined himself killed, shrieked shrilly and ran as hard as he could to the distant stables to find out if it were not so.

Pete picked up his hat. Rowdy scrambled up and shook himself. Pete was mad. Over on the edge of the bunk-house veranda sat four or five of the Concho boys. They rocked back and forth and slapped their legs and shouted. It was a trying situation.

The foreman, Bailey, rose as Pete limped up. "We're livin' over here," said Bailey. "Did you want to see some one?"

Pete wet his lips. "The fo'man. I—I—jest rid over to see how you was makin' it."

"Why, we 're doin' right fair. How you makin' it yourself?"

"I'm here," said Pete succinctly and without a smile.

"So we noticed," said the foreman mildly, too mildly, for one of the punchers began to laugh, and the rest joined in.

"Wisht I had a hoss like that," said a cowboy. "Always did hate to climb offen a hoss. I like to have 'em set down and kind o' let me step off easy-like."

Pete sorely wanted to make a sharp retort, but he had learned the wisdom of silence. He knew that he had made himself ridiculous before these men. It would be hard to live down this thing. He deemed himself sadly out of luck, but he never lost sight of the main chance for an instant.

Bailey, through young Andy White, knew of Pete and was studying him. The boy had self-possession, and he had not cursed the horse for stumbling. He saw that Pete was making a fight to keep his temper.

"You lookin' for work?" he said kindly.

"I was headed that way," replied Pete.

"Can you rope?"

"Oh, some. I kin keep from tanglin' my feet in a rope when it's hangin' on the horn and I'm standin' off a piece."

"Well, things are slack right now. Don't know as I could use you. What's your name, anyhow?"

"I'm Pete Annersley. I reckon you know who my pop was."

Bailey nodded. "The T-Bar-T," he said, turning toward the men. They shook their heads and were silent, gazing curiously at the boy, of whom it was said that he had "bumped off" two T-Bar-T boys in a raid some years ago. Young Pete felt his ground firmer beneath him. The men had ceased laughing. If it had not been for that unfortunate stumble...

"You're sportin' a right good rig," said the foreman.

"I aim to," said Pete quickly. "If I hadn't gone broke buyin' it, I'd ride up here on a real hoss."

"Things are pretty slack right now," said Bailey. "Glad to see you—but they won't be nothin' doin' till fall. Won't you set down? We're goin' to eat right soon."

"Thanks. I ain't a-missin' a chanct to eat. And I reckon ole Rowdy there could do somethin' in that line hisself."

Bailey smiled. "Turn your horse into the corral. Better pack your saddle over here. That pup

will chew them new latigos if he gets near it."

"That doggone pup come mighty nigh bustin' me,"—and Pete smiled for the first time since arriving. "But the pup was havin' a good time, anyhow."

"Say, I want to shake with you!" said a big puncher, rising and sticking out a strong, hairy hand.

Pete's face expressed surprise. "Why—sure!" he stammered, not realizing that his smiling reference to the pup had won him a friend.

"He's sure a hard-boiled kid," said one of the men as Pete unsaddled and led Rowdy to the corral. "Did you catch his eye? Black—and shinin'; plumb full of deviltry—down in deep. That kid's had to hit some hard spots afore he growed to where he is."

"And he can take his medicine," asserted another cowboy. "He was mad enough to kill that hoss and the bunch of us—but he held her down and bellied up to us like a real one. Looks like he had kind of a Injun streak in him."

Bailey nodded. "Wish I had a job for the kid. He would make good. He's been driftin' round the country with old man Montoya for a couple of years. Old man Annersley picked him up down to Concho. The kid was with a horse-trader. He would have been all right with Annersley, but you boys know what happened. This ain't no orphan asylum, but—well, anyhow—did you size up the rig he's sportin'?"

"Some rig."

"And he says he went broke to buy her."

"Some kid."

"Goin' to string him along?" queried another cowboy.

"Nope," replied Bailey. "The pup strung him plenty. Mebby we'll give him a whirl at a real horse after dinner. He's itchin' to climb a real one and show us, and likewise to break in that new rig."

"Or git busted," suggested one of the men.

"By his eye, I'd say he'll stick," said Bailey. "Don't you boys go to raggin' him too strong about ridin', for I ain't aimin' to kill the kid. If he can stick on Blue Smoke, I've a good mind to give him a job. I told Andy to tell him there wa'n't no chanct up here—but the kid comes to look-see for hisself. I kind o' like that."

"You 're gettin' soft in your haid, Bud," said a cowboy affectionately.

"Mebby, but I don't have to put cotton in my ears to keep my brains in," Bailey retorted mildly.

The cowboy who had spoken was suffering from earache and had an ear plugged with cotton.

Pete swaggered up and sat down. "Who's ridin' that blue out there?" he queried, gesturing toward the corral.

"He's a pet," said Bailey. "Nobody rides him."

"Uh-huh. Well, I reckon the man who tries 'll be one of ole Abraham's pets right off soon after," commented Pete. "He don't look good to me."

"You sabe 'em?" queried Bailey and winked at a companion.

"Nope," replied Pete. "I can't tell a hoss from a hitchin'-rail, 'less he kicks me."

"Well, Blue Smoke ain't a hitchin'-rail," asserted Bailey. "What do you say if we go over and tell the missis we're starvin' to death?"

"Send Pete over," suggested a cowboy.

Bailey liked a joke. As he had said, things were dull, just then. "Lope over and tell my missis we're settin' out here starvin' to death," he suggested to Pete.

Pete strode to the house and entered, hat in hand. The foreman's wife, a plump, cheery woman, liked nothing better than to joke with the men. Presently Pete came out bearing the half of a large, thick, juicy pie in his hands. He marched to the bunkhouse and sat down near the men—but not too near. He ate pie and said nothing. When he had finished the pie, he rolled a cigarette and smoked, in huge content. The cowboys glanced at one another and grinned.

"Well," said Bailey presently; "what's the answer?"

Pete grinned. "Misses Bailey says to tell you fellas to keep on starvin' to death. It'll save cookin'."

"I move that we get one square before we cross over," said Bailey, rising. "Come on, boys. I can smell twelve o'clock comin' from the kitchen."

CHAPTER X

"TURN HIM LOOSE!"

Blue Smoke was one of those unfortunate animals known as an outlaw. He was a blue roan with a black stripe down his back, a tough, strong pony, with a white-rimmed eye as uncompromising as the muzzle of a cocked gun. He was of no special use as a cow-pony and was kept about the ranch merely because he happened to belong to the Concho caviyard. It took a wise horse and two good men to get a saddle on him when some aspiring newcomer intimated that he could ride anything with hair on it. He was the inevitable test of the new man. No one as yet had ridden him to a finish; nor was it expected. The man who could stand a brief ten seconds' punishment astride of the outlaw was considered a pretty fair rider. It was customary to time the performance, as one would time a race, but in the instance of riding Blue Smoke the man was timed rather than the horse. So far, Bailey himself held the record. He had stayed with the outlaw fifteen seconds.

Pete learned this, and much more, about Blue Smoke's disposition while the men ate and joked with Mrs. Bailey. And Mrs. Bailey, good woman, was no less eloquent than the men in describing the outlaw's unenviable temperament, never dreaming that the men would allow a boy of Pete's years to ride the horse. Pete, a bit embarrassed in this lively company, attended heartily to his plate. He gathered, indirectly, that he was expected to demonstrate his ability as a rider, sooner or later. He hoped that it would be later.

After dinner the men loafed out and gravitated lazily toward the corral, where they stood eying the horses and commenting on this and that pony. Pete had eyes for no horse but Blue Smoke. He admitted to himself that he did not want to ride that horse. He knew that his rise would be sudden and that his fall would be great. Still, he sported the habiliments of a full-fledged buckaroo, and he would have to live up to them. A man who could not sit the hurricane-deck of a pitching horse was of little use to the ranch. In the busy season each man caught up his string of ponies and rode them as he needed them. There was neither time nor disposition to choose.

Pete wished that Blue Smoke had a little more of Rowdy's equable disposition. It was typical of Pete, however, that he absolutely hated to leave an unpleasant task to an indefinite future. Moreover, he rather liked the Concho boys and the foreman. He wanted to ride with them. That was the main thing. Any hesitancy he had in regard to riding the outlaw was the outcome of discretion rather than of fear. Bailey had said there was no work for him. Pete felt that he had rather risk his neck a dozen times than to return to the town of Concho and tell Roth that he had been unsuccessful in getting work. Yet Pete did not forget his shrewdness. He would bargain with the foreman.

"How long kin a fella stick on that there Blue Smoke hoss?" he queried presently.

"Depends on the man," said Bailey, grinning.

"Bailey here stayed with him fifteen seconds onct," said a cowboy.

Pete pushed back his hat. "Well, I ain't no bronco-twister, but I reckon I could ride him a couple o' jumps. Who's keepin' time on the dog-gone cayuse?"

"Anybody that's got a watch," replied Bailey.

Pete hitched up his chaps. "I got a watch and I'd hate to bust her. If you'll hold her till I git through"—and he handed the watch to the nearest cowboy. "If you'll throw my saddle on 'im, I reckon I'll walk him round a little and see what kind of action he's got."

"Shucks!" exclaimed Bailey; "that hoss would jest nacherally pitch you so high you wouldn't git back in time for the fall round-up, kid. He's bad."

"Well, you said they wa'n't no job till fall, anyhow," said Pete. "Mebby I'd git back in time for a job."

Bailey shook his head. "I was joshin'—this mornin'."

"Bout my ridin' that hoss? Well, I ain't. I'm kind of a stranger up here, and I reckon you fellas think, because that doggone ole soap-foot fell down with me, that I can't ride 'em."

"Oh, mebbby some of 'em," laughed Bailey.

Pete's black eyes flashed. To him the matter was anything but a joke. "You give me a job if I stick on that hoss for fifteen seconds? Why, I'm game to crawl him and see who wins out. If I git pitched, I lose. And I'm taking all the chances."

"Throw a saddle on him and give the kid a chanct," suggested a cowboy.

Bailey turned and looked at Pete, whose eyes were alight with the hope of winning out—not for the sake of any brief glory, Pete's compressed lips denied that, but for the sake of demonstrating his ability to hold down a job on the ranch.

"Rope him, Monte," said Bailey. "Take the sorrel. I'll throw the kid's saddle on him."

"Do I git the job if I stick?" queried Pete nervously.

"Mebby," said Bailey.

Now Pete's watch was a long-suffering dollar watch that went when it wanted to and ceased to go when it felt like resting. At present the watch was on furlough and had been for several days. A good shake would start it going—and once started it seemed anxious to make up for lost time by racing at a delirious pace that ignored the sun, the stars, and all that makes the deliberate progress of the hours. If Pete could arrange it so that his riding could be timed by his own watch, he thought he could win, with something to spare. After a wild battle with the punchers, Blue Smoke was saddled with Pete's saddle. He still fought the men. There was no time for discussion if Pete intended to ride.

"Go to 'im!" cried Bailey.

Pete hitched up his chaps and crawled over the bars. "Jest time him for me," said Pete, turning to the cowboy who held his watch.

The cowboy glanced at the watch, put it to his ear, then glanced at it again. "The durn thing's stopped!" he asserted.

"Shake her," said Pete.

Pete slipped into the saddle. "Turn 'im loose!" he cried.

The men jumped back. Blue Smoke lunged and went at it. Pete gritted his teeth and hung to the rope. The corral revolved and the buildings teetered drunkenly. Blue Smoke was not a running buckner, but did his pitching in a small area—and viciously. Pete's head snapped back and forth. He lost all sense of time, direction, and place. He was jolted and jarred by a grunting cyclone that flung him up and sideways, met him coming down and racked every muscle in his body. Pete dully hoped that it would soon be over. He was bleeding at the nose. His neck felt as though it had been broken. He wanted to let go and fall. Anything was better than this terrible punishment.

He heard shouting, and then a woman's shrill voice. Blue Smoke gave a quick pitch and twist. Pete felt something crash up against him. Suddenly it was night. All motion had ceased.

When he came to, Mrs. Bailey was kneeling beside him and ringed around were the curious faces of the cowboys.

"I'm the Ridin' Kid from Powder River," muttered Pete. "Did I make it?"

"That horse liked to killed you," said Mrs. Bailey. "If I'd 'a' knew the boys was up to this ... and him just a boy! Jim Bailey, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" Ma Bailey wiped Pete's face with her apron and put her motherly arm beneath his head. "If he was my boy, Jim Bailey, I'd—I'd—show you!"

Pete raised on his elbow. "I'm all right, mam. It wa'n't his fault. I said I could ride that hoss. Did I make it?"

"Accordin' to your watch here," said the puncher who held Pete's irresponsible timepiece, "you rid him for four hours and sixteen minutes. The hands was a-fannin' it round like a windmill in a cyclone. But she's quit, now."

"Do I git the job?" queried Pete.

"You get right to bed! It's a wonder every bone in your body ain't broke!" exclaimed Ma Bailey.

"Bed!" snorted Pete. He rose stiffly. His hat was gone and one spur was missing. His legs felt heavy. His neck ached; but his black eyes were bright and blinking.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Mrs. Bailey. "Why, the boy is comin' to all right!"

"You bet!" said Pete, grinning, although he felt far from all right. He realized that he rather owed Mrs. Bailey something in the way of an expression of gratitude for her interest. "I—you, you sure can make the best pie ever turned loose!" he asserted.

"Pie!" gasped the foreman's wife, "and him almost killed by that blue devil there! You come right in the house, wash your face, and I'll fix you up."

"The kid's all right, mother," said Bailey placatingly.

Mrs. Bailey turned on her husband. "That's not your fault, Jim Bailey. Such goin's-on! You great, lazy hulk, you, to go set a boy to ridin' that hoss that you dassent ride yourself. If he was my boy—"

"Well, I'm willin'," said Pete, who began to realize the power behind the throne.

"Bless his heart!" Mrs. Bailey put her arm about his shoulders. Pete was mightily embarrassed. No woman had ever caressed him, so far as he could remember. The men would sure think him a softy, to allow all this strange mothering; but he could not help himself. Evidently the foreman's wife was a power in the land, for the men had taken her berating silently and respectfully. But before they reached the house Pete was only too glad to feel Mrs. Bailey's arm round his shoulders, for the ground seemed unnecessarily uneven, and the trees had a strange way of rocking back and forth, although there was no wind.

Mrs. Bailey insisted that he lie down, and she spread a blanket on her own white bed. Pete did not want to lie down. But Mrs. Bailey insisted, helping him to unbuckle his chaps and even to pull off his boots. The bed felt soft and comfortable to his aching body. The room was darkened. Mrs. Bailey tiptoed through the doorway. Pete gazed drowsily at a flaming lithograph on the wall; a basket of fruit such as was never known on land or sea, placed on a highly polished table such as was never made by human hands. The colors of the chromo grew dimmer and dimmer. Pete sighed and fell asleep.

Mrs. Bailey, like most folk in that locality, knew something of Pete's earlier life. Rumor had it that Pete was a bad one—a tough kid—that he had even killed two cowboys of the T-Bar-T. Mrs. Bailey had never seen Pete until that morning. Yet she immediately formed her own opinion of him, intuition guiding her aright. Young Pete was simply unfortunate—not vicious. She could see that at a glance. And he was a manly youngster with a quick, direct eye. He had come to the Concho looking for work. The men had played their usual pranks, fortunately with no serious consequences. But Bailey should have known better, and she told him so that afternoon in the kitchen, while Pete slumbered blissfully in the next room. "And he can help around the place, even if it is slack times," she concluded.

That evening was one of the happiest evenings of Pete's life. He had never known the tender solicitude of a woman. Mrs. Bailey treated him as a sort of semi-invalid, waiting on him, silencing the men's good-natured joshing with her sharp tongue, feeding him canned peaches—a rare treat—and finally enthroning him in her own ample rocking-chair, somewhat to Pete's embarrassment, and much to the amusement of the men.

"He sure can ride it!" said a cowboy, indicating the rocking-chair.

"Bill Haskins, you need a shave!" said Mrs. Bailey.

The aforesaid Bill Haskins, unable to see any connection between his remark and the condition of his beard, stared from one to another of his blank-faced companions, grew red, stammered, and felt of his chin.

"I reckon I do," he said weakly, and rising he plodded to the bunk-house.

"And if you want to smoke," said Mrs. Bailey, indicating another of the boys who had just rolled and lighted a cigarette, "there's all outdoors to do it in."

This puncher also grew red, rose, and sauntered out.

Bailey and the two remaining cowboys shuffled their feet, wondering who would be the next to suffer the slings and arrows of Ma Bailey's indignation. *They* considered the Blue Smoke episode closed. Evidently Ma Bailey did not. Bailey himself wisely suggested that they go over to the bunk-house. It would be cooler there. The cowboys rose promptly and departed. But they were cowboys and not to be silenced so easily.

They loved Ma Bailey and they dearly loved to tease her. Strong, rugged, and used to activity, they could not be quiet long. Mrs. Bailey hitched a chair close to Pete and had learned much of his early history—for Pete felt that the least he could do was to answer her kindly questions—and he, in turn, had been feeling quite at home in her evident sympathy, when an unearthly yell shattered the quiet of the summer evening. More yells—and a voice from the darkness stated that some one was hurt bad; to bring a light. Groans, heartrending and hoarse, punctuated the succeeding silence. "It's Jim," the voice asserted. "Guess his leg's bruk."

The groaning continued. Mrs. Bailey rose and seized the lamp. Pete got up stiffly and followed her out. One of the men was down on all fours, jumping about in ludicrous imitation of a bucking horse; and another was astride him, beating him not too gently with a quirt. As Ma Bailey came in sight the other cowboys swung their hats and shouted encouragement to the rider. Bailey was not visible.

"Stay with 'im!" cried one. "Rake 'im! He's gittin' played out! Look out! He's goin' to sunfish! Bust 'im wide open!"

It was a huge parody of the afternoon performance, staged for Ma Bailey's special benefit. Suddenly the cowboy who represented Blue Smoke made an astounding buck and his rider bit the dust.

Ma Bailey held the lamp aloft and gazed sternly at the two sweating, puffing cowboys. "Where's Bailey?" she queried sharply.

One of the men stepped forward and doffing his hat assumed an attitude of profound gravity. "Blue there, he done pitched your husband, mam, and broke his leg. Your husband done loped off on three laigs, to git the doctor to fix it."

"Let me catch sight of him and I'll fix it!" she snorted. "Jim, if you're hidin' in that bunk-house you come out here—and behave yourself. Lord knows you are old enough to know better."

"That's right, mam. Jim is sure old enough to know better 'n to behave hisself. You feed us so plumb good, mam, that we jest can't set still nohow. I reckon it was the pie that done it. Reckon them dried apples kind of turned to cider."

Mrs. Bailey swung around with all the dignity of a liner leaving harbor, and headed for the house.

"Is she gone?" came in a hoarse whisper.

"You come near this house to-night and you'll find out!" Mrs. Bailey advised from the doorway.

"It's the hay for yours, Jim," comforted a cowboy.

Pete hesitated as to which course were better. Finally he decided to "throw in" with the men.

Bailey lighted the hanging lamp in the bunk-house, and the boys shuffled in, grinning sheepishly. "You're sure a he-widder to-night," said Bill Haskins sympathetically.

Bailey grinned. His good wife was used to such pranks. In fact the altogether unexpected and amusing carryings on of the boys did much toward lightening the monotony when times were dull, as they were just then. Had the boys ceased to cut up for any length of time, Ma Bailey would have thought them ill and would have doctored them accordingly.

Pete became interested in watching Bill Haskins endeavor to shave himself with cold water by the light of the hanging lamp.

Presently Pete's attention was diverted to the cowboy whom Mrs. Bailey had sent outdoors to smoke. He had fished up from somewhere a piece of cardboard and a blue pencil. He was diligently lettering a sign which he eventually showed to his companions with no little pride. It read:

"NO SMOKING ALOUD."

Pete did not see the joke, but he laughed heartily with the rest. The laughter had just about subsided when a voice came from across the way: "Jim, you come right straight to bed!"

Bailey indicated a bunk for Pete and stepped from the bunk-house.

Presently the boys heard Mrs. Bailey's voice. "Good-night, boys."

"Good-night, Ma!" they chorused heartily.

And "Good-night, Pete," came from the house.

"Good-night, Ma!" shrilled Pete, blushing.

"I'm plumb sore!" asserted Haskins. "'Good-night, boys,' is good enough for us. But did you hear what come after! I kin see who gits all the extra pie around this here ranch! I've half a mind to quit."

"What—eatin' pie?"

"Nope! Joshin' Ma. She allus gits the best of us."

CHAPTER XI

POP ANNERSLEY'S BOY

Several days after Pete's arrival at the Concho ranch, Andy White rode in with a companion, dusty, tired, and hungry from a sojourn over near the Apache line. White made his report to the foreman, unsaddled, and was washing with a great deal of splutter and elbow-motion, when some one slapped him on the back. He turned a dripping face to behold Pete grinning at him.

Andy's eyes lighted with pleasure. He stuck out a wet hand. "Did you land a job?"

"With both feet."

"Good! I was so darned tired I clean forgot you was livin'. Say, I saw ole José this afternoon. We was crossin' the bottom and rode into his camp. He said you had quit him. I asked him if you come up here, but he only shook his head and handed me the usual 'Quien sabe?' He'll never git a sore throat from talkin' too much. Say, wait till I git some of this here alkali out of my ears and we'll go and eat and then have a smoke and talk it out. Gee! But I'm glad you landed! How'd you work it?"

"Easy. I rid that there Blue Smoke hoss—give 'em an exhibition of real ridin' and the fo'man sure fell for my style."

"Uh-huh. What kind of a fall did *you* make?"

"Well, I wasn't in shape to know—till I come to. The fellas said I done all right till ole Smoke done that little double twist and left me standin' in the air—only with my feet up. I ain't jest lovin' that hoss a whole lot."

Andy nodded sagely. "I tried him onct. So Bailey give you a job, eh?"

"Kind of a job. Mostly peelin' potatoes and helpin' round the house. Ma Bailey says I'm worth any two of the men helpin' round the house. And I found out one thing—what Ma Bailey says round here goes."

"You bet! She's the boss. If Ma don't like a guy, he don't work long for the Concho. I recollect when Steve Gary quit over the T-Bar-T and come over here lookin' for a job. Ma she sized him up, but didn't say nothin' right away. But Gary he didn't stay long enough to git a saddle warm. Ma didn't like him, nohow. He sure was a top-hand—but that didn't help him none. He's over to the T-Bar-T now. Seen him the other day. He's got some kind of a drag there, for they took him back. Folks says—say, what's bitin' you?"

"Nothin'. You said Gary?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I was jest thinkin'."

Young Andy dried his face on the community towel, emptied the basin with a flourish which drenched the pup and sent him yelping toward the house, attempted to shy the basin so that it would land right-side up on the bench—but the basin was wet and soapy and slipped. It sailed through the door of the bunk-house and caromed off Bill Haskins's head. Andy saw what had happened and, seizing Pete's arm, rushed him across the clearing and into the house, where he grabbed Ma Bailey and kissed her heartily, scrambled backward as she pretended to threaten him with the mammoth coffee-pot, and sat down at the table with the remark that he was "powerful tired."

"You act like it," scoffed Mrs. Bailey.

Bill Haskins, with a face like black thunder, clumped in and asked Mrs. Bailey if she had any "stickin'-plaster."

"Cut you, Bill?"

"Bad!" said Bill, exhibiting a cut above the ear—the result of Andy's basin-throwing.

"Oh, you go 'long!" said Mrs. Bailey, pushing him away. "Askin' for stickin'-plaster for a scratch like that!"

Bill Haskins growled and grumbled as he took his place at the table. He kept shaking his head like a dog with a sore ear, vowing that if he found out "who thrun that basin" there would be an empty chair at the Concho board before many days had passed.

Andy White glanced at Pete and snickered. Bill Haskins glowered and felt of his head. "Liked to skelp me," he asserted. "Ma, I jest ask you what you would do now, if you was settin' peaceful in the bunk-house pawin' over your war-bag, lookin' for a clean shirt, and all of a sudden *whing!* along comes a warsh-basin and takes you right over the ear. Wouldn't you feel like killin' somebody?"

"Lookin' for a clean shirt!" whispered Andy to Pete. "Did you git that?"

Bill "got" it—and flushed amazingly. "I was meanin' a clean—clean dress, Mrs. Bailey. A clean dress or stockin's, mebby."

"Bill was lookin' for a clean dress," snickered Andy. Pete grinned.

"Bill, I reckon it ain't your ear that needs that sticking-plaster. A clean shirt, indeed! I'm surprised at you, William."

"Gee, Ma called him Willum!" whispered Andy. "Bill better fade."

The men tramped in, nodded to Mrs. Bailey, and sat down. Eating was a serious matter with them. They said little. It was toward the end of the meal, during a lull in the clatter of knives and forks, that Andy White suggested, *sotto voce*, but intended for the assemblage, "That Bill always was scared of a wash-basin." This gentle innuendo was lost on the men, but Bill Haskins vowed mighty vengeance.

It was evident from the start that Pete and Andy would run in double harness. They were the youngsters of the outfit, liked each other, and as the months went by became known—Ma Bailey had read the book—as "The Heavenly Twins." Bailey asked his good wife why "heavenly." He averred that "twins was all right—but as for 'heavenly'—"

Mrs. Bailey chuckled. "I'm callin' 'em 'heavenly,' Jim, to kind of even up for what the boys call 'em. I don't use that kind of language."

Pete graduated from peeling potatoes and helping about the house to riding line with young Andy, until the fall round-up called for all hands, the loading of the chuck-wagon and a farewell to the lazy days at the home ranch. The air was keen with the tang of autumn. The hillside blue of spruce and pine was splashed here and there with the rich gold of the quaking asp. Far vistas grew clearer as the haze of summer heat waned and fled before the stealthy harbingers of winter. In the lower levels of the distant desert, heat waves still pulsed above the grayish brown reaches of sand and brush—but the desert was fifty, sixty, eighty miles away, spoken of as "down there" by the riders of the high country. And Young Pete, detailed to help "gather" in some of the most rugged timberland of the Blue, would not have changed places with any man. He had been allotted a string of ponies, placed under the supervision of an old hand, entered on the pay-roll at the nominal salary of thirty dollars a month, and turned out to do his share in the big round-up, wherein riders from the T-Bar-T, the Blue, the Eight-O-Eight, and the Concho rode with a loose rein and a quick spur, gathering and bunching the large herds over the high country.

There was a fly in Pete's coffee, however. Young Andy White had been detailed to ride another section of the country. Bailey had wisely separated these young hopefuls, fearing that competition—for they were always striving to outdo each other—might lead to a hard fall for one or both. Moreover, they were always up to some mischief or other—Andy working the schemes that Pete usually invented for the occasion. Up to the time that he arrived at the Concho ranch, Young Pete had never known the joy of good-natured, rough-and-tumble horseplay, that wholesome diversion that tries a man out, and either rubs off the ragged edges of his temper or marks him as an undesirable and to-be-let-alone. Pete, while possessing a workable sense of humor, was intense—somewhat quick on the trigger, so to speak. The frequent roughings he experienced served to steady him, and also taught him to distinguish the tentative line between good-natured banter and the veiled insult.

Unconsciously he studied his fellows, until he thought he pretty well knew their peculiarities and preferences. Unrealized by Pete, and by themselves, this set him apart from them. They never studied him, but took him for just what he seemed—a bright, quick, and withal industrious youngster, rather quiet at times, but never sullen. Bailey, whose business it was to know and handle men, confided to his wife that he did not quite understand Pete. And Mrs. Bailey, who was really fond of Pete, was consistently feminine when she averred that it wasn't necessary to understand him so long as he attended to his work and behaved himself, which was Mrs. Bailey's way of dodging the issue. She did not understand Pete herself. "He does a heap of thinking—for a boy," she told Bailey. "He's got something' besides cattle on his mind," Bailey asserted. Mrs. Bailey had closed the question for the time being with the rather vague assertion, "I should hope so."

The first real inkling that Andy White had of Pete's deeper nature was occasioned by an incident during the round-up.

The cutting-out and branding were about over. The Concho men, camped round their wagon, were fraternizing with visitors from the Blue and T-Bar-T. Every kind of gossip was afloat. The Government was going to make a game preserve of the Blue Range. Old man Dobson, of the Eight-O-Eight, had fired one of his men for packing whiskey into the camp: "Dobson was drunk

hissself!" was asserted. One sprightly and inventive son-of-saddle-leather had brought a pair of horse-clippers to the round-up. Every suffering puncher in the outfit had been thrown and clipped, including the foreman, and even the cattle inspector. Rumor had it that the boys from the Blue intended to widen their scope of operation and clip everybody. The "gentleman [described in the vernacular] who started to clip my [also described] head'll think he's tackled a tree-kitty," stated a husky cowboy from the T-Bar-T.

Old Montoya's name was mentioned by another rider from the T-Bar-T. Andy who was lying beside Pete, just within the circle of firelight, nudged him.

"We run every nester out of this country; and it's about time we started in on the sheep," said this individual, and he spoke not jestingly, but with a vicious meaning in his voice, that silenced the talk.

Bailey was there and Houck, the T-Bar-T foreman, Bud Long, foreman of the Blue, and possibly some fifteen or eighteen visiting cowboys. The strident ill-nature of the speaker challenged argument, but the boys were in good-humor.

"What you pickin' on Montoya for?" queried a cowboy, laughing. "He ain't here."

Pete sat up, naturally interested in the answer.

"He's lucky he ain't," retorted the cow-puncher.

"*You're* lucky he ain't," came from Pete's vicinity.

"Who says so?"

Andy White tugged at Pete's sleeve. "Shut up, Pete! That's Steve Gary talkin'. Don't you go mixin' with Gary. He's right quick with his gun. What's a-bitin' you, anyhow?"

"Who'd you say?" queried Pete.

"Gary—Steve Gary. Reckon you heard of him."

"Who says I'm lucky he ain't here?" again challenged Gary.

"Shut up, Steve," said a friendly cowboy. "Can't you take a josh?"

"Who's lookin' for a row, anyhow?" queried another cowboy. "I ain't."

The men laughed. Pete's face was somber in the firelight. Gary! The man who had led the raid on Pop Annersley's homestead. Pete knew that he would meet Gary some day, and he was curious to see the man who was responsible for the killing of Annersley. He had no definite plan—did not know just what he would do when he met him. Time had dulled the edge of Pete's earlier hatred and experience had taught him to leave well enough alone. But that strident voice, edged with malice, had stirred bitter memories. Pete felt that should he keep silent it would reflect on his loyalty to both Montoya and Annersley. There were men there who knew he had worked for Montoya. They knew, but hardly expected that Pete would take up Gary's general challenge. He was but a youth—hardly more than a boy. The camp was somewhat surprised when Pete got to his feet and stepped toward the fire.

"I'm the one that said you was lucky Montoya wasn't here," he asserted. "And I'm leavin' it to my boss, or Bud Long, or your own boss"—and he indicated Houck with a gesture—"if I ain't right."

"Who in hell are you, anyhow?" queried Gary,

"Me? I'm Pop Annersley's boy, Pete. Mebby you recollect you said you'd kill me if I talked about that shootin'. I was a kid then—and I was sure scared of the bunch that busted into the shack—three growed men ag'in' a kid—a-threatenin' what they'd do to the man that bumped off two of their braves. You was askin' who talked up awhile back. It was me."

Gary was on his feet and took a step toward Pete when young Andy rose. Pete was his bunkie. Andy didn't want to fight, but if Gary pulled his gun...

Bailey got up quietly, and turning his back on Gary told Pete and Andy to saddle up and ride out to relieve two of the boys on night-herd.

It was Bud Long who broke the tension. "It's right late for young roosters to be crowin' that way," he chuckled.

Everybody laughed except Gary. "But it ain't too late for full-growed roosters to crow!" he asserted.

Long chuckled again. "Nope. I jest crowed."

Not a man present missed the double-meaning, including Gary. And Gary did not want any of

Long's game. The genial Bud had delicately intimated that his sympathies were with the Concho boys. Then there were Bailey and Bill Haskins and several others among the Concho outfit who would never see one of their own get the worst of it. Gary turned and slunk away toward his own wagon. One after another the T-Bar-T boys rose and followed. The Annersley raid was not a popular subject with them.

Bailey turned to Long. "Thanks, Bud."

"Mornin', Jim," said Long facetiously. "When 'd you git here?"

Two exceedingly disgruntled young cowboys saddled up and rode out to the night-herd. They had worked all day, and now they would have to ride herd the rest of the night, for it was nearing twelve. As relief men they would have to hold their end of the herd until daybreak.

"I told you to shut up," complained Andy.

"I wasn't listenin' to you," said Pete,

"Yes! And this is what we git for your gittin' red-headed about a ole Mexican sheep-herder. But, honest, Pete, you sure come clost to gittin' yours. Gary mebbly wouldn't 'a' pulled on you—but he'd 'a' sure trimmed you if Bailey hadn't stepped in."

"He'd never put a hand on me," stated Pete.

"You mean you'd 'a' plugged 'im?"

"I'm meanin' I would."

"But, hell, Pete, you ain't no killer! And they's no use gettin' started that way. They's plenty as would like to see Gary bumped off—but I don't want to be the man to do it. Suppose Gary did lead that raid on ole man Annersley? That's over and done. Annersley is dead. You're livin'—and sure two dead men don't make a live one. What's the good o' takin' chances like that?"

"I dunno, Andy. All I know is that when Gary started talkin' about Montoya I commenced to git hot inside. I knowed I was a fool—but I jest had to stand up and tell him what he was. It wa'n't me doin' it. It was jest like somethin' big a-pullin' me onto my feet and makin' me talk like I did. It was jest like you was ridin' the edge of some steep and bad goin' and a maverick takes over and you know you got no business to put your hoss down after him. But your saddle is a-creakin' and a-sayin', 'Go git 'im!'—and you jest nacherally go. Kin you tell me what makes a fella do the like of that?"

"I dunno, Pete. But chasin' mavericks is different."

"Mebby. But the idee is jest the same."

"Well, I'm hopin' you don't git many more of them idee's right soon. I'm sure with you to the finish, but I ain't wishful to git mine that way."

"I ain't askin' you to," said Pete, for he was angry with himself despite the logic of his own argument.

They were near the herd. Andy, who had flushed hotly at Pete's rather ungenerous intimation, spurred his pony round and rode toward a dim figure that nodded in the starlight. Pete whirled his own pony and rode in the opposite direction.

Toward dawn, as they circled, they met again.

"Got the makin's?" queried Pete.

"Right here," said Andy.

As Pete took the little sack of tobacco, their hands touched and gripped. "I seen you standin' side of me," said Pete, "when I was talkin' to Gary."

"You was dreamin'" laughed Andy. "That was your shadow."

"Mebby," asserted Pete succinctly. "But I seen out of the corner of my eye that that there shadow had its hand on its gun. And I sure didn't."

CHAPTER XII

IN THE PIT

The round-up was over. A trainload of Concho steers was on its way East, accompanied by four of the Concho boys. The season had been a good one and prices were fair. Bailey was feeling well. There was no obvious reason for his restlessness. He had eaten a hearty breakfast. The sky was clear, and a thin, fragrant wind ran over the high mesa, a wind as refreshing as a drink of cold mountain water on a hot day. Suddenly it occurred to Bailey that the deer season was open—that "the hunting winds were loose." Somewhere in the far hills the bucks were running again. A little venison would be a welcome change from a fairly steady diet of beef.

Bailey saddled up, and hung his rifle under the stirrup-leather. He tucked a compact lunch in his saddle-pockets, filled a *morral* with grain and set off in the direction of the Blue Range.

Once on the way and his restlessness evaporated. He did not realize that deer-hunting was an excuse to be alone.

Jim Bailey, however, was not altogether happy. He was worried about Young Pete. The incident at the round-up had set him thinking. The T-Bar-T and the Concho men were not over-friendly. There were certain questions of grazing and water that had never been definitely settled. The Concho had always claimed the right to run their cattle on the Blue Mesa with the Blue Range as a tentative line of demarcation. The T-Bar-T always claimed the Blue as part of their range. There had been some bickering until the killing of Annersley, when Bailey promptly issued word to his men to keep the Concho cattle north of the homestead. He had refused to have anything to do with the raid, nor did he now intend that his cattle should be an evidence that he had even countenanced it.

Young Pete had unwittingly stirred up the old enmity. Any untoward act of a cowboy under such circumstances would be taken as expressive of the policy of the foreman. Even if Pete's quarrel was purely a personal matter there was no telling to what it might lead. The right or wrong of the matter, personally, was not for Bailey to decide. His duty was to keep his cattle where they belonged and his men out of trouble. And because he was known as level-headed and capable he held the position of actual manager of the Concho—owned by an Eastern syndicate—but he was too modest and sensible to assume any such title, realizing that as foreman he was in closer touch with his men. They told him things, as foreman, that as manager he would have heard indirectly through a foreman—qualified or elaborated as that official might choose.

As he jogged along across the levels Bailey thought it all over. He would have a talk with Young Pete when he returned and try to show him that his recent attitude toward Gary militated against the Concho's unprinted motto: "The fewer quarrels the more beef."

Halfway across the mesa there was what was known as "The Pit "; a circular hole in the plain; rock-walled, some forty or fifty yards in diameter and as many yards deep. Its bottom was covered with fine, loose sand, a strange circumstance in a country composed of tufa and volcanic rock. Legend had it that the Pit was an old Hopi tank, or water-hole—a huge cistern where that prehistoric tribe conserved the rain. Bits of broken pottery and scattered beads bore out this theory, and round the tank lay the low, crumbling mounds of what had once been a village.

The trail on the Blue ran close to the Pit, and no rider passing it failed to glance down. Cattle occasionally strayed into it and if weak were unable to climb out again without help from horse and rope. As Bailey approached, he heard the unmistakable bark of a six-shooter. He slipped from his horse, strode cautiously to the rim, and peered over.

Young Pete had ridden his horse down the ragged trail and was at the moment engaged in six-gun practice. Bailey drew back and sat down. Pete had gathered together some bits of rock and had built a target loosely representing a man. The largest rock, on which was laid a small round, boulder for a head, was spattered with lead. Pete, quite unconscious of an audience, was cutting loose with speed and accuracy. He threw several shots at the place which represented the vitals of his theoretical enemy, punched the shells from his gun, and reloaded. Then he stepped to his horse and led him opposite the target and some twenty feet from it. Crouching, he fired under the horse's belly. The horse bucked and circled the enclosure. Pete strode after him, caught him up, and repeated the performance. Each time Pete fired, the horse naturally jumped and ran. Patiently Pete caught him up again. Finally the animal, although trembling and wild-eyed, stood to the gun. Pete patted its neck. Reloading he mounted. Bailey was curious to see what the boy would do next. Pete turned the horse and, spurring him, flung past the target, emptying his gun as he went. Then he dismounted and striding up to within ten yards of the man-target, holstered his gun and stood for a moment as still as a stone itself. Suddenly his hand flashed to his side. Bailey rubbed his eyes. The gun had not come from the holster, yet the rock target was spattered with five more shots. Bailey could see the lead fly as the blunt slugs flattened on the stone.

"The young son-of-a-gun!" muttered Bailey. "Dinged if he ain't shootin' through the open holster! Where in blazes did he learn that bad-man trick?"

Thus far Pete had not said a word, even to the horse. But now that he had finished his practice he strode to the rock-target and thrust his hand against it. "You're dead!" he exclaimed. "You're plumb salivated!" He pushed, and the man-target toppled and fell.

"Ain't you goin' to bury him?" queried Bailey.

Pete whirled. The color ran up his neck and face. "H'lo, Jim."

"How'd you know it was me?" Bailey stood up.

"Knowed your voice."

"Well, come on up. I was wonderin' who was down there settin' off the fireworks. Didn't hear you till I got most on top of you. You sure got some private shootin'-gallery."

Pete led his pony up the steep trail and squatted beside Bailey. "How long you been watching me, Jim?"

"Oh, jest since you started shooting under your hoss. What's the idea?"

"Nothin', jest practicin'."

"You must 'a' been practicin' quite a' spell. You handle that smoke-wagon like an ole-timer."

"I ain't advertisin' it."

"Well, it's all right, Pete. Glad I got a front seat. Never figured you was a top-hand with a gun. Now I'm wise. I know enough not to stack up against you."

Pete smiled his slow smile and pushed back his hat. "I reckon you're right about that. I never did no shootin' in company. Ole José Montoya always said to do your practicin' by yourself, and then nobody knows just how you would play your hand."

Bailey frowned and nodded. "Well, seein' as I'm in on it, Pete, I'd kind of like to know myself."

"Why, I'm jest figurin' that some day mebbly somebody'll want to hang my hide on the fence. I don't aim to let him."

"Meanin' Gary?"

"The same. I ain't *lookin'* for Gary—even if he did shoot down Pop Annersley—nor I ain't tryin' to keep out of his way. I'm ridin' this country and I'm like to meet up with him 'most any time. That's all."

"Shucks, Pete! You forget Gary. He sure ain't worth gettin' hung for. Gary ain't goin' to put you down so long as you ride for the Concho. He knows somebody 'd get him. You jest practice shootin' all you like—but tend to business the rest of the time and you'll live longer. You can figure on one thing, if Gary was to get you he wouldn't live to get out of this country."

"You're handin' me your best card," said Pete. "Gary killed Annersley. The law didn't get Gary. And none of you fellas got him. He's ridin' this here country yet. And you was tellin' me to forget him."

"But that's different, Pete. No one saw Gary shoot Annersley. It was night. Annersley was killed in his cabin—by a shot through the window. Anybody might have fired that shot. Why, you were there yourself—and you can't prove who done it."

"I can't, eh? Well, between you and me, Jim, I *know*. One of Gary's own men said that night when they were leavin' the cabin, 'It must 'a' been Steve that drilled the ole man because Steve was the only puncher who knowed where the window was and fired into it.'"

"I didn't know that. So you aim to even up, eh?"

"Nope. I jest aim to be ready to even up."

Bailey strode back to his horse. "I'm goin' up in the hills and look for a deer. Want to take a little pasear with me?"

"Suits me, Jim."

"Come on, then."

They mounted and rode side by side across the noon mesa.

The ponies stepped briskly. The air was like a song. Far away the blue hills invited exploration of their timbered and mysterious silences.

"Makes a fella feel like forgettin' everything and everybody—but jest this," said Pete, gesturing toward the ranges.

"The bucks'll be on the ridges," remarked Bailey.

CHAPTER XIII

GAME

They got their buck—a big six-point—just before the sun dipped below the flaming sky-line. In order to pack the meat in, one or the other would have to walk. Pete volunteered, but Bailey generously offered to toss up for the privilege of riding. He flipped a coin and won. "Suits me," said Pete, grinning. "It's worth walkin' from here to the ranch jest to see you rope that deer on my hoss. I reckon you'll sweat."

It took about all of the foreman's skill and strength, assisted by Pete, to rope the deer on the pony, who had never packed game and who never intended to if he could help it. And it was a nervous horse that Pete led down the long woodland trail as the shadows grew distorted and grim in the swiftly fading light. Long before they reached the mesa level it was dark. The trail was carpeted with needles of the pine and their going was silent save for the creak of the saddles and the occasional click of a hoof against an uncovered rock. Pete's horse seemed even more nervous as they made the last descent before striking the mesa. "Somethin' besides deer is bother'n' him," said Pete as they worked cautiously down a steep switchback. The horse had stopped and was trembling. Bailey glanced back. "Up there!" he whispered, gesturing to the trail above them. Pete had also been looking round, and before Bailey could speak again, a sliver of flame split the darkness and the roar of Pete's six-gun shattered the eerie silence of the hillside. Bailey's horse plunged off the trail and rocketed straight down the mountain. Pete's horse, rearing from the hurtling shape that lunged from the trail above, tore the rope from his hand and crashed down the hillside, snorting. Something was threshing about the trail and coughing horribly. Pete would have run if he had known which way to run. He had seen two lambent green dots glowing above him and had fired with that quick instinct of placing his shot—the result of long practice. The flopping and coughing ceased. Pete, with cocked gun poked ahead of him, struck a match. In its pale flare he saw the long gray shape of a mountain lion stretched across the trail. Evidently the lion had smelled the blood of the deer, or the odor of the sweating horses—a mountain lion likes horse-flesh better than anything else—and had padded down the trail in the darkness, following as close as he dared. The match flamed and spluttered out. Pete wisely backed away a few paces and listened. A little wind whispered in the pines and a branch creaked, but there came no sound of movement from the lion. "I reckon I plugged him right!" muttered Pete. "Wonder what made Jim light out in sech a hurry?" And, "Hey, Jim!" he called.

From far below came a faint *Whoo! Halloo!* Then the words separate and distinct: "I—got—your—horse."

"I—got—a—lion," called Pete shrilly.

"Who—is lyin'—?" came from the depths below.

Pete grinned despite his agitation. "Come—on—back!" shouted Pete. He thought he heard Bailey say something like "damn," but it may have been, "I am." Pete struck another match and stepped nearer the lion this time. The great, lithe beast was dead. The blunt-nose forty-five at close range had torn away a part of its skull. "I done spiled the head," complained Pete. In the succeeding darkness he heard the faint tinkle of shod feet on the trail.

Presently he could distinctly hear the heavy breathing of the horse and the gentle creak of the saddle. Within speaking distance he told the foreman that he had shot a whopper of a lion and it looked as though they would need another pack-horse. Bailey said nothing until he had arrived at the angle of the switchback, when he lighted a match and gazed at the great gray cat of the rocks.

"You get twenty dollars bounty," he told Pete. "And you sure stampeded me into the worst piece of down timber I've rode for a long time. Gosh! but you're quick with that smoke-wagon of yours! Lost my hat and liked to broke my leg ag'in' a tree, but I run plumb onto your horse draggin' a rope. I tied him down there on the flat. I figure you've saved a dozen calves by killin' that kitty-cat. Did you know it was a lion when you shot?"

"Nope, or I'd 'a' sure beat the hosses down the grade. I jest cut loose at them two green eyes a-burnin' in the brush and *whump!* down comes Mr. Kitty-cat almost plumb atop me. Mebby I wasn't scared! I was wonderin' why you set off in sech a hurry. You sure burned the ground down the mountain."

"Just stayin' with my saddle," laughed Bailey. "Old Frisco here ain't lost any lions recent."

"Will he pack?"

"I dunno. Wish it was daylight."

"Wish we had another rope," said Pete. "My rope is on my hoss and yours is cinchin' the deer on him. And that there lion sure won't lead. *He's* dead."

"Way high up in the Mokiones," chanted Bailey.

"A-trippin' down the slope!" laughed Pete. "And we ain't got no rope. But say, Jim, can't we kind of hang him acrost your saddle and steady him down to the flats?"

"I'll see what I can do with the tie-strings. I'll hold Frisco. You go ahead and heave him up."

Pete approached the lion and tried to lift it, but it weaved and slipped from his arms. "Limper 'n wet rawhide!" asserted Pete.

"Are you that scared? Shucks, now, I'd 'a' thought—"

"The doggone lion, I mean. Every time I heave at him he jest folds up and lays ag'in' me like he was powerful glad to see me. You try him."

The horse snorted and shied as the foreman slung the huge carcass across the saddle and tied the lion's fore feet and hind feet with the saddle-strings. They made slow progress to the flats below, where they had another lively session with Pete's horse, who had smelled the lion. Finally with their game roped securely they set out on foot for the ranch.

The hunting, and especially Pete's kill, had drawn them close together. They laughed and talked, making light of high-heeled boots that pinched and blistered as they plodded across the starlit mesa.

"Let's put one over on the boys!" suggested Pete. "We'll drift in quiet, hang the buck in the slaughter-house, and then pack the kitty-cat into the bunk-house and leave him layin' like he was asleep, by Bill Haskins's bunk. Ole Bill allus gits his feet on the floor afore he gits his eyes open. Mebby he won't step high and lively when he sees what he's got his feet on!"

Bailey, plodding ahead and leading Frisco, chuckled. "I'll go you, Pete, but I want you to promise me somethin'."

"Shoot!"

Bailey waited for Pete to come alongside. "It's this way, Pete—and this here is plain outdoor talk, which you sabe. Mrs. Bailey and me ain't exactly hatin' you, as you know. But we would hate to see you get into trouble on account of Gary or any of the T-Bar-T boys. And because you can shoot is a mighty good reason for you to go slow with that gun. 'T ain't that I give two whoops and a holler what happens to Gary. It's what might happen to you. I was raised right here in this country and I know jest how those things go. You're workin' for the Concho. What you do, the Concho's got to back up. I couldn't hold the boys if Gary got you, or if you got Gary. They'd be hell a-poppin' all over the range. Speakin' personal, I'm with you to the finish, for I know how you feel about Pop Annersley. But you ain't growed up yet. You got plenty time to think. If you are a-hankerin' for Gary's scalp, when you git to be twenty-one, why, go to it. But you're a kid yet, and a whole lot can happen in five or six years. Mebby somebody'll git Gary afore then. I sure hope they do. But while you're worldly for me—jest forget Gary. I ain't tellin' you you *got* to. I'm talkin' as your friend."

"I'll go you," said Pete slowly. "But if Steve Gary comes at me—"

"That's different. Let him talk—and you keep still. Keepin' still at the right time has saved many a man's hide. Most folks talk too much."

CHAPTER XIV

THE KITTY-CAT

Pete and Bailey took off their boots just before they entered the bunk-house. They lugged the defunct mountain lion in and laid it by Bill Haskins's bunk.

Pete propped the lion's head up with one of Haskin's boots. The effect was realistic enough. The lion lay stretched out in a most natural way, apparently gazing languidly at the sleeping cow-puncher. This was more or less accidental, as they dare not light the lamp for fear of waking the men. Bailey stole softly to the door and across to the house. Pete undressed and turned in, to dream of who knows what ghostly lions prowling through the timberlands of the Blue Range. It seemed but a few minutes when he heard the clatter of the pack-horse bell that Mrs. Bailey used to call the men to breakfast. The chill gray half-light of early morning discovered him with one cautious eye, gazing across at Haskins, who still snored, despite the bell. "Oh, Bill!" called Pete. Haskins's snore broke in two as he swallowed the unlaunched half and sat up rubbing his eyes. He swung his feet down and yawned prodigiously. "Heh—hell!" he exclaimed as his bare feet

touched the furry back of the lion. Bill glanced down into those half-closed eyes. His jaw sagged. Then he bounded to the middle of the room. With a whoop he dashed through the doorway, rounded into the open, and sprinted for the corral fence, his bare legs twinkling like the side-rods of a speeding locomotive and his shirt-tail fluttering in the morning breeze. Andy White leaped from his bunk, saw the dead lion, and started to follow Haskins. Another cowboy, Avery, was dancing on one foot endeavoring to don his overalls.

Hank Barley, an old-timer, jumped up with his gun poised, ready for business. "Why, he's daid!" he exclaimed, poking the lion with the muzzle of his gun.

Pete rose languidly and began to dress. "What's all the hocus, fellas? Where's Haskins?"

"Bill he done lit out like he'd lost somethin'," said Barley. "Now I wonder what young ijjut packed that tree-cat in here last night? Jim said yesterday he was goin' to do a little lookin' round. Looks like he sure seen somethin'."

"Yes," drawled Pete. "Jim and me got a buck and this here lion. We didn't have time to git anything else."

"Too bad you didn't git a bear and a couple of bob-cats while you was at it."

"Hey, boys!" called Andy from the doorway. "Come see Bill!"

The men crowded to the door. Perched on the top rail of the corral fence sat Bill Haskins shivering and staring at the house. "We killed your bed-feller!" called Barley. "He done et your pants afore we plugged him, but I kin lend you a pair. You had better git a-movin' afore Ma Bailey —"

"Ssh!" whispered Andy White. "There's Ma standin' in the kitchen door and—she's seen Bill!"

Bill also realized that he had been seen by Mrs. Bailey. He shivered and shook, teetering on the top rail until indecision got the better of his equilibrium. With a wild backward flip he disappeared from the high-line of vision. Ma Bailey also disappeared. The boys doubled up and groaned as Bill Haskins crawled on all fours across the corral toward the shelter of the stable.

"Oh, my Gosh!" gasped Barley. "S-s-ome—body—sh-shoot me and put me out of my misery!"

A few seconds later Bailey crossed the yard carrying an extra pair of those coverings most essential to male comfort and equanimity.

It was a supernaturally grave bevy of cow-punchers that gathered round the table that morning. Ma Bailey's silence was eloquent of suppressed indignation. Bailey also seemed subdued. Pete was as placid as a sleeping cherub. Only Andy White seemed really overwrought. He seemed to suffer internally. The sweat stood out on Bill Haskins's red face, but his appetite was in no way impaired. He ate rapidly and drank much coffee. Ma Bailey was especially gracious to him. Presently from Pete's end of the table came a faint "Me-e-ow!" Andy White put down his cup of coffee and excusing himself fled from the room, Pete stared after him as though greatly astonished. Barley the imperturbable seemed to be suffering from internal spasms, and presently left the table. Blaze Andrews, the quietest of the lot, also departed without finishing his breakfast.

"Ain't you feelin' well, Ma?" queried Pete innocently.

Bailey rose and said he thought he would "go see to the horses"—a very unusual procedure for him. Pete also thought it was about time to depart. He rose and nodded to Bill. "Glad to see you back, Bill." Then he went swiftly.

Haskins heaved a sigh. "I—doggone it—I—You got any sticking-plaster, Ma?"

"Yes, William"—and "William" because Ma Bailey was still a bit indignant, although she appreciated that Bill was more sinned against than sinning. "Yes, William. Did you hurt yourself?"

"Stepped on a nail—er—this mawnin'. I—I wasn't lookin' where I stepped."

"What started you out—that way?" queried Mrs. Bailey.

"Why, hell, Ma—I—wasn't meanin' hell, Ma,—but somebody—I reckon I know who—plants a mountain lion right aside my bunk last night when I was sleepin'. Fust thing this mawnin' I heard that bell and jumped out o' my bunk plumb onto the cuss. Like to bruk my neck. That there lion was a-lookin' right up into my face, kind of sleepy-eyed and smilin' like he was hungry. I sure didn't stop to find out. 'Course, when I got my wind, I knowed it was a joke. I reckon I ought to kill somebody—"

"A lion, Bill? Hev you been drinkin'?"

"Drinkin'! Why, Ma, I ain't had a drop sence—"

"I reckon I better go see what's in that bunk-house," said Mrs. Bailey, rising. "I'll get you that stickin'-plaster when I come back."

Mrs. Bailey realized that something unusual had started Bill Haskins on his wild career that morning, but she could not quite believe that there was a mountain lion—alive or dead—in the bunk-house until she saw the great beast with her own amazed eyes. And she could not quite believe that Pete had shot the lion until Bailey himself certified to Pete's story of the hunt. Mrs. Bailey, for some feminine reason, felt that she had been cheated. Bailey had not told her about the lion. She had been indignant with Haskins for his apparently unseemly conduct, and had been still more indignant with Pete when she appreciated that he was at the bottom of the joke. But Haskins was innocent and Pete was now somewhat of a hero. The good woman turned on her husband and rebuked him roundly for allowing such "goings-on." Bailey took his dressing-down silently. He felt that the fun had been worth it. Pete himself was rather proud and obviously afraid he would show it. But the atmosphere settled to normal when the men went to work. Pete was commissioned to skin and cut up the deer. Later in the day he tackled the lion, skinned it, fleshed out the nose, ears, and eyelids, and salted and rolled the hide. Roth, the storekeeper at Concho, was somewhat of a taxidermist and Mrs. Bailey had admired the lion-skin.

Pete felt that he could have used the twenty dollars bounty, but he was nothing if not generous. That afternoon he rode to Concho with the lion-skin tied behind the cante. He returned to the ranch late that night. Next morning he was mysteriously reticent about the disappearance of the hide. He intended to surprise Ma Bailey with a real Christmas present. No one guessed his intent. Pete was good at keeping his own counsel.

A few evenings later the men, loafing outside the bunk-house, amused themselves by originating titles for the chief actors in the recent range-drama. Pete, without question, was "The Lion Tamer," Bailey was "Big-Chief-not-Afraid-of-a-Buck." Ma Bailey was "Queen of the Pies"—not analogous to the drama but flattering—and Haskins, after some argument and much suggestion, was entitled "Claw-Hammer." Such titles as "Deer-Foot," "Rail-Hopper," "Back-Flip Bill," "Wind-Splitter," and the like were discarded in favor of "Claw-Hammer"—for the unfortunate Bill had stepped on a rusty nail in his recent exodus from the lion's den, and was at the time suffering from a swollen and inflamed foot—really a serious injury, although scoffed at by the good-natured Bill himself despite Mrs. Bailey's solicitude and solution of peroxide.

Winter, with its thin shifts of snow, its intermittent sunshiny days, its biting winds that bored through chaps and heavy gloves, was finally borne away on the reiterant, warm breezes of spring. Mrs. Bailey was the proud and happy possessor of a lion-skin rug—Pete's Christmas present to her—proud of the pelt itself and happy because Young Pete had foregone the bounty that he might make the present, which was significant of his real affection. Coats and heavy overshoes were discarded. Birds sang among sprouting aspen twigs, and lean, mangy-looking coyotes lay on the distant hillsides soaking in the warmth. Gaunt cattle lowed in the hollows and spring calves staggered about, gazing at this new world with round, staring eyes.

Houck, the T-Bar-T foreman, had discussed with Bailey the advisability of defining a line between the two big ranches. They came to an agreement and both stated that they would send men to roughly survey the line, fix upon landmarks, and make them known to the riders of both outfits. Bailey, who had to ride from Concho to the railroad to meet a Kansas City commission man, sent word back to the Concho to have two men ride over to Annersley's old homestead the following day. Mrs. Bailey immediately commissioned Young Pete and Andy to ride over to the homestead, thinking that Pete was a particularly good choice as he knew the country thereabouts. She cautioned the boys to behave themselves—she always did when Andy and Pete set out together—and giving them a comfortable package of lunch, she turned to her household work.

"I'm takin' Blue Smoke," stated Pete as Andy packed his saddle to the corral.

"You're takin' chances then," observed Andy.

"Oh, I got him so he knows which way is north," asserted Pete. "I been gittin' acquainted with that cayuse, Chico."

"Yes. I seen you settin' on the ground watchin' him buck your saddle off a couple of times," snorted Andy.

"Well, seein' as this here pasear is straight ridin' I reckon I'll crawl him and turn him loose. He needs exercisin'."

"Well, I don't," asserted Andy. "'Course, some folks has always got to be showin' off. If Bailey was here you wouldn't be ridin' that hoss."

"'And up and down and round and 'cross, that top-boss done his best!'" sang Pete as he lugged his saddle into the corral.

"'All hell can't glue you to that hoss when he gits headed west,'" Andy misquoted for the occasion.

"You jest swing that gate open when I git aboard," suggested Pete. "I'm the Ridin' Kid from

Powder River."

Andy laughed.

"The Ridin' Kid from Powder River
Ain't got no lungs nor ary liver,
Some says it was a blue cayuse..."

"Go git you a sack and gather up the leavin's," laughed Pete, as he kicked his foot into the stirrup and hit the saddle before Blue Smoke knew what had happened. Andy swung the gate open. The horse headed for the mesa, pitching as he ran. This was not half so bad for Pete as though Blue Smoke had been forced to confine his efforts to the corral. Pete had long since discovered that when Blue Smoke saw space ahead of him, he was not apt to pitch hard, but rather to take it out in running bucks and then settle down to a high-lope—as he did on this occasion, after he had tried with his usual gusto to unseat his rider. There is something admirable in the spirit of a horse that refuses to be ridden, and there was much to be said for Blue Smoke. He possessed tremendous energy, high courage, and strength, signified by the black stripe down his back and the compact muscles of his flanks and fore legs. Pete had coveted the horse ever since that first and unforgettable experience in the corral. Bailey had said jokingly that he would give Pete the outlaw if Pete would break him. Pete had frequently had it out with Blue Smoke when the men were away. He had taken Bailey at his word, but as usual had said nothing about riding the animal.

Andy watched Pete until he saw that Blue Smoke had ceased to pitch and was running, when he swung up and loped out after his companion. He overtook him a half-mile from the ranch, and loped alongside, watching Pete with no little admiration and some envy. It struck Andy that while Pete never made much of his intent or his accomplishment, whatever it might be, he usually succeeded in gaining his end. There was something about Pete that puzzled Andy; a kind of silent forcefulness that emanated neither from bulk nor speech; for Pete was rather lithe and compact than "beefy" and more inclined to silence than to speech. Yet there was none of the "do or die" attitude about him, either. But whatever it was, it was there—evident in Pete's eye as he turned and glanced at Andy—an intenseness of purpose, not manifest in any outward show or form.

"You sure tamed him," said Andy admiringly.

"Only for this mornin'," acknowledged Pete. "To-morrow mornin' he'll go to it ag'in. But I aim to sweat some of it out of him afore we hit the Blue. Got the makin's?"

CHAPTER XV

FOUR MEN

Pete grew silent as he rode with Andy toward the hill-trail that led to his old home on the Blue Mesa, where he finally surveyed the traces of old man Annersley's patient toil. The fences had been pulled down and the water-hole enlarged. The cabin, now a rendezvous for occasional riders of the T-Bar-T, had suffered from weather and neglect. The door sagging from one hinge, the grimy, cobwebbed windows, the unswept floor, and the litter of tin cans about the yard, stirred bitter memories in Pete's heart. Andy spoke of Annersley, "A fine old man," but Pete had no comment to make. They loafed outside in the afternoon sunshine, momentarily expecting the two men from the T-Bar-T. Presently Andy White rose and wandered off toward the spring. Pete sat idly tossing pellets of earth at a tin can. He was thinking of Annersley, of the old man's unvarying kindness and quaint humor. He wished that Annersley were alive, could know of his success—Pete had done pretty well for a lad of sixteen—and that they could talk together as in the old days. He rose presently and entered the abandoned cabin. The afternoon sunlight flickered palely through the dusty windows. Several window-panes had been broken out, but the one marked with two bullet holes, radiating tiny cracks in the glass, was still there. The oilcloth on the table was torn and soiled. The mud of wet weather had been tracked about the floor. The stove was rusted and cracked. Pete wondered why men must invariably abuse things that were patently useful, when those things did not belong to any one especially; for the stove, the windows, the table, the two home-made chairs showed more than disuse. They had been wantonly broken, hacked, or battered. Some one had pried the damper from the stove, broken it in two, and had used half of it for a lid-lifter. A door had been torn from the wall-cupboard and split into kindling, as a few painted splinters attested. And some one had shot several holes in the door, evidently endeavoring to make the initial "T" with a forty-five. An old pair of discarded overalls lay in one corner, a worn and useless glove in another. Pete was glad that Annersley would never know of all this—and yet it seemed as though Annersley *could* see these things—and Pete, standing alone in the room, felt as though he were in some way to blame for this disorder and squalidness. Time and occupation had rather dulled Pete's remembrance of the actual detail of the place, but now its original neatness and orderliness came back to him vividly.

He was mentally rehabilitating the cabin when a boot-heel crunched on the ground outside and Andy appeared in the doorway. "The T-Bar-T boys are comin'. Seen 'em driftin' down the Ranger Trail."

"They was to be here this mornin'," said Pete. "Reckon they aim to bush here all night and ride to-morrow. Hope they brought some grub along."

"We got plenty. Come on outside. This here ole room kind o' gits on my nerves."

Pete strode out. They stood watching the approaching riders. Suddenly Andy White touched Pete's arm. "One of 'em is Gary!" he said, speaking low.

Pete stopped and, picking up a clod, jerked it toward a fence-post. The clod happened to hit the post and was flicked into dust. "That for Gary," said Pete.

Andy grinned, but his eyes were grave. "We'll be right busy," he said in a sort of tentative way.

Pete nodded and hitched up his chaps. One of the approaching horsemen waved a hand. Andy acknowledged the salute.

The T-Bar-T men rode in and dismounted. "Where's Bailey?" was Gary's first word.

"Jim sent us to fix up that line with you," replied Andy. "He's over to Enright."

Gary glanced at Pete, who stared at him, but made no gesture of greeting. But Pete had read Gary's unspoken thought. "Bailey had sent a couple of kids over to the Blue to help survey the line." And Pete did not intend to let Gary "get by" with the idea that his attitude was not understood.

"Where's Houck?" asked Pete, naming the foreman of the T-Bar-T.

Cotton, Gary's companion, a light-haired, amiable but rather dull youth, stated that Houck was over to the ranch.

"I reckoned he'd come hisself," said Pete. "He knows this country better 'n most."

"Oh, I dunno," sneered Gary. "Some of us been here before."

"They wasn't no line then," said Pete quietly, "but they's goin' to be one."

"You makin' it?" queried Gary.

Pete smiled. "I was sent over here with Andy to do that same thing. But you're sure welcome to hand out any idees you got, seein' your fo'man ain't here."

Andy, who saw the inevitable end of this kind of talk, nudged Pete. "Let's eat," he said. "I reckon we're all willin'."

Gary, like most of his type, was always anticipating an insult, possibly because his general attitude toward humanity was deliberately intended to provoke argument and recrimination. He was naturally quarrelsome—and a bully because of his unquestioned physical courage. He was popular in a way with those of his fellows who looked upon a gunman—a killer—as a kind of hero. The foreman of the T-Bar-T found him valuable as a sort of animate scarecrow. Gary's mere presence often served to turn the balance when the T-Bar-T riders had occasion to substantiate a bluff or settle a dispute with some other outfit riding the high country. And because Gary imagined that Bailey of the Concho had deliberately sent such youngsters as Andy White and Young Pete to the Blue Mesa to settle the matter of a boundary line, Gary felt insulted. He was too narrow-minded to reason that Bailey could hardly know whom Houck of the T-Bar-T would send. Gary's ill-humor was not improved by the presence of Young Pete nor by Pete's pugnacious attitude. Strangely enough, Gary was nervous because he knew that Young Pete was not afraid of him.

Andy White was keenly aware of this, and found occasion that evening in Gary's temporary absence to caution Pete, who immediately called attention to the fact that they had all hung up their guns except Gary.

"All the better!" asserted Andy. "That lets you out if he was to start something."

"Yes. And it mebbly might let me out for good, Andy. Gary is jest the kind to shoot a man down without givin' him a chanct. It ain't like Gary was scared of me—but he's scared of what I know. I hung up my gun 'cause I told Jim I wouldn't set to lookin' for a scrap with Gary, or any man. Gary ain't got sand enough to do the same. But there won't be no fuss. I reckon he dassent draw on me with you two fellas here. Where 'd he and Cotton go, anyhow?"

"I dunno, Pete. They moseyed out without sayin' anything."

"Looks like Gary wanted to put Cotton wise."

"Well, if anything starts, I'll sure keep my eye on that Cotton hombre," said Andy.

"He's easy—and slow," stated Pete. "He ain't got a fightin' eye."

"Here they come," whispered Andy. "I kin hear 'em talkin'."

Pete immediately began to whistle. Andy rose and poked a stick of wood in the stove. "She's right cool up here," he remarked.

"We been kind o' sizin' up things," stated Cotton as Gary and he entered the cabin; an excuse for their absence that was unnecessary and obviously manufactured.

Pete smiled. "I got 'em sized up. Never did cotton to workin' in the dark."

Gary paused in the act of unsnapping his chaps.

He was about to say something when Andy White interrupted by suggesting that they turn in early and rise early that they might get the work done in daylight and not have to spend another night at the cabin.

Gary dragged an old mattress from the bedroom and, dropping it beneath the window, spread his blanket, rolled up in it, and at Cotton's query as to sharing half of the mattress told Cotton to "sleep where he dam' pleased."

"He's a friendly cuss, ain't he?" remarked Pete.

"Who?" asked Gary, half-rising.

"Why, Cotton, there," replied Pete. "You didn't think I was meanin' you, did you?"

Andy nudged Pete in the dark. "All right," said Pete, ignoring Andy's meaning. "You git your blanket and we'll bush outside."

They spread their blankets under a cedar, some distance from the cabin, and lay gazing at the stars.

Presently Andy turned to Pete. "Pete," he said gravely, "you're walkin' right into trouble. Every time Gary starts to lope, you rein him up mighty short. He's fightin' the bit, and first thing you know—"

"I'll git pitched, eh? Well, mebby you're right. I done told Bailey that if I ever did meet Steve Gary I would leave him do the talking but I sure can't stand for his line o' talk. He's plumb mean."

"I'll be mighty glad when we git through with this job," said Andy.

"Shucks! It won't take three hours! I know every tree and stump on this flat. We'll be driftin' home 'long about four to-morrow."

CHAPTER XVI

THE OPEN HOLSTER

If there ever was a morning calculated to inspire good-will and heartiness in a human being it was that morning. The dawn came swiftly, battering through a fleece of clouds and painting the Blue Mesa in all the gorgeous and utterly indescribable colors of an Arizona sunrise. The air was crisp and so clear that it seemed to sparkle, like water. Andy White whistled as he gathered up the blankets and plodded toward the cabin. Pete felt like whistling, but for some reason he was silent. He followed Andy to the cabin and saw that the cowboy Cotton was making coffee.

"All we got is cold grub," stated Pete, "but we got plenty for everybody."

"We fetched some coffee and bacon," said Cotton. But he did not invite them to eat.

Pete glanced at Andy. Evidently Cotton had had his instructions or was afraid to make any friendly overtures. Gary was still lying on the mattress by the window, apparently asleep.

Pete stepped to where his own gun hung and buckled it on. "Let's mosey over to the spring and wash," he suggested to Andy. "I ain't no dude, but I kind o' like to wash before I eat."

"Here, too," said Andy. "Mebby we can locate the horses on the way."

When they returned to the cabin, Gary and Cotton were eating breakfast. Pete flung a pair of

broken hobbles on the floor. "Somebody's cayuse got rid of these," he stated casually. He knew that they had been on Gary's horse, as he had seen Gary hobble him. Pete turned and strode out. Andy was unwrapping their lunch. Presently Gary and Cotton appeared and picked up their ropes. Andy White, who had seen his own easily caught pony, graciously offered the use of it in hunting the strayed horse, but Gary declined the offer gruffly.

"He's so doggone mean his face hurts him," stated Pete, as Gary and Cotton set off together.

"We'll lose some time if his hoss has lit out for home," said Andy.

"Gary's doin' all he kin to make a job of it," declared Pete. "But I don't wait for him. Soon's we finish eatin' I'm goin' to locate Blue Smoke and git to work. We kin run that line without any help from them. Let 'em walk till they're tired."

"And what do you think of a couple of punchers—*punchers*, mind you—that sit down and eat bacon and drink coffee and don't as much as say 'come in'?"

"I don't waste time thinkin' about such, Andy. You finish up the grub. I got all I want."

"Shucks! This ain't all. We ain't touched the grub in your saddle-pockets yet. Ma Bailey sure fixed us up right."

"That'll do for noon," said Pete. "I'll run your hoss in, when I git Blue Smoke. Your hoss'll follow, anyway."

"Jest a minute till I git my rope."

"Nope, you stay here. That Blue Smoke hoss knows me. If he spots two of us comin' he's like to git excited and mebbly bust his hobbles and light out. I'll ketch him all right."

"Jest as you say, Pete."

The sun was warming the air and it was pleasant to sit and watch the light clouds trail along the far horizon. Andy leaned back against the cedar and rolled a cigarette. He grinned as he recalled how Pete had called Gary at every turn, and yet had given the other no chance to find excuse for a quarrel. Pete was certainly "a cool hand—for a kid." White, several years Pete's senior, always thought of him as not much more than a boy.

Meanwhile Pete, who knew every foot of ground on the homestead, trailed through the scrub toward the spring. Down an occasional opening he could see the distant forest that edged the mesa, and once he thought he saw a horse's head behind a bush, but it turned out to be the stub of a fallen tree. The brush hid the cabin as he worked toward the timber. Presently he discovered Blue Smoke's tracks and followed them down into a shallow hollow where the brush was thick. He wound in and out, keeping the tracks in sight and casually noting where the horse had stopped to graze. Near the bottom of the hollow he heard voices. He had been so intent on tracking the horse that he had forgotten Gary and Cotton. The tracks led toward the voices. Pete instinctively paused and listened, then shrugged his shoulders and stepped forward. A thick partition of brush separated him from the unseen speaker. Pete stopped midway in his stride.

"If you squat down here you can see the winder, right under this bush. The moon was shinin'. It was a plumb easy shot. And it sure stopped homesteadin' in this end of the country."

Gary was speaking. Pete drew a step nearer.

"You ain't sayin' who fired that shot,"—and Cotton laughed obsequiously.

Pete stepped from behind the bush. Gary was facing toward the cabin. Cotton was squatting near by smoking a cigarette.

"Tell him," said Pete. "I want to know myself."

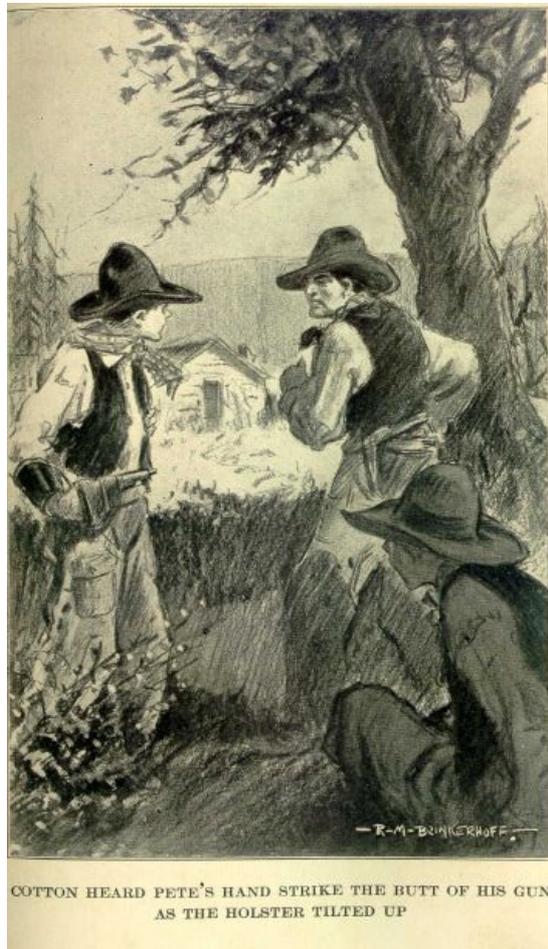
"What's it to you?" snarled Gary, and he stepped back. Gary's very attitude was a challenge. Pete knew that he could not drop his rope and pull his own gun quick enough to save himself. He saw Gary's hand move almost imperceptibly toward his holster.

"I reckon I made a mistake," said Pete slowly—and he let the rope slip from his hand as though utterly unnerved. "I—I talked kind o' quick," he stammered.

"Well, you won't make no more mistakes," sneered Gary, and he dropped his hand to his gun. "You want to know who plugged that old hoss-thief, Annersley, eh? Well, what you goin' to say when I tell you it was me?"

Pete saw that Gary was working himself up to the pitch when he would kill. And Pete knew that he had but one chance in a thousand of breaking even with the killer. He would not have time to draw—but Montoya had taught him the trick of shooting through the open holster... Cotton heard Pete's hand strike the butt of his gun as the holster tilted up. Pete fired twice. Staring as though hypnotized, Gary clutched at his shirt over his chest with his free hand. He gave at the knees and his body wilted and settled down—even as he threw a desperate shot at

Pete in a last venomous effort to kill.



COTTON HEARD PETE'S HAND STRIKE THE BUTT OF HIS GUN AS THE HOLSTER TILTED UP

[Illustration: Cotton heard Pete's hand strike the butt of his gun as the holster tilted up.]

"You seen it was an even break," said Pete, turning to Cotton, who immediately sank to his knees and implored Pete not to kill him.

"But I reckon you'd lie, anyhow," continued Pete, paying no attention to the other's mouthings. "Hunt your cayuse—and git a-movin'."

Cotton understood that. Glancing over his shoulder at Gary he turned and ran toward the timber. Pete stepped to the crumpled figure and gazed at the bubbling hole in the chest. Then he stepped hack and mechanically holstered his gun which he had pulled as he spoke to Cotton. "They'll git me for this," he whispered to himself. "It was an even break—but they'll git me." Pete fought back his fear with a peculiar pride—the pride that scorned to appear frightened before his chum, Andy White. The quarrel had occurred so unexpectedly and terminated so suddenly, that Pete could not yet realize the full extent of the tragedy. While quite conscious of what he was doing and intended to do, he felt as though he were walking in a horrible dream from which he would never awaken. His instincts were as keen as ever—for he was already planning his next move—but his sensibilities had suffered a blunt shock—were numb to all external influence. He knew that the sun was shining, yet he did not feel its warmth. He was walking toward the cabin, and toward Andy. He stumbled as he walked, taking no account of the irregularities of the ground. He could hardly believe that he had killed Gary. To convince himself against his own will he mechanically drew his gun and glanced at the two empty shells. "Three and two is five," he muttered. "I shot twict." He did not realize that Gary had shot at him—that a shred of his flannel shirt was dangling from his sleeve where Gary's bullet had cut it. "Wonder if Andy heard?" he kept asking himself. "I got to tell Andy."

Almost before he realized it he was standing under the cedar and Andy was speaking. "Thought I heard some one shoot, over toward the woods."

As Pete did not answer, Andy thought that the horse had got away from him. "Did you get him?" he queried.

Pete nodded dully. "I got him. He's over there—in the brush."

"Why didn't you fetch him in? Did he get the best of you? You look like he give you a tussle."

"I got him—twict," said Pete.

"Twict? Say, Pete, are you loco? What's ailin' you, anyhow?"

"Nothin'. Me and Gary just had it out. He's over there—in the brush."

"Gary!"

"Yes. I reckon I got him."

"Hell!" The ruddy color sank from Andy's face. He had supposed that Gary and Cotton were by this time tracking the strayed horses toward the T-Bar-T. "Where's Cotton?" he asked.

"I told him to fan it."

"But, Pete—!"

"I know. They's no use talkin', Andy. I come back to tell you—and to git your rope. Mine's over by Gary."

"What you goin' to do, Pete?"

"Me? Why, I'm goin' to drift as soon as I can git a saddle on Blue. Cotton he seen the shootin'—but that don't do me no good. He'll swear that I pulled first. He'd say 'most anything—he was too scared to know what come off. Gary's hand was on his gun when I let him have it—twict."

Andy noticed then Pete's torn sleeve. "I reckon that's right. Look at that!"

Pete turned his head and glanced at his sleeve. "Never knowed he shot—it was all done so quick." He seemed to awaken suddenly to the significance of his position. "I'll take your rope and go git Smoke. Then I'm goin' to drift."

"But where?"

"You're my pardner, Andy, but I ain't sayin'. Then you won't have to lie. You'll have to tell Jim—and tell him it was like I said—*if Gary come at me, that would be different*. I'm leavin' it to you to square me with Jim Bailey." Pete picked up the rope and started toward the spring.

"I'm goin' with you," said White, "and ketch my hoss. I aim to see you through with this."

In an hour they were back at the cabin with the horses. Andy White glanced at his watch. "Cotton is afoot—for I seen his hoss over there. But he can make it to the T-Bar-T in three hours. That'll give us a start of two hours, anyhow. I don't know which way you aim to ride, but—"

"I'm playin' this hand alone," stated Pete as he saddled Blue Smoke. "No use your gittin' in bad."

White made no comment, but cinched up his pony. Pete stepped to him and held out his hand. "So-long, Andy. You been a mighty square pardner."

"Nothin' doin'!" exclaimed Andy. "I'm with you to the finish."

"Nope, Andy. If we was both to light out, you'd be in it as bad as me."

"Then what do you say if we both ride down to Concho and report to the sheriff?"

"I tried that onct—when they killed Pop Annersley. I know how that would work."

"But what you goin' to do?"

"I'm ridin'," and Pete swung to his horse. Blue Smoke pitched across the clearing under the spur and rein that finally turned him toward the south. Pete's sombrero flew off as he headed for the timber. Andy, reining 'round his horse, that fretted to follow, swung down and caught up Pete's hat on the run. Pete had pulled up near the edge of the timber. Andy, as he was about to give Pete his hat, suddenly changed it for his own. "For luck!" he cried, as Pete slackened rein and Blue Smoke shot down the dim forest trail.

Pete, perhaps influenced by Montoya's example, always wore a high-crowned black sombrero. Andy's hat was the usual gray. In the excitement of leaving, Pete had not thought of that; but as he rode, he suspected Andy's motive, and glanced back. But Andy was not following, or if he were, he was riding slowly.

Meanwhile Andy cheerfully put himself in the way of assisting Pete to escape. He knew the country and thought he knew where Pete was headed for. Before nightfall a posse would be riding the high country hunting the slayer of Gary. They would look for a cowboy wearing a black sombrero. Realizing the risk that he ran, and yet as careless of that risk as though he rode to a fiesta, Young Andy deliberately turned back to where Gary lay—he had not yet been to that spot—and, dismounting, picked up Pete's rope. He glanced at Gary, shivered, and swung to his horse. Riding so that his trail would be easy to read he set off toward the open country, east. The fact that he had no food with him, and that the country was arid and that water was scarce, did not trouble him. All he hoped for was to delay or mislead the posse long enough to enable Pete to

reach the southern desert. There Pete might have one chance in twenty of making his final escape. Perhaps it was a foolish thing to do, but Andy White, inspired by a motive of which there is no finer, did not stop to reason about it. "He that giveth his life for a friend..." Andy knew nothing of such a quotation. He was riding into the desert, quite conscious of the natural hazards of the trail, and keen to the possibilities that might follow in the form of an excited posse not too discriminating, in their eagerness to capture an outlaw, yet he rode with a light heart. After all, Pete was not guilty of murder. He had but defended his own life. Andy's heart was light because of the tang of adventure, and a certain appreciation of what a disappointed posse might feel and express—and because Romance ran lightly beside him, heartening him on his way; Romance, whose ears are deaf to all moral considerations and whose eyes see only the true adventurer, be he priest or pirate; Romance whose eyes are blind to those who fear to dare.

CHAPTER XVII

A FALSE TRAIL

"Sure he's dead!" reiterated Cotton. "Didn't I see them two holes plumb through him and the blood soakin' his shirt when I turned him over? If I'd 'a' had my gun on me that Young Pete would be right side of Steve, right now! But I couldn't do nothin' without a gun. Pete Annersley was plumb scared. That's why he killed Steve. Jest you gimme a gun and watch me ride him down! I aim to settle with that Jay."

Cotton was talking to Houck of the T-Bar-T, blending fact and fiction in a blustering attempt to make himself believe he had played the man. During his long, foot-weary journey to the ranch he had roughly invented this speech and tried to memorize it. Through repetition he came to believe that he was telling the truth. Incidentally he had not paused to catch up his horse, which was a slight oversight, considering the trail from the Blue to his home ranch.

"What's the matter with the gun you're packin'?" asked Houck.

Cotton had forgotten his own gun.

"I—it was like this, Bill. After Young Pete killed Gary, I went back to the shack and got my gun. At first, Andy White wasn't goin' to leave me have it—but I tells him to fan it. I reckon he's pretty nigh home by now."

"Thought you said you didn't see White after the shooting—that he forked his horse and rode for the Concho? Cotton, you're lyin' so fast you're like to choke."

"Honest, Bill! If I'd 'a' had my gun..."

"Oh, hell! Don't try to swing that bluff. Where's your horse?"

"I couldn't ketch him, honest."

"Thought you said you caught him in the brush and tied him to a tree and Young Annersley threatened to kill you if you went for your saddle."

"That's right—honest, Bill, that's what he said."

"Then how is it that Bobby Lent caught your horse strayin' in more 'n a hour ago? Dam' if I believe a word you say. You're plumb crazy."

"Honest, Bill. I hope to die if Steve Gary ain't layin' over there with two holes in him. He's sure dead. Do you think I footed it all the way jest because I like walkin'?"

Houck frowned and shook his head. "You say him and Young Pete had come to words?"

"Yep; about ole man Annersley. Steve was tellin' me about the raid when Pete steps up and tells him to say it over ag'in. Steve started to talk when Pete cuts down on him—twict. My God, he was quick! I never even seen him draw."

"Did Gary say *he* was the one that plugged Annersley?"

"Yep. Said he did it—and asked Pete what he was goin' to do about it."

"Then Steve was drunk or crazy. You go git a horse and burn the trail to Concho. Tell Sutton that Young Pete Annersley killed Gary, up to the Blue Mesa. Tell him we're out after Young Pete. Can you git that straight?"

"What if the sheriff was to pinch me for bein' in that scrap?"

"You! In a gun-fight? No. He wouldn't believe that if you told him so. You jest tell Sutton what I said, and git goin'! Don't lie to him—or he'll spot it and pinch you dam' quick."

With Cotton gone, Houck saddled up and rode out to where one of his men was mending fence. "Take your horse and git all the boys you can reach before night. Young Pete Annersley shot Steve over to the Blue this mornin'."

The cowboy, unlike Cotton, whistled his surprise, dropped his tools, mounted, and was off before Houck had reined back toward the ranch-house.

It was near twelve that night when a quiet band of riders dismounted at the Annersley cabin, separated, and trailed off in the darkness to look for Gary. One of them found him where he had fallen and signaled with his gun. They carried Gary to the cabin. In the flickering light of the open stove they saw that he was still alive. There was one chance in a thousand that he could recover. They washed his wounds and one of the men set out toward Concho, to telephone to Enright for a doctor. The rest grouped around the stove and talked in low tones, waiting for daylight. "Chances are the kid went south," said Houck, half to himself.

"How about young White?" queried a cowboy.

"I dunno. Either he rode with Pete Annersley or he's back at the Concho. Daylight'll tell."

"If Steve could talk—" said the cowboy.

"I guess Steve is done for," said Houck. "I knew Young Pete was a tough kid—but I didn't figure he'd try to down Steve."

"Supposin' they both had a hand in it—White and Young Pete?"

Houck shook his head. "Anybody got any whiskey?" he asked.

Some one produced a flask. Houck knelt and raised Gary's head, tilting the flask carefully. Presently Gary's lips moved and his chest heaved.

"Who was it? White?" questioned Houck.

Gary moved his head in the negative.

"Young Pete?" Gary's white lips shaped to a faint whisper—"Yes."

One of the men folded a slicker and put it under Gary's head.

Houck stood up. "I guess it's up to us to get Pete Annersley."

"You can count me out," said a cowboy immediately. "Steve was allus huntin' trouble and it looks like he found it this trip. They's plenty without me to ride down the kid. Young Pete may be bad—but I figure he had a dam' good excuse when he plugged Steve, here. You can count me out."

"And me," said another. "If young Pete was a growed man—"

"Same here," interrupted the third. "Any kid that's got nerve enough to down Steve has got a right to git away with it. If you corner him he's goin' to fight—and git bumped off by a bunch of growed men—mebby four to one. That ain't my style."

Houck turned to several cowboys who had not spoken. They were Gary's friends, of his kind—in a measure. "How is it, boys?" asked Houck.

"We stick," said one, and the others nodded.

"Then you boys"—and Houck indicated the first group—"can ride back to the ranch. Or, here, Larkin, you can stay with Steve till the doc shows up. The rest of you can drift."

Without waiting for dawn the men who had refused to go out after Pete rode back along the hill-trail to the ranch. But before they left, Houck took what hastily packed food they had and distributed it among the posse, who packed it in their saddle-pockets. The remaining cowboys lay down for a brief sleep. They were up at dawn, and after a hasty breakfast set out looking for tracks. Houck himself discovered Andy White's tracks leading from the spot where Gary had been found, and calling the others together, set off across the eastern mesa.

Meanwhile Andy White was sleeping soundly in a coulee many miles from the homestead, and just within sight of a desert ranch, to which he had planned to ride at daybreak, ask for food and depart, leaving the impression that he was Pete Annersley in haste to get beyond the reach of the law. He had stopped at the coulee because he had found grass and water for his horse and because he did not want to risk being found at the ranch-house. A posse would naturally head for the ranch to search and ask questions. Fed and housed he might oversleep and be caught. Then his service to Pete would amount to little. But if he rode in at daybreak, ahead of the posse, ate and departed, leaving a hint as to his assumed identity, he could mislead them a day longer at

least. He built all his reasoning on the hope that the posse would find and follow his tracks.

Under the silent stars he slept, his head on his saddle, and near him lay Pete's black sombrero.

In the disillusioning light of morning, that which Andy had taken to be a ranch-house dwindled to a goat-herder's shack fronted by a brush-roofed lean-to. Near it was a diminutive corral and a sun-faded tent. The old Indian herder seemed in no way surprised to see a young rider dismount and approach cautiously—for Andy had entered into the spirit of the thing. He paused to glance apprehensively back and survey the western horizon. Andy greeted the Indian, who grunted his acknowledgment in the patois of the plains.

"Any vaqueros ride by here this morning?" queried Andy.

The herder shook his head.

"Well, I guess I got time to eat," said Andy.

A faint twinkle touched the old Indian's eyes, but his face was as expressionless as a dried apple.

"Si," he said.

"But not a whole lot of time," asserted Andy.

The Indian rose and fetched a pail of goat's milk and some tortillas from the shack. He shuffled back to his hermitage and reappeared with a tin cup. Andy, who meanwhile had consumed one leathery tortilla, shook his head. "Never mind the cup, amigo." He tilted the pail and drank—paused for breath, and drank again. He set the pail down empty. "I was some dry," he said, smiling. "Got any more of these rawhide flapjacks?"

The herder nodded, stooped to enter the shack, and came out with a half-dozen of the tortillas, which Andy rolled and stuffed in his saddle-pocket. "Mighty good trail bread!" he said enthusiastically. "You can't wear 'em out."

Again the herder nodded, covertly studying this young rider who did not look like an outlaw, whose eye was clear and untroubled. Well, what did it matter?—a man must eat.

The old Indian had given unquestioningly from his poverty, with the simple dignity of true hospitality. As for who this stranger was, of what he had done—that was none of his affair. A man must eat.

"I'm payin' for this,"—and Andy proffered a silver dollar.

The other turned the piece round in his fingers as though hesitating to accept it.

"Si. But has not the señor some little money?"

"That's all right, amigo. Keep it."

The herder shook his head, and held up two fingers. Andy smiled. "I get you! You don't aim to bank all your wealth in one lump. Lemme see? All I got left is a couple of two-bit pieces. Want 'em?" The herder nodded and took the two coins and handed back the dollar. Then he padded stolidly to the shack and reappeared, bearing a purple velvet jacket which was ornamented with buttons made from silver quarters. He held it up, indicating that two of the buttons were missing. "Muchacha," he grunted, pointing toward the south.

"I get you. Your girl is out looking after the goats, and you aim to kind of surprise her with a full set of buttons when she gets back. She'll ask you right quick where you got 'em, eh?"

A faint grin touched the old Indian's mouth. The young vaquero was of the country. He understood.

"Well, it beats me," said Andy. "Now, a white man is all for the big money. He'd take the dollar, get it changed, and be two-bits ahead, every time. But I got to drift along. Say, amigo, if any of my friends come a-boilin down this way, jest tell 'em that Pete—that's me—was in a hurry, and headed east. Sabe?"

"Si."

"Pete—with the black sombrero." Andy touched his hat.

"Si. 'Pete.'"

"Adios. Wisht I could take a goat along. That milk was sure comfortin'."

The herder watched Andy mount and ride away. Then he plodded back to the shack and busied himself patiently soldering tiny rings on the silver pieces, that the set of buttons for his daughter's jacket might be complete. He knew that the young stranger must be a fugitive,

otherwise he would not have ridden into the desert so hurriedly. He had not inquired about water, nor as to feed for his horse. Truly he was in great haste!

Life meant but three things to the old Indian. Food, sleep, and physical freedom. He had once been in jail and had suffered as only those used to the open sky suffer when imprisoned. The young vaquero had eaten, and had food with him. His eyes had shown that he was not in need of sleep. Yet he had all but said there would be men looking for him.

The old Indian rose and picked up a blanket. In the doorway he paused, surveying the western horizon. Satisfied that no one was in sight, he padded out to where Andy had tied his horse and swept the blanket across the tracks in the loose sand. Walking backwards he drew the blanket after him, obliterating the hoof-prints until he came to a rise where the ground was rocky. Without haste he returned and squatted in the shack. He was patiently working on a silver piece when some one called out peremptorily.

The old Indian's face was expressionless as he nodded to the posse of cowboys.

"Seen anything of a young fella ridin' a blue roan and sportin' a black hat?" asked Houck.

The Indian shook his head.

"He's lyin'," asserted a cowboy. "Comes as natural as breathin' to him. We trailed a hoss to this here wickiup"—the hot lust of the man-hunt was in the cowboy's eyes as he swung down—"and we aim to see who was ridin' him!"

Houck and his three companions sat their horses as the fourth member of the posse shouldered the old Indian aside and entered the shack. "Nothin' in there," he said, as he reappeared, "but somebody's been here this mornin'." And he pointed to the imprint of a high-heeled boot in the sand of the yard.

"Which way did he ride?" asked Houck, indicating the footprint.

The old herder shook his head. "Quien sabe?" he grunted, shrugging his shoulders.

"Who knows, eh? Well, you know—for one. And you're goin' to say—or there'll be a heap big bonfire right here where your shack is."

Meanwhile one of the men, who had pushed out into the desert and was riding in a circle, halloed and waved his arm.

"He headed this way," he called. "Some one dragged a blanket over his trail."

The cowboy who was afoot strode up to the herder. "We'll learn you to play hoss with this outfit!" He swung his quirt and struck the Indian across the face. The old Indian stepped back and stiffened. His sunken eyes blazed with hatred, but he made no sound or sign. He knew that if he as much as lifted his hand the men would kill him. To him they were the law, searching for a fugitive. The welt across his face burned like the sear of fire—the cowardly brand of hatred on the impassive face of primitive fortitude! This because he had fed a hungry man and delayed his pursuers.

Long after the posse had disappeared down the far reaches of the desert, the old Indian stood gazing toward the east, vaguely wondering what would have happened to him had he struck a white man across the face with a quirt. He would have been shot down—and his slayer would have gone unpunished. He shook his head, unable to understand the white man's law. His primitive soul knew a better law, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," a law that knew no caste and was as old as the sun-swept spaces of his native land. He was glad that his daughter had not been there. The white men might have threatened and insulted her. If they had ... The old herder padded to his shack and squatted down, to finish soldering the tiny rings on the buttons for his daughter's jacket.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BLACK SOMBRERO

When Andy had ridden far enough to feel secure in turning and riding north—in fact, his plan was to work back to the Concho in a wide circle—he reined in and dismounted. From a low ridge he surveyed the western desert, approximated his bearings, and had his foot in the stirrup when he saw four tiny dots that bobbed up and down on the distant sky-line of the west. He had left an easy trail to follow and the pursuers were riding hard. They were still a long distance from him. He led his horse down the far side of the ridge and mounted. He rode straight east for perhaps a

quarter of a mile. Then he turned and at right angles to his trail sped north behind the long, low, sandy ridge. He could not be seen until the posse had topped it—and even then it was probable they would fling down the slope, following his tracks until they came to where he had turned. Straight ahead of him the ridge swung to the left. In half an hour or so he would again cross it, which he hoped to do before he was discovered. Once over the ridge, he would head for the Concho. To follow him would mean that his pursuers would be riding directly away from Pete's trail. Many long desert miles lay between Andy and the Concho, but he argued that his horse was as fresh as the horses of his pursuers. He would give them a good run. If they overtook him before they reached the ranch, the most they could do would be to curse him for misleading them. He reasoned that the posse was from the T-Bar-T—that at best the sheriff could not have been advised of the shooting in time to join them. They would have no official right to detain him or interfere with his progress—once they knew who he was.

A trot, a lope, then back to a swinging trot again—and as yet no riders had appeared on the hills. Andy was making good time. The crest of the ridge shimmered in the noon sun. At this pace he would be over and down the western side before they saw him.

When the posse finally caught sight of the man they were after far out across the level and riding toward the west, they knew at once that he was making for the Concho and what protection his fellows might afford him under the circumstances. This did not fit into their scheme. The man-hunt had tuned their pulses to a high pitch. They wanted to lay hands on Gary's slayer—to disarm him and bring him into the town of Concho themselves—or, if he showed fight, to "get" him. They forgot that he was little more than a boy. He was an enemy—and potentially dangerous.

"It's Young Pete," said a cowboy. "I know him by that black hat."

Plying quirt and spur the posse flung down the ridge and out across the plain below. They would ride their quarry down before he reached the boundary of the Concho—before he got among his friends.

Andy turned and glanced back. They were gaining on him. He knew that his own horse was doing his best. Again he glanced back. The riders were forcing their horses to a terrific pace that could not last long. In a mile or so they would be close enough to use their rifles. But the harder they rode the better Andy liked it. They would be in sorry shape to make the long ride south after Pete, when they realized that they were chasing the wrong man. If he could get out of it without getting shot, he would consider himself lucky. Ahead of him lay a flat of brushless land offering no shelter. He hoped that his horse would not be killed by a chance shot. In that event his pride would force him to retaliate, until he was either killed or captured. He had about made up his mind to rein up and surrender when he heard the singing *whizz-zip* of a bullet that sprayed sand ahead of him. Then came the faint *pop* of a rifle far behind. He pulled up, swiftly unbuckled his belt, and hung his gun on the saddle-horn. Then he stepped away from his horse—an unconsciously fine thing to do—and turned toward the distant posse. Again came that shrill, sinister *whizz-zip* and he was standing bareheaded in the glaring sun as the black sombrero spun round and settled lightly in the sand beside him. He wisely thrust up his hands—arguing that if the posse could see to shoot with such accuracy they could see and possibly appreciate his attitude. He felt outraged, and wanted to fight. He did not realize at the moment that his pursuers were acting in good faith according to their viewpoint.

Meanwhile they flung toward him, spreading out fanwise in case of some possible treachery. Without moving a muscle Andy stood with his hands raised, blinking trying to identify each individual rider.

There was Houck on his big gray cow-horse. To the left rode Simpson, known all over the range as Gary's close friend. Andy half-expected to see Cotton with the posse, but Cotton was not there. He did not recognize the two riders on the wings of the posse.

"Mornin', fellas!" he called as the cowboys swept up. "What's the idea?"

"This!" snarled Simpson as he took out his rope.

"Hold on!" cried Houck, dismounting and covering White. "This ain't our man! It's young Andy White!"

"You might 'a' found that out before you started shootin'," said Andy, lowering his hands. "My gun's on the saddle there."

Despite the fact that it was Andy White, Houck took no chances, but searched him. Then, "what in hell was *your* idea?"

"Me? Why, I was ridin' to the Concho when one of you guys shot my hat off. I reckoned it was about time to pull up."

"Ridin' to the Concho, eh? I suppose you'll say next that you got lost and thought the Concho was over this way?"

"Nope. I was ridin' to the Concho to report the shootin' of Steve Gary to my boss."

Houck, who had imagined that White would disclaim any knowledge of the shooting until forced to admit it, took a new tack. "Where's Pete Annersley?"

"That's jest what I was wonderin'. Last time I see him he was fannin' it east. I took out after him—but I must 'a' missed him."

"That'll do to tell the sheriff. We want to know what you know about the shootin'-up of Steve."

"Nothin'. I was over by the shack waiting for Pete when I thought I heard a couple of shots. Didn't pay no attention to that—'cause Pete was always poppin' his gun at somethin'. Then pretty soon Pete walks in, and I go out with him and help him ketch his hoss. He don't say much—and I don't. Then first thing I know he lights on that little buckskin hoss of his—"

"And forgets his hat," interrupted Houck.

"Nope. He was wearin' a hat the last I seen of him."

"And ridin' a buckskin cayuse, eh? Now Cotton says it was a blue roan."

Andy laughed. "That hombre Cotton's got mighty poor eyesight. Why, he couldn't see good enough to ketch up his own hoss. Pete told me Cotton set out for home afoot. I didn't see him, but I'd take Pete's word against Cotton's any time."

"Mebby you think we're takin' your word about Young Pete—and the shootin'?"

"Why not?"

"We can make you talk!" threatened Simpson.

"I reckon you could," said Andy easily. "Four to one—and my gun hangin' over there on the saddle-horn. But suppose you did? How are you goin' to know I'll talk straight or lie to you? You ain't thrown any big scare into me yet"—and Andy stooped and caught up his hat and thrust his finger through the hole in the crown—"because I ain't done nothin' to be scared about. I ain't shot nobody and I ain't seen nobody get shot. Cotton could 'a' told you that."

"That's right," asserted Houck reluctantly. "White here had nothin' to do with the shootin'. Cotton said that. We lost some time trailin' you"—Houck turned to Andy—"but we don't aim to lose any more. Which way did young Pete ride?"

Andy laughed. "You would say I lied if I told you. But I'm goin' to tell you straight. Young Pete took the old Ranger Trail south, through the timber. And I want to tell you gentlemen he was goin' like hell a-smokin' when I seen him last. Mebby you don't believe that? And there's somethin' else—that old Ranger Trail forks three times this side of Cienegas—and she forks twice afore she crosses the line. She's a dim trail when she's doin' her best acrost the rocks, and they's places in her where she's as blind as a dead ox. Water is as scarce as cow-punchers at a camp-meetin' and they ain't no feed this side of Showdown. And Showdown never tore its shirt tryin' to be polite to strangers. I been there. 'Course, when it comes to rustlers and cardsharps and killers—but you fellas know how that is. I—"

"Come on, boys," said Houck, reining round. "White here is puttin' up a talk to hold us—and Young Pete's usin' the time."

Andy watched them ride away, a queer expression lighting his face. "They hate like the Ole Scratch to believe me—and they are hatin' themselves for havin' to."

He pulled off Pete's hat and turned it over, gazing at the two little round holes curiously. "Pete, old scout," he said, smiling whimsically, "here's hopin' they never come closer to gettin' you than they did to gettin' me. Keep a-ridin'—for you sure got to be that 'Ridin' Kid from Powder River' this journey—and then some."

Andy turned the black sombrero round in his hands. "All this here hocus comes of the killin' of a old man that never lifted a finger against nobody—and as game a kid as ever raked a hoss with a spur. But one killin' always means more. I ain't no gunman—or no killer. But, by cracky! some of my ideas has changed since I got that hole in my hat. I wisht I'd 'a' rode with Pete. I wouldn't ask nothin' better right now than to stand back to back with him, out in the open somewhere and let 'em come! Because why? Because the only law that a man's got in this country is hisself—and if he's right, why, crossin' over with his gun explainin' his idees ain't the worst way to go. Anyhow, it ain't any worse than gettin' thrown from a bronc and gettin' his neck broke or gettin' stomped out in a stampede. Them's just regular, common ways of goin' out. I just wonder how Pete is makin' it?"

Andy put on his hat, glanced at the sun, and strode to his pony. Far across the eastern desert he saw the posse—a mere moving dot against the blue. "Wolf-hungry to make a killin' because they're foolin' themselves that they're actin' out the law! Well, come on, Chico, old hoss, we got to make home before sundown."

CHAPTER XIX

THE SPIDER

Where the old Ranger Trail, crossing the Blue Mesa, leaves the high mesa and meanders off into the desert, there is a fork which leads southwest, to the Apache country—a grim and waterless land—and finally swings south toward the border. Pete dismounted at this fork, pulled up his slackened cinches, and making certain that he was leaving a plain track, rode down the main trail for half a mile. Then he reined his pony to a bare spot on the grass-dotted tufa, and again dismounted. He looped Blue Smoke's fore feet, then threw him, and pulled his shoes with a pair of wire nippers, and stowed the shoes in his saddle-pockets.

He again rode directly down the trail, surmising that the occasional track of a barefoot horse would appear natural enough should the posse, whom he knew would follow him, split up and ride both trails. Farther on he again swung from the trail to the tufa, never slackening pace, and rode across the broken ground for several miles. He had often seen the unshod and unbranded ponies of the high country run along a trail for a mile or so and then dash off across the open. Of course, if the posse took the direct trail to the border, paying no attention to tracks, they would eventually overtake him. Pete was done with the companionship of men who allowed the wanton killing of a man like Annersley to go unpunished. He knew that if he were caught, he would most probably be hanged or imprisoned for the shooting of Gary—if he were not killed in being taken. The T-Bar-T interests ruled the courts. Moreover, his reputation was against him. Ever since the raid on Annersley's place Pete had been pointed out as the "kid who stood off the raiders and got two of them." And Pete knew that the very folk who seemed proud of the fact would be the first to condemn him for the killing of Gary. He was outlawed—not for avenging the death of his foster-father, but actually because he had defended his own life, a fact difficult to establish in court and which would weigh little against the evidence of the six or eight men who had heard him challenge Gary at the round-up. Jim Bailey had been right. Men talked too much as a usual thing. Gary had talked too much.

Pete realized that his loyalty to the memory of Annersley had earned him disrepute. He resented the injustice of this, and all his old hatred of the law revived. Yet despite all logic of justice as against law—he could see Gary's hand clutching against his chest, his staring eyes, and the red ooze starting through those tense fingers—Pete reasoned that had he not been so skilled and quick with a gun, he would be in Gary's place now. As it was, he was alive and had a good horse between his knees.

To ride an unshod horse in the southern desert is to invite disaster. Toward evening, Pete pulled up at a water-hole, straightened the nails in the horseshoes and tacked them on again with a piece of rock. They would hold until he reached the desert town of Showdown—a place of ill-repute and a rendezvous for outlawry and crime.

He rode on until he came within sight of the town—a dim huddle of low buildings in the starlight. He swung off the trail, hobbled his horse, fastened his rope to the hobbles, and tied that in turn to a long, heavy slab of rock, and turned in. He would not risk losing his horse in this desert land. At best a posse could not reach Showdown before noon the next day, and rather than blunder into Showdown at night and take unnecessary risks, he decided to rest, and ride in at sunup, when he would be able to see what he was doing and better estimate the possibilities of getting food for himself and his horse and of finding refuge in some out-of-the-way ranch or homestead. In spite of his vivid imaginings he slept well. At dawn he caught up his pony and rode into town.

Showdown boasted some fifteen or eighteen low-roofed adobes, the most pretentious being the saloon. These all faced a straggling road which ran east and west, disappearing at either end of the town as though anxious to obliterate itself in the clean sand of the desert. The environs of Showdown were garnished with tin cans and trash, dirt and desolation. Unlike the ordinary cow-town this place was not sprightly, but morose, with an aspect of hating itself for existing. Even the railroad swung many miles to the south as though anxious to leave the town to its own pernicious isolation.

The fixed population consisted of a few Mexicans and one white man, known as "The Spider," who ran the saloon and consequently owned Showdown body and—but Showdown had no soul.

Men arrived and departed along the several desert trails that led in and out of the town. These men seldom tarried long. And they usually came alone, perchance from the Blue, the Gila, the T-Bar-T, or from below the border, for their business was with the border rustlers and parasites. Sheriffs of four counties seldom disturbed the place, because a man who had got as far south as Showdown was pretty hard to apprehend. From there to the border lay a trackless desert. Showdown was a rendezvous for that inglorious legion, "The Men Who Can't Come Back," renegades who when below the line worked machine guns for whichever side of the argument promised the more loot. Horse- and cattle-thieves, killers, escaped convicts, came and went—

ominous birds of passage, the scavengers of war and banditry.

The Spider was lean, with legs warped by long years in the saddle. He was called The Spider because of his physical attributes as well as because of his attitude toward life. He never went anywhere, yet he accumulated sustenance. He usually had a victim tangled in his web. It was said that The Spider never let a wounded outlaw die for lack of proper attention if he considered the outlaw worth saving—as an investment. And possibly this was the secret of his power, for he was ever ready to grub-stake or doctor any gentleman in need or wounded in a desert affair—and he had had a large experience in caring for gun-shot wounds.

Pete, dismounting at the worn hitching-rail, entered the saloon, nodded casually to The Spider, and called for a drink. The Spider, who always officiated at the bar for politic reasons, aside from the selling of liquor, noticed that the young stranger's eyes were clear and steady—that he showed no trace of hard night-riding; yet he had arrived in Showdown at sunup. As Pete drank, The Spider sized up his horse—which looked fresh. He had already noticed that Pete's gun hung well down and handy, and assumed correctly that it was not worn for ornament. The Spider knew that the drink was a mere formality—that the stranger was not a drinking man in the larger sense.

Neither spoke until a Mexican, quite evidently in haste, rode up and entered the saloon. The Mexican bore the strange news that four riders were expected to reach Showdown that day—perhaps by noon. Then The Spider spoke, and Pete was startled by the voice, which was pitched in a high key yet was little more than a whisper.

The Mexican began to expostulate shrilly. The Spider had cursed him for a loud-mouthed fool. Again came that sinister whisper, like the rush of a high wind in the reeds. The Mexican turned and silently left the room. When Pete, who had pretended absorption in thought, glanced up, the Spider's eyes were fixed on Pete's horse, which had swung around as the Mexican departed. The Spider's deep-set eyes shifted to Pete, who smiled. The Spider nodded. Interpreted this would have read: "I see you ride a horse with the Concho brand." And Pete's eyes had retorted: "I sure do. I was waiting for you to say that."

Still The Spider had not addressed his new guest nor had Pete uttered a word. It was a sort of cool, deliberate duel of will power. Pete turned his head and surveyed the long room leisurely. The Spider pushed the bottle toward him, silently inviting him to drink again. Pete shook his head. The Spider hobbled from behind the bar and moving quickly across the room flung open the back door, discovering a patio set with tables and chairs. Pete nodded.

They were establishing a tentative understanding without speech. The test was hard for Pete. The Spider was uncanny—though quick of movement and shifty of eye—intensely alive withal.

As for The Spider himself, he was not displeased. This was but a youth, yet a youth who was not unfamiliar with the fine points of a rendezvous. The back door opened on a patio and the door in the wall of the patio opened on a corral. The corral bars opened to the desert—Pete had almost sensed that, without seeing farther than the patio, and had nodded his approval, without speaking. The Spider considered this highly commendable.

Pete knew at a glance that The Spider was absolutely without honor—that his soul was as crooked as his badly bowed legs; and that he called no man friend and meant it.

And The Spider knew, without other evidence than his own eyes found, that this young stranger would not hesitate to kill him if sufficient provocation offered. Nor did this displease the autocrat of Showdown in the least. He was accustomed to dealing with such men. Yet one thing bothered him. Had the stranger made a get-away that would bring a posse to Showdown—as the Mexican had intimated? If so the sooner the visitor left, the better. If he were merely some cowboy looking for easy money and excitement, that was a different matter. Or perhaps he had but stolen a horse, or butchered and sold beef that bore a neighbor's brand. Yet there was something about Pete that impressed The Spider more deeply than mere horse- or cattle-stealing could. The youth's eye was not the eye of a thief. He had not come to Showdown to consort with rustlers. He was somewhat of a puzzle—but The Spider, true to his name, was silently patient.

Meanwhile the desert sun rolled upward and onward, blazing down on the huddled adobes, and slowly filtering into the room. With his back to the bar, Pete idly flicked bits of a broken match at a knot-hole in the floor. Tired of that, he rolled a cigarette with one hand, and swiftly. Pete's hands were compact, of medium size, with the finger joints lightly defined—the hands of a conjuror—or, as The Spider thought, of a born gunman. And Pete was always doing something with his hands, even when apparently oblivious to everything around him. A novice at reading men would have considered him nervous. He was far from nervous. This was proven to The Spider's satisfaction when Malvey entered—"Bull" Malvey, red-headed, bluff and huge, of a gaunt frame, with large-knuckled hands and big feet. Malvey tossed a coin on the bar noisily, and in that one act Pete read him for what he was—a man who "bullied" his way through life with much bluster and profanity, but a man who, if he boasted, would make good his boast. What appeared to be hearty good-nature in Malvey was in reality a certain blatantly boisterous vigor—a vigor utterly soulless, and masking a nature at bottom as treacherous as The Spider's—but in contrast squalid and mean. Malvey would steal five dollars. The Spider would not touch a job for less than five hundred. While cruel, treacherous, and a killer, The Spider had nothing small or mean about

him. And subtle to a degree, he hated the blunt-spoken, blustering Malvey, but for reasons unadvertised, called him friend.

"Have a drink?"

"Thanks." And Pete poured himself a noticeably small quantity.

"This is Malvey—Bull Malvey," said The Spider, hesitating for Pete to name himself.

"Pete's my name. I left the rest of it to home."

Malvey laughed. "That goes. How's things over to the Concho?"

"I ain't been there since yesterday."

The Spider blinked, which was a sign that he was pleased. He never laughed.

Malvey winked at The Spider. "You ain't ridin' back that way to-day, mebby? I'd like to send word—"

Pete shook his head. "Nope. I aim to stay right here a spell."

"If you're intendin' to *keep* that horse out there, perhaps you'd like to feed him." And The Spider indicated the direction of the corral with a twist of the head.

"Which is correct," said Pete.

"Help yourself," said The Spider.

"I get you," said Pete significantly; and he turned and strode out.

"What in hell is he talkin' about?" queried Malvey.

"His horse."

Malvey frowned. "Some smooth kid, eh?"

The Spider nodded.

Pete appreciated that his own absence was desired; that these men were quietly curious to find out who he was—and what he had done that brought him to Showdown. But Malvey knew nothing about Pete, nor of any recent trouble over Concho way. And Pete, unsaddling his pony, knew that he would either make good with The Spider or else he would make a mistake, and then there would be no need for further subterfuge. Pete surveyed the corral and outbuildings. The whole arrangement was cleverly planned. He calculated from the position of the sun that it lacked about three hours of noon. Well, so far he had played his hand with all the cards on the table—card for card with The Spider alone. Now there would be a new deal. Pete would have to play accordingly.

When he again entered the saloon, from the rear, The Spider and Malvey were standing out in the road, gazing toward the north. "I see only three of them," he heard The Spider say in his peculiar, high-pitched voice. And Pete knew that the speech was intended for his ear.

"Nope. Four!" said Malvey positively.

Pete leaned his elbow on the bar and watched them. Malvey was obviously acting his part, but The Spider's attitude seemed sincere. "Pete," he called, "Malvey says there are four riders drifting in from the north. I make it three."

"You're both wrong and you got about three hours to find it out in," said Pete.

Malvey and The Spider glanced at one another. Evidently Pete was more shrewd than they had suspected. And evidently he would be followed to Showdown.

"It's a killing," whispered The Spider. "I thought that it was. How do you size him up?"

"Pretty smooth—for a kid," said Malvey.

"Worth a blanket?" queried The Spider, which meant, worth hiding from the law until such time as a blanket was not necessary.

"I'd say so."

They turned and entered the saloon. The Spider crept from the middle of his web and made plain his immediate desire. "Strangers are welcome in Showdown, riding single," he told Pete. "We aren't hooked up to entertain a crowd. If you got friends coming—friends that are suffering to see you—why, you ain't here when they come. *And you ain't been here.* If nobody is following your smoke, why, take your time."

"I'll be takin' my hoss when he gits done feedin'," stated Pete.

The Spider nodded approval. Showdown had troubles of its own.

"Malvey, did you say you were riding south?"

"Uh-huh."

"Kind of funny—but I was headin' south myself," said Pete. "Bein' a stranger I might git lost alone."

"Which wouldn't scare you none," guffawed, Malvey.

"Which wouldn't scare me none," said Pete.

"But a crowd of friends—riding in sudden—" suggested The Spider.

"I 'd be plumb scared to death," said Pete.

"I got your number," asserted The Spider.

"Then hang her on the rack. But hang her on the right hook."

"One, two, or three?" queried The Spider.

"Make it three," said Pete.

The Spider glanced sharply at Pete, who met his eye with a gaze in which there was both a challenge and a confession. Yet there was no boastful pride in the confession. It was as though Pete had stated the simple fact that he had killed a man in self-defense—perhaps more than one man—and had earned the hatred of those who had the power to make him pay with his life, whether he were actually guilty or not.

If this young stranger had three notches in his gun, and thus far had managed to evade the law, there was a possibility of his becoming a satellite among The Spider's henchmen. Not that The Spider cared in the least what became of Pete, save that if he gave promise of becoming useful, it would be worth while helping him to evade his pursuers this once at least. He knew that if he once earned Pete's gratitude, he would have one stanch friend. Moreover, The Spider was exceedingly crafty, always avoiding trouble when possible to do so. So he set about weaving the blanket that was to hide Pete from any one who might become too solicitous about his welfare and so disturb the present peace of Showdown.

The Spider's plan was simple, and his instructions to Malvey brief. While Pete saddled his horse, The Spider talked with Malvey. "Take him south—to Flores's rancho. Tell Flores he is a friend of mine. When you get a chance, take his horse, and fan it over to Blake's. Leave the horse there. I want you to set him afoot at Flores's. When I'm ready, I'll send for him."

"What do I git out of it?"

"Why, the horse. Blake'll give you a hundred for that cayuse, if I am any judge of a good animal."

"He'll give me fifty, mebby. Blake ain't payin' too much for any hosses that I fetch in."

"Then I'll give you the other fifty and settle with Blake later."

"That goes, Spider."

The Spider and Malvey stepped out as Pete had it out with Blue Smoke in front of the saloon.

"We're ridin'," said Malvey, as Pete spurred his pony to the rail.

Pete leaned forward and offered his hand to The Spider. "I'll make this right with you," said Pete.

"Forget it," said The Spider.

Showdown dozed in the desert heat. The street was deserted. The Mexican who helped about the saloon was asleep in the patio. The Spider opened a new pack of cards, shuffled them, and began a game of solitaire. Occasionally he glanced out into the glare, blinking and muttering to himself. Malvey and Pete had been gone about an hour when a lean dog that had lain across from the hitching-rail, rose, shook himself, and turned to gaze up the street. The Spider called to the man in the patio. He came quickly. "I'm expecting visitors," said The Spider in Mexican. The other started toward the front doorway, but The Spider called him back with a word, and gestured to the door back of the bar—the doorway to The Spider's private room. The Mexican entered the room and closed the door softly, drew up a chair, and sat close to the door in the attitude of one who listens. Presently he heard the patter of hoofs, the grunt of horses pulled up sharply, and the tread of men entering the saloon. The Mexican drew his gun and rested his forearm across his knees, the gun hanging easily in his half-closed hand. He did not know who

the men were nor how The Spider had known that they were coming. But he knew what was expected of him in case of trouble. The Spider sat directly across from the door behind the bar. Any one talking with him would be between him and the door.

"Guess we'll have a drink—and talk later," said Houck. The Spider glanced up from his card-game, and nodded casually.

The sound of shuffling feet, and the Mexican knew that the strangers were facing the bar. He softly holstered his gun. While he could not understand English, he knew by the tone of the conversation that these men were not the enemies of his weazened master.

"Seen anything of a kind of dark-complected young fella wearin' a black Stetson and ridin' a blue roan?" queried Houck.

"Where was he from?" countered The Spider.

"The Concho, and ridin' a hoss with the Concho brand."

"Wanted bad?"

"Yes—a whole lot. He shot Steve Gary yesterday."

"Gary of the T-Bar-T?"

"The same—and a friend of mine," interpolated the cowboy Simpson.

"Huh! You say he's young—just a kid?"

"Yes. But a dam' tough kid."

"Pete Annersley, eh? Not the Young Pete that was mixed up in that raid a few years ago?"

"The same."

"No—I didn't see anything of him," said The Spider.

"We trailed him down this way."

The Spider nodded.

"And we mean to keep right on ridin'—till we find him," blurted Simpson.

Houck realized that The Spider knew more than he cared to tell. Simpson had blundered in stating their future plans, Houck tried to cover the blunder. "We like to get some chuck—enough to carry us back to the ranch."

"I'm short on chuck," said The Spider. "If you men were deputies—sworn in regular—why, I'd have to give it to you."

Simpson was inclined to argue, but Houck stopped him.

"Guess we can make it all right," he said easily. "Come on, boys!"

Houck, wiser than his companions, realized the uselessness of searching farther, a fact obvious even to the hot-headed Simpson when at the edge of the town they tried to buy provisions from a Mexican and were met with a shrug and a reiterated "No sabe."

"And that just about settles it," said Houck as he reined his pony round and faced north.

CHAPTER XX

BULL MALVEY

Malvey, when not operating a machine gun for Mexican bandits, was usually busy evading a posse on the American side of the border. Needless to say, he knew the country well—and the country knew him only too well. He had friends—of a kind—and he had enemies of every description and color from the swart, black-eyed Cholas of Sonora to the ruddy, blue-eyed Rangers of Texas. He trusted no man—and no man who knew him trusted him—not even The Spider, though he could have sent Malvey to the penitentiary on any one of several counts.

Malvey had no subtlety. He simply knew the game and possessed a tremendous amount of nerve. Like most red-headed men, he rode rough-shod and aggressively to his goal. He "bulled" his way through, when more capable men of equal nerve failed.

Riding beside him across the southern desert, Young Pete could not help noticing Malvey's hands—huge-knuckled and freckled—and Pete surmised correctly that this man was not quick with a gun. Pete also noticed that Malvey "roughed" his horse unnecessarily; that he was a good rider, but a poor horseman. Pete wondered that desert life had not taught Malvey to take better care of his horse.

As yet Pete knew nothing of their destination—nor did he care. It was good to be out in the open, again with a good horse under him. The atmosphere of The Spider's saloon had been too tense for comfort. Pete simply wanted to vacate Showdown until such time as he might return safely. He had no plan—but he did believe that Showdown would know him again. He could not say why. And it was significant of Young Pete's descent to the lower plane that he should consider Showdown safe at any time.

Pete was in reality never more unsafe than at the present time. While space and a swift pony between his knees argued of bodily freedom, he felt uneasy. Perhaps because of Malvey's occasional covert glance at Blue Smoke—for Pete saw much that he did not appear to see. Pete became cautious forthwith, studying the lay of the land. It was a bad country to travel, being so alike in its general aspect of butte and arroyo, sand and cacti, that there was little to lay hold upon as a landmark. A faint line of hills edged the far southern horizon and there were distant hills to the east and west. They journeyed across an immense basin, sun-smitten, desolate, unpromising.

"Just plain hell," said Malvey as though reading Pete's thought.

"You act like you was to home all right," laughed Pete.

Malvey glanced quickly at his companion, alive to an implied insult, but he saw only a young, smooth-cheeked rider in whose dark eyes shone neither animosity nor friendliness. They jogged on, neither speaking for many miles. When Malvey did speak, his manner was the least bit patronizing. He could not quite understand Pete, yet The Spider had seemed to understand him. As Pete had said nothing about the trouble that had driven him to the desert, Malvey considered silence on that subject emanated from a lack of trust. He wanted to gain Pete's confidence—for the time being at least. It would make it that much easier to follow The Spider's instructions in regard to Pete's horse. But to all Malvey's hints Pete was either silent or jestingly unresponsive. As the journey thinned the possibilities of Pete's capture, it became monotonous, even to Malvey, who set about planning how he could steal Pete's horse with the least risk to himself. Aside from The Spider's instructions Malvey coveted the pony—a far better horse than his own—and he was of two minds as to whether he should not keep the pony for his own use. The Concho was a long cry from Showdown—while the horse Malvey rode had been stolen from a more immediate neighborhood. As for setting this young stranger afoot in the desert, that did not bother Malvey in the least. No posse would ride farther south than Showdown, and with Pete afoot at Flores's rancho, Malvey would be free to follow his own will, either to Blake's ranch or farther south and across the border. Whether Pete returned to Showdown or not was none of Malvey's affair. To get away with the horse might require some scheming. Malvey made no further attempt to draw Pete out—but rode on in silence.

They came upon the cañon suddenly, so suddenly that Pete's horse shied and circled. Malvey, leading, put his own pony down a steep and winding trail. Pete followed, fixing his eyes on a far green spot at the bottom of the cañon, and the thin thread of smoke above the trees that told of a habitation.

At a bend in the trail, Malvey turned in the saddle: "We'll bush down here. Friends of mine."

Pete nodded.

They watered their horses at the thin trickle of water in the cañon-bed and then rode slowly past a weirdly fenced field. Presently they came to a rude adobe stable and scrub-cedar corral. A few yards beyond, and hidden by the bushes, was the house. A pock-marked Mexican greeted Malvey gruffly. The Spider's name was mentioned, and Pete was introduced as his friend. The horses were corralled and fed.

As Pete entered the adobe, a thin, listless Mexican woman—Flores's wife—called to some one in an inner room. Presently Flores's daughter appeared, supple of movement and smiling. She greeted Malvey as though he were an old friend, cast down her eyes at Pete's direct gaze, and straightway disappeared again. From the inner room came the sound of a song. The young stranger with Malvey was good-looking—quite worth changing her dress for. She hoped he would think her pretty. Most men admired her—she was really beautiful in her dark, Southern way—and some of them had given her presents—a cheap ring, a handkerchief from Old Mexico, a pink and, to her, wonderful brush and comb. Boca Dulzura—or "pretty mouth" of the Flores rancho—cared for no man, but she liked men, especially when they gave her presents.

When she came from her room, Malvey laughingly accused her of "fixing up" because of Pete,

as he teased her about her gay rebosa and her crimson sash. She affected scorn for his talk—but was naturally pleased. And the young stranger was staring at her, which pleased her still more.

"This here hombre is Pete," said Malvey. "He left his other name to home." And he laughed raucously.

Pete bowed, taking the introduction quite seriously.

Boca was piqued. This young caballero did not seem anxious to know her—like the other men. He did not smile.

"Pete," she lisped, with a tinge of mockery in her voice. "Pete has not learned to talk yet—he is so young?"

Malvey slapped his thigh and guffawed. Pete stood solemnly eying him for a moment. Then he turned to the girl. "I ain't used to talkin' to women—'specially pretty ones—like you."

Boca clapped her hands. "There! 'Bool' Malvey has never said anything so clever as that."

"Bool" Malvey frowned. But he was hungry, and Flores's wife was preparing supper. Despite Boca's pretty mouth and fine dark eyes, which invited to conversation, Pete felt very much alone—very much of a stranger in this out-of-the-way household. He thought of his chum Andy White, and of Ma Bailey and Jim, and the boys of the Concho. He wondered what they were doing—if they were talking about him—and Gary. It seemed a long time since he had thrown his hat in the corner and pulled up his chair to the Concho table. He wished that he might talk with some one—he was thinking of Jim Bailey—and tell him just what there had been to the shooting. But with these folks...

The shadows were lengthening. Already the lamp on Flores's table was lighted, there in the kitchen where Malvey was drinking wine with the old Mexican. Pete had forgotten Boca—almost forgotten where he was for the moment, when something touched his arm. He turned a startled face to the girl. She smiled and then whispered quickly, "It is that I hate that 'Bool' Malvey. He is bad. Of what are you thinking, señor?"

Pete blinked and hesitated. "Of my folks—back there," he said.

Boca darted from him as her mother called her to help set the table. Pete's lips were drawn in a queer line. He had no folks "back there"—or anywhere. "It was her eyes made me feel that way," he thought. And, "Doggone it—I'm livin'—anyhow."

From the general conversation at the table that evening Pete gathered that queer visitors came to this place frequently. It was a kind of isolated, halfway house between the border and Showdown. He heard the name of "Scar-Face," "White-Eye," "Sonora Jim," "Tio Verdugo," a rare assortment of border vagabonds known by name to the cowboys of the high country. The Spider was frequently mentioned. It was evident that he had some peculiar influence over the Flores household, from the respectful manner in which his name was received by the whole family. And Pete, unfamiliar with the goings and comings of those men, their quarrels, friendships, and sinister escapades, ate and listened in silence, realizing that he too had earned a tentative place among them. He found himself listening with keen interest to Malvey's account of a machine-gun duel between two white men,—renegades and leaders in opposing factions below the border,—and how one of them, shot through and through, stuck to his gun until he had swept the plaza of enemy sharpshooters and had then crawled on hands and knees to the other machine gun, killed its wounded operator with a six-shooter, and turned the machine gun on his fleeing foes, shooting until the Mexicans of his own company had taken courage enough to return and rescue him. "And he's in El Paso now," concluded Malvey, "at the hospital. He writ to The Spider for money—and The Spider sure sent it to him."

"Who was he fightin' for?" queried Pete, interested in spite of himself.

"Fightin' for? For hisself! Because he likes the game. You don't want to git the idea that any white man is down there fightin' just to help a lot of dirty Greasers—on either side of the scrap."

A quick and significant glance shot from Boca's eyes to her mother's. Old Flores ate stolidly. If he had heard he showed no evidence of it.

"'Bull' Malvey! A darn good name for him," thought Pete. And he felt a strange sense of shame at being in his company. He wondered if Flores were afraid of Malvey or simply indifferent to his raw talk. And Pete—who had never gone out of his way to make a friend—decided to be as careful of what he said as Malvey was careless. Pete had never lacked nerve, but he was endowed with considerable caution—a fact that The Spider had realized and so had considered him worth the trouble of hiding—as an experiment.

After supper the men sat out beneath the vine-covered portal—Malvey and Flores with a wicker-covered demijohn of wine between them—and Pete lounging on the doorstep, smoking and gazing across the cañon at the faint stars of an early evening. With the wine, old Flores's manner changed from surly indifference to a superficial politeness which in no way deceived Pete. And Malvey, whose intent was plainly to get drunk, boasted of his doings on either side of

the line. He hinted that he had put more than one Mexican out of the way—and he slapped Flores on the back—and Flores laughed. He spoke of raids on the horse-herds of white men, and through some queer perversity inspired in his drink, openly asserted that he was the "slickest hoss-thief in Arizona," turning to Pete as he spoke.

"I'll take your word for it," said Pete.

"But what's the use of settin' out here like a couple of dam' buzzards when the ladies are waitin' for us in there?" queried Malvey, and he leered at Flores.

The old Mexican grunted and rose stiffly. They entered the 'dobe, Malvey insisting that Pete come in and hear Boca sing.

"I can listen out here." Pete was beginning to hate Malvey, with the cold, deliberate hatred born of instinct. As for old Flores, Pete despised him heartily. A man that could hear his countrymen called "a dirty bunch of Greasers," and have nothing to say, was a pretty poor sort of a man.

Disgusted with Malvey's loud talk and his raw attitude toward Boca, Pete sat in the moon-flung shadows of the portal and smoked and gazed at the stars. He was half-asleep when he heard Boca tell Malvey that he was a pig and the son of a pig. Malvey laughed. There came the sound of a scuffle. Pete glanced over his shoulder. Malvey had his arm around the girl and was trying to kiss her. Flores was watching them, grinning in a kind of drunken indifference.

Pete hesitated. He was there on sufferance—a stranger. After all, this was none of his business. Boca's father and mother were also there...

Boca screamed. Malvey let go of her and swung round as Pete stepped up. "What's the idee, Malvey?"

"You don't draw no cards in this deal," snarled Malvey.

"Then we shuffle and cut for a new deal," said Pete.

Malvey's loose mouth hardened as he backed toward the corner of the room, where Boca cringed, her hands covering her face. Suddenly the girl sprang up and caught Malvey's arm, "No! No!" she cried.

He flung her aside and reached for his gun—but Pete was too quick for him. They crashed down and rolled across the room. Pete wriggled free and rose. In a flash he realized that he was no match for Malvey's brute strength. He had no desire to kill Malvey—but he did not intend that Malvey should kill him. Pete jerked his gun loose as Malvey staggered to his feet, but Pete dared not shoot on account of Boca. He saw Malvey's hand touch the butt of his gun—when something crashed down from behind. Pete dimly remembered Boca's white face—and the room went black.

Malvey strode forward.

Old Flores dropped the neck of the shattered bottle and stood gazing down at Pete. "The good wine is gone. I break the bottle," said Flores, grinning.

"To hell with the wine! Let's pack this young tin-horn out where he won't be in the way."

But as Malvey stooped, Boca flung herself in front of him. "Pig!" she flamed. She turned furiously on her father, whose vacuous grin faded as she cursed him shrilly for a coward.

Listless and heavy-eyed came Boca's mother. Without the slightest trace of emotion she examined Pete's wound, fetched water and washed it, binding it up with a handkerchief. Quite as listlessly she spoke to her husband, telling him to leave the wine and go to bed.

Flores mumbled a protest. Malvey asked him if he let the women run the place. Boca's mother turned to Malvey. "You will go," she said quietly. Malvey cursed as he stepped from the room. He could face Boca's fury, or face any man in a quarrel, but there was something in the deathlike quietness of the sad-eyed Mexican woman that chilled his blood. He did not know what would happen if he refused to go—yet he knew that something would happen. It was not the first time that Flores's wife had interfered in quarrels of the border outlaws sojourning at the ranch. In Showdown men said that she would as soon knife a man as not. Malvey, who had lived much in Old Mexico, had seen women use the knife.

He went without a word. Boca heard him speak sharply to his horse, as she and her mother lifted Pete and carried him to the bedroom.

CHAPTER XXI

BOCA DULZURA

Just before dawn Pete became conscious that some one was sitting near him and occasionally bathing his head with cool water. He tried to sit up. A slender hand pushed him gently back. "It is good that you rest," said a voice. The room was dark—he could not see—but he knew that Boca was there and he felt uncomfortable. He was not accustomed to being waited upon, especially by a woman.

"Where's Malvey?" he asked.

"I do not know. He is gone."

Again Pete tried to sit up, but sank back as a shower of fiery dots whirled before his eyes. He realized that he had been hit pretty hard—that he could do nothing but keep still just then. The hot pain subsided as the wet cloth again touched his forehead and he drifted to sleep. When he awakened at midday he was alone.

He rose, and steadying himself along the wall, finally reached the doorway. Old Flores was working in the distant garden-patch. Beyond him, Boca and her mother were pulling beans. Pete stepped out dizzily and glanced toward the corral. His horse was not there.

Pete was a bit hasty in concluding that the squalid drama of the previous evening (the cringing girl, the drunkenly indifferent father, and the malevolent Malvey) had been staged entirely for his benefit. The fact was that Malvey had been only too sincere in his boorishness toward Boca; Flores equally sincere in his indifference, and Boca herself actually frightened by the turn Malvey's drink had taken. That old Flores had knocked Pete out with a bottle was the one and extravagant act that even Malvey himself could hardly have anticipated had the whole miserable affair been prearranged. In his drunken stupidity Flores blindly imagined that the young stranger was the cause of the quarrel.

Pete, however, saw in it a frame-up to knock him out and make away with his horse. And back of it all he saw The Spider's craftily flung web that held him prisoner, afoot and among strangers. "They worked it slick," he muttered.

Boca happened to glance up. Pete was standing bareheaded in the noon sunlight. With an exclamation Boca rose and hastened to him. Young Pete's eyes were sullen as she begged him to seek the shade of the portal.

"Where's my horse?" he challenged, ignoring her solicitude.

She shook her head. "I do not know. Malvey is gone."

"That's a cinch! You sure worked it slick."

"I do not understand."

"Well, I do."

Pete studied her face. Despite his natural distrust, he realized that the girl was innocent of plotting against him. He decided to confide in her—even play the lover if necessary—and he hated pretense—to win her sympathy and help; for he knew that if he ever needed a friend it was now.

Boca steadied him to the bench just outside the doorway, and fetched water. He drank and felt better. Then she carefully unrolled the bandage, washed the clotted blood from the wound and bound it up again.

"It is bad that you come here," she told him.

"Well, I got one friend, anyhow," said Pete.

"Si, I am your friend," she murmured.

"I ain't what you'd call hungry—but I reckon some coffee would kind of stop my head from swimmin' round," suggested Pete.

"Si, I will get it."

Pete wondered how far he could trust the girl—whether she would really help him or whether her kindness were such as any human being would extend to one injured or in distress—"same as a dog with his leg broke," thought Pete. But after he drank the coffee he ceased worrying about the future and decided to take things as they came and make the best of them.

"Perhaps it is that you have killed a man?" ventured Boca, curious to know why he was there.

Pete hesitated, as he eyed her sharply. There seemed to be no motive behind her question other than simple curiosity. "I've put better men than Malvey out of business," he asserted.

Boca eyed him with a new interest. She had thought that perhaps this young señor had but stolen a horse or two—a most natural inference in view of his recent associate. So this young vaquero was a boy in years only?—and outlawed! No doubt there was a reward for his capture. Boca had lightly fancied Young Pete the evening before; but now she felt a much deeper interest. She quickly cautioned him to say nothing to her father about the real reason for his being there. Rather Pete was to say, if questioned, that he had stolen a horse about which Malvey and he had quarreled.

Pete scowled. "I'm no low-down hoss-thief!" he flared.

Boca smiled. "Now it is that I know you have killed a man!"

Pete was surprised that the idea seemed to please her.

"But my father"—she continued—"he would sell you—for money. So it is that you will say that you have stolen a horse."

"I reckon he would,"—and Pete gently felt the back of his head. "So I'll tell him like you say. I'm dependin' a whole lot on you—to git me out of this," he added.

"You will rest," she told him, and turned to go back to her work. "I am your friend," she whispered, pausing with her finger to her lips.

Pete understood and nodded.

So far he had done pretty well, he argued. Later, when he felt able to ride, he would ask Boca to find a horse for him. He knew that there must be saddle-stock somewhere in the cañon. Men like Flores always kept several good horses handy for an emergency. Meanwhile Pete determined to rest and gain strength, even while he pretended that he was unfit to ride. When he *did* leave, he would leave in a hurry and before old Flores could play him another trick.

For a while Pete watched the three figures pattering about the bean-patch. Presently he got up and stepped into the house, drank some coffee, and came out again. He sat down on the bench and took mental stock of his own belongings. He had a few dollars in silver, his erratic watch, and his gun. Suddenly he bethought him of his saddle. The sun made his head swim as he stepped out toward the corral. Yes, his saddle and bridle hung on the corral bars, just where he had left them. He was about to return to the shade of the portal when he noticed the tracks of unshod horses in the dust. So old Flores had other horses in the cañon? Well, in a day or so Pete would show the Mexican a trick with a large round hole in it—the hole representing the space recently occupied by one of his ponies. Incidentally Pete realized that he was getting deeper and deeper into the meshes of The Spider's web—and the thought spurred him to a keener vigilance. So far he had killed three men actually in self-defense. But when he met up with Malvey—and Pete promised himself that pleasure—he would not wait for Malvey to open the argument. "Got to kill to live," he told himself. "Well, I got the name—and I might as well have the game. It's nobody's funeral but mine, anyhow." He felt, mistakenly, that his friends had all gone back on him—a condition of mind occasioned by his misfortunes rather than by any logical thought, for at that very moment Jim Bailey was searching high and low for Pete in order to tell him that Gary was not dead—but had been taken to the railroad hospital at Enright, operated on, and now lay, minus the fragments of three or four ribs, as malevolent as ever, and slowly recovering from a wound that had at first been considered fatal.

Young Pete was not to know of this until long after the knowledge could have had any value in shaping his career. Bailey, with two of his men, traced Pete as far as Showdown, where the trail went blind, ending with The Spider's apparently sincere assertion that he knew nothing whatever of Peters whereabouts.

Paradoxically, those very qualities which won him friends now kept Pete from those friends. The last place toward which he would have chosen to ride would have been the Concho—and the last man he would have asked for help would have been Jim Bailey. Pete felt that he was doing pretty well at creating trouble for himself without entangling his best friends.

"Got to kill to live," he reiterated.

"Como 'sta, señor?" Old Flores had just stepped from behind the crumbling 'dobe wall of the stable.

"Well, it ain't your fault I ain't a-furnishin' a argument for the coyotes."

"The señor would insult Boca. He was drunk," said Flores.

"Hold on there! Don't you go cantelopin' off with any little ole idea like that sewed up in your hat. *Which* señor was drunk?"

Flores shrugged his shoulders. "Who may say?" he half-whined.

"Well, I can, for one," asserted Pete. "*You* was drunk and *Malvey* was drunk, and the two of you dam' near fixed me. But that don't count—now. Where's my hoss?"

"Quien sabe?"

"You make me sick," said Pete in English. Flores caught the word "sick" and thought Pete was complaining of his physical condition.

"The señor is welcome to rest and get well. What is done is done, and cannot be mended. But when the señor would ride, I can find a horse—a good horse and not a very great price."

"I'm willin' to pay," said Pete, who thought that he had already pretty well paid for anything he might need.

"And a good saddle," continued Flores.

"I'm usin' my own rig," stated Pete.

"It is the saddle, there, that I would sell to the señor." The old Mexican gestured toward Pete's own saddle.

Pete was about to retort hastily when he reconsidered. The only way to meet trickery was with trickery. "All right," he said indifferently. "You'll sure get all that is comin' to you."

CHAPTER XXII

"A DRESS—OR A RING, PERHAPS"

All that day Pete lay in the shade of the 'dobe feigning indifference to Boca as she brought him water and food, until even she was deceived by his listlessness, fearing that he had been seriously injured. Not until evening did he show any sign of interest in her presence. With the shadows it grew cooler. Old Flores sat in the doorway smoking. His wife sat beside him, gazing at the far rim of the evening cañon. Presently she rose and stepped round to where Pete and Boca were talking. "You will go," said Boca's mother abruptly. "Boca shall find a horse for you."

Pete, taken by surprise,—Boca's mother had spoken just when Pete had asked Boca where her father kept the horses,—stammered an acknowledgment of her presence; but the Mexican woman did not seem to hear him. "To-night," she continued, "Boca will find a horse. It is good that you go—but not that you go to Showdown."

"I sure want to thank you both. But, honest, I wouldn't know where else to go but to Showdown. Besides, I got a hunch Malvey was headed that way."

"That is as a man speaks," said the señora. "My man was like that once—but now—"

"I'm broke—no dineros," said Pete.

"It is my horse that he shall have—" Boca began.

But her mother interrupted quietly. "The young señor will return—and there are many ways to pay. We are poor. You will not forget us. You will come again, alone in the night. And it is not Malvey that will show you the way."

"Not if I see him first, señora."

"You jest—but even now you would kill Malvey if he were here."

"You sure are tellin' Malvey's fortune," laughed Pete. "Kin you tell mine?"

"Again you jest—but I will speak. You will not kill Malvey, yet you shall find your own horse. You will be hunted by men, but you will not always be as you are now. Some day you will have wealth, and then it is that you will remember this night. You will come again at night, and alone—but Boca will not be here. You will grow weary of life from much suffering, even as I. Then it is that you will think of these days and many days to come—and these days shall be as wine in your old age—" Boca's mother paused as though listening. "But like wine—" and again she paused.

"Headache?" queried Pete. "Well, I know how that feels, without the wine. That fortune sounds good to me—all except that about Boca. Now, mebbly you could tell me which way Malvey was headed?"

"He has ridden to Showdown."

"So that red-headed hoss-thief fanned it right back to his boss, eh? He must 'a' thought I was fixed for good."

"It is his way. Men spake truly when they called him the bull. He is big—but he is as a child."

"Well, there's goin' to be one mighty sick child for somebody to nurse, right soon," stated Pete.

"I have said that it is bad that you ride to Showdown. But you will go there—and he whom men call The Spider—he shall be your friend—even with his life."

As quietly as she came the Mexican woman departed, leaving Boca and Pete gazing at each other in the dusk. "She makes me afraid sometimes," whispered Boca.

"Sounds like she could jest plumb see what she was talkin' about. Kind of second-sight, I reckon. Wonder why she didn't put me wise to Malvey when I lit in here with him? It would 'a' saved a heap of trouble."

"It is the dream," said Boca. "These things she has seen in a dream."

"I ain't got nothin' against your ole—your mother, Boca, but by the way I'm feelin', she's sure due to have a bad one, right soon."

"You do not believe?" queried Boca quite seriously.

"Kind of—half. I don't aim to know everything."

"She said you would come back," and Boca smiled.

"*That* dream'll sure come true. I ain't forgettin'. But I ain't goin' to wait till you're gone."

Boca touched Pete's hand. "And you will bring me a present. A dress—or a ring, perhaps?"

"You kin jest bank on that! I don't aim to travel where they make 'em reg'lar, but you sure get that present—after I settle with Malvey."

"That is the way with men," pouted Boca. "They think only of the quarrel."

"You got me wrong, señorita. I don't want to kill nobody. The big idee is to keep from gittin' bumped off myself. Now you'd think a whole lot of me if I was to ride off and forgit all about what Malvey done?"

"I would go with you," said Boca softly.

"Honest? Well, you'd sure make a good pardner." Pete eyed the girl with a new interest. Then he shook his head. "I—you'd sure make a good pardner—but it would be mighty tough for you. I'd do most anything—but that. You see, Chicita, I'm in bad. I'm like to get mine most any time. And I ain't no ladies' man—nohow."

"But you will come back?" queried Boca anxiously.

"As sure as you're livin'! Only you want to kind o' eddicate your ole man to handle bottles more easy-like. He ought to know what they're made for."

"Your head—it is cool," said Boca, reaching up and touching Pete's forehead.

"Oh, I'm feelin' fine, considerin'."

"Then I am happy," said Boca.

Pete never knew just how he happened to find Boca's hand in his own. But he knew that she had a very pretty mouth, and fine eyes; eyes that glowed softly in the dusk. Before he realized what had happened, Boca was in his arms, and he was telling her again and again that "he sure would come back."

She murmured her happiness as he kissed her awkwardly, and quickly, as though bidding her a hasty farewell. But she would not let him go with that. "Mi amor! Mi corazone!" she whispered, as she clasped her hands behind his head and gently drew his mouth to hers.

Pete felt embarrassed, but his embarrassment melted in the soft warmth of her affection and he returned her kisses with all the ardor of youth. Suddenly she pushed him away and rose. Her mother had called her.

"About twelve," whispered Pete. "Tell your ole man I'll bush out here. It's a heap cooler."

She nodded and left him. Pete heard Flores speak to her gruffly.

"Somebody ought to put that ole side-of bacon in the well," soliloquized Pete. "I could stand for the ole lady, all right, and Boca sure is a lily ... but I was forgettin' I got to ride to Showdown

to-night."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DEVIL-WIND

As Pete lay planning his departure—he wondered if Boca would think to find him a canteen and food for his long ride—the stars, hitherto clear-edged and brilliant, became blurred as though an almost invisible mist had drifted between them and the earth. He rubbed his eyes. Yes, there was no mistake about it. He was wide awake, and the sky was changing. That which had seemed a mist now appeared more like a fine dust, that swept across the heavens and dimmed the desert sky. It occurred to him that he was at the bottom of a fairly deep cañon and that that impalpable dust meant wind. A little later he heard it,—at first a faint, far-away sound like the whisper of many voices; then a soft, steady hiss as when wind-driven sand runs over sand. A hot wind sprang up suddenly and swept with a rush down the night-walled cañon. It was the devil-wind of the desert, the wind that curls the leaf and shrivels the vine, even in the hours when there is no sun. When the devil-wind drives, men lie naked beneath the sky in sleepless misery. Horses and cattle stand with heads lowered and flanks drawn in, suffering an invisible torture from which there is no escape. The dawn brings no relief—no freshening of the air. The heat drives on—three days—say those who know the southern desert—and no man rides the trails, but seeks what shade may be, and lies torpid and silent—or if he speaks, it is to curse the land.

Pete knew that this devil-wind would make old Flores restless. He stepped round to the doorway and asked for water. From the darkness within the adobe came Flores's voice and the sound of a match against wood. The Mexican appeared with a candle.

"My head feels queer," stated Pete, as an excuse for disturbing Flores. "I can't find the olla—and I'm dead for a drink."

"Then we shall drink this," said Flores, fetching a jug of wine from beneath the bench.

"Not for mine! I'm dizzy enough, without that."

"It is the devil-wind. One may get drunk and forget. One may then sleep. And if one sleeps, it is not so bad."

Pete shook his head, but tasted the wine that Flores poured for him. If the old man would only get drunk enough to go to sleep... The Mexican's oily, pock-marked face glistened in the flickering candle-light. He drank and smacked his lips. "If one is to die of the heat—one might as well die drunk," he laughed. "Drink, señor!"

Pete sipped the wine and watched the other as he filled and emptied his glass again. "It is the good wine," said Flores. The candle-light cast a huge, distorted shadow of the Mexican's head and shoulders on the farther wall. The faint drone of the hot wind came to them from the plains above. The candle-flame fluttered. Flores reached down for the jug and set it on the table. "All night we shall drink of the good wine, for no man may sleep.",

"I'm with you," said Pete. "Only I ain't so swift."

"No man may sleep," reiterated Flores, again emptying his tumbler.

"How about the women-folks?" queried Pete.

Flores waved his hand in a gesture indicative of supreme indifference to what the "women-folks" did. He noticed that Pete was not drinking and insisted that he drink and refill his glass. Pete downed the raw red wine and presently complained of feeling sleepy. Flores grinned. "I do not sleep," he asserted—"not until this is gone"—and he struck the jug with his knuckles. Pete felt that he was in for a long session, and inwardly cursed his luck. Flores's eyes brightened and he grew talkative. He spoke of his youth in Old Mexico; of the cattle and the women of that land. Pete feigned a heaviness that he did not feel. Presently Flores's talk grew disconnected; his eye became dull and his swarthy face was mottled with yellow. The sweat, which had rolled down his cheeks and dripped from his nose, now seemed to coagulate in tiny, oily globules. He put down a half-empty tumbler and stared at Pete. "No man sleeps," he mumbled, as his lids drooped. Slowly his chin sank to his chest and he slumped forward against the table. Pete started to get up. Flores raised his head. "Drink—señor!" he murmured, and slumped forward, knocking the tumbler over. A dark red line streaked the table and dripped to the floor.

Something moved in the kitchen doorway. Pete glanced up to see Boca staring at him. He gestured toward her father. She nodded indifferently and beckoned Pete to follow her.

"I knew that you would think me a lie if I did not come," she told him, as they stood near the old corral—Pete's impatience to be gone evident, as he shouldered his saddle. "But you will not ride tonight. You would die."

"It's some hot—but I aim to go through."

"But no—not to-night! For three days will it be like this! It is terrible! And you have been ill."

She pressed close to him and touched his arm. "Have I not been your friend?"

"You sure have! But honest, Boca, I got a hunch that it's time to fan it. 'T ain't that I'm sore at your old man now—or want to leave you—but I got a hunch somethin' is goin' to happen."

"You think only of that Malvey. You do not think of me," complained Boca.

"I'm sure thinkin' of you every minute. It ain't Malvey that's botherin' me now."

"Then why do you not rest—and wait?"

"Because restin' and waitin' is worse than takin' a chanct. I got to go."

"You must go?"

Pete nodded.

"But what if I will not find a horse for you?"

"Then I reckon you been foolin' me right along."

"That is not so!" Boca's hand dropped to her side and she turned from him.

"Course it ain't! And say, Boca, I'll make it through all right. All I want is a good hoss—and a canteen and some grub."

"I have made ready the food and have a canteen for you—in my room."

"Then let's go hunt up that cayuse."

"It is that you will die—" she began; but Pete, irritated by argument and the burning wind that droned through the cañon, put an end to it all by dropping the saddle and taking her swiftly in his arms. He kissed her—rather perfunctorily. "My little pardner!" he whispered.

Boca, although sixteen and mature in a sense, was in reality little more than a child. When Pete chose to assert himself, he had much the stronger will. She felt that all pleading would be useless. "You have the reata?" she queried, and turning led him past the corral and along the fence until they came to the stream. A few hundred yards down the stream she turned, and cautioning him to follow closely, entered a sort of lateral cañon—a veritable box at whose farther end was Flores's cache of horses, kept in this hidden pasture for any immediate need. Pete heard the quick trampling of hoofs and the snort of startled horses.

"We will drive them on into the corral," said Boca.

Pete could see but dimly, but he sensed the situation at once. The cañon was a box, narrowing to a natural enclosure with the open end fenced. He had seen such places—called "traps" by men who made a business of catching wild horses.

Several dim shapes bunched in the small enclosure, plunging and circling as Pete found and closed the bars.

"The yellow horse is of the desert—and very strong," said Boca.

"They all look alike to me," laughed Pete. "It's mighty dark, right now." He slipped through the bars and shook out his rope. The horses crowded away from him as he followed. A shape reared and backed. Pete flipped the noose and set his heels as the rope snapped taut. He held barely enough slack to make the snubbing-post, but finally took a turn round it and fought the horse up. "Blamed if he ain't the buckskin," panted Pete.

The sweat dripped from his face as he bridled and saddled the half-wild animal. It was doubly hard work in the dark. Then he came to the corral bars where Boca stood. "I'm all hooked up, Boca."

"Then I shall go back for the cantina and the food."

"I'll go right along with you. I'll wait at the other corral."

Pete followed her and sat a nervous horse until she reappeared, with the canteen and package of food. The hot wind purred and whispered round them. Above, the stars struggled dimly through the haze. Pete reached down and took her hand. She had barely touched his fingers when the horse shied and reared.

"If Malvey he kill you—I shall kill him!" she whispered fiercely.

"I'm comin' back," said Pete.

A shadow flung across the night; and Boca. was standing gazing into the black wall through which the shadow had plunged. Far up the trail she could hear quick hoofbeats, and presently above the drone of the wind came a faint musical "Adios! Adios!"

She dared not call back to him for fear of waking her father, in spite of the fact that she knew he was drugged beyond all feeling and sound. And she had her own good reason for caution. When Flores discovered his best horse gone, there would be no evidence that would entangle her or her mother in wordy argument with him for having helped the young vaquero to leave—and against the direct commands of The Spider, who had sent word to Flores through Malvey that Pete was to remain at the rancho till sent for.

At the top of the cañon trail Pete reined in and tried to get his bearings. But the horse, fighting the bit, seemed to have a clear idea of going somewhere and in the general direction of Showdown. "You ought to know the trail to Showdown," said Pete. "And you ain't tryin' to git back home, so go to it! I'll be right with you."

The heavy, hot wind seethed round him and he bent his head, tying his bandanna across his nose and mouth. The buckskin bored into the night, his unshod hoofs pattering softly on the desert trail. His first "fine frenzy" done, he settled to a swinging trot that ate into the miles ceaselessly. Twice during the ride Pete raised the canteen and moistened his burning throat. Slowly he grew numb to the heat and the bite of the whipping sand, and rode as one in a horrible dream. He had been a fool to ride from comparative safety into this blind furnace of burning wind. Why had he done so? And again and again he asked himself this question, wondering if he were going mad. It had been years and years since he had left the Flores rancho. There was a girl there—Boca Dulzura—or had he dreamed of such a girl? Pete felt the back of his head. "No, it wa'n't a dream," he told himself.

A ghastly dawn burned into Showdown, baring the town's ugliness as it crept from 'dobe to 'dobe as though in search of some living thing to torture with slow fire. The street was a wind-swept emptiness, smooth with fine sand. Pete rode to the hitching-rail. The Spider's place was dumb to his knocking. He staggered round to the western side of the saloon and squatted on his heels. "Water that pony after a while," he muttered. Strange flashes of light danced before his eyes. His head pained dully and he ached all over for lack of sleep. A sudden trampling brought him to his feet. He turned the corner of the saloon just in time to see the buckskin lunge back. The reins snapped like a thread. The pony shook its head and trotted away, circling. Pete followed, hoping that the tangle of dragging rein might stop him.

Half-dazed, Pete followed doggedly, but the horse started to run. Pete staggered back to the hitching-rail, untied the end of the broken rein and tossed it across the street. He did not know why he did this; he simply did it mechanically.

He was again afoot, weak and exhausted from his night's ride. "I reckon that ole Mexican woman—was right," he muttered. "But I got one pardner yet, anyhow," and his hand slid to his holster. "You and me ag'in' the whole dam' town! God, it's hot."

He slumped to the corner of the saloon and squatted, leaning against the wall. He thought of Boca. He could hear her speak his name distinctly. A shadow drifted across his blurred vision. He glanced up. The Spider, naked to the waist, stood looking down at him, leanly grotesque in the dawn light.

"You 're going strong!" said The Spider.

"I want Malvey," whispered Pete.

The Spider's lips twitched. "You'll get some coffee and beans first. Any man that's got enough sand to foot it from Flores here—can camp on me *any* time—coming or going."

"I'm workin' this case myself," stated Pete sullenly.

"You play your own hand," said The Spider. And for once he meant it. He could scarcely believe that Young Pete had made it across the desert on foot—yet there was no horse in sight. If Young Pete could force himself to such a pace and survive he would become a mighty useful tool.

"Did Malvey play you?" queried The Spider.

"You ought to know."

"He said you were sick—down at Flores's rancho."

"Then he's here!" And Pete's dulling eyes brightened. "Well, I ain't as sick as he's goin' to be,

Spider."

CHAPTER XXIV

"A RIDER STOOD AT THE LAMPLIT BAR"

Pete was surprised to find the darkened saloon cooler than the open desert, even at dawn; and he realized, after glancing about, that The Spider had closed the doors and windows during the night to shut out the heat.

"In here," said The Spider, opening the door back of the bar.

Pete followed, groping his way into The Spider's room. He started back as a match flared. The Spider lighted a lamp. In the sudden soft glow Pete beheld a veritable storehouse of plunder: gorgeous serapes from Old Mexico—blankets from Tehuantepec and Oaxaca, rebosas of woven silk and linen and wool, the cruder colorings of the Navajo and Hopi saddle-blankets, war-bags and buckskin garments heavy with the beadwork of the Utes and Blackfeet, a buffalo-hide shield, an Apache bow and quiver of arrows, skins of the mountain lion and lynx, and hanging from the beam-end a silver-mounted saddle and bridle and above it a Mexican sombrero heavy with golden filigree.

"You've rambled some," commented Pete.

"Some. What's the matter with your head?"

"Your friend Flores handed me one—from behind," said Pete.

The Spider gestured toward a blanket-covered couch against the wall. "Lay down there. No, on your face. Huh! Wait till I get some water."

Pete closed his eyes. Presently he felt the light touch of fingers and then a soothing coolness. He heard The Spider moving about the room. The door closed softly. Pete raised his head. The room was dark. He thought of Malvey and he wondered at The Spider's apparent solicitude. He was in The Spider's hands—for good or ill... Sleep blotted out all sense of being.

Late that afternoon he awoke to realize that there was some one in the room. He raised on his elbow and turned to see The Spider gazing down at him with a peculiar expression—as though he were questioning himself and awaiting an answer from some outside source.

Pete stretched and yawned and grinned lazily. "Hello, pardner! I was dreamin' of a friend of mine when I come to and saw"—Pete hesitated, sat up and yawned again—"another friend that I wa'n't dreamin' about," he concluded.

"What makes you think I'm your friend?" queried The Spider.

"Oh, hell, I dunno," said Pete, rubbing the back of his head and grinning boyishly. "But there's no law ag'in' my feelin' that way, is there? Doggone it, I'm plumb empty! Feel like my insides had been takin' a day off and had come back just pawin' the air to git to work."

"Malvey's in town."

Pete's mouth hardened, then relaxed to a grin.

"Well, if he's as hungry as I am he ain't worryin' about me."

"He's got your horse."

"That don't worry me none."

"I told Malvey to get your horse from you and set you afoot at Flores'."

"And he sure made a good job of it, didn't he? But I don't sabe your game in hog-tyin' me down to Flores's place."

"I figured you'd be safer afoot till you kind of cooled down."

Pete tried to read The Spider's face, but it was as impersonal as the desert itself. "Mebby you figured to hold me there till you was good and ready to use me," said Pete.

The Spider nodded.

"Well, there's nothin' doin'. I ain't no killer or no hoss-thief lookin' for a job. I got in bad up

north—but I ain't lookin' for no more trouble. If Malvey and me lock horns—that's my business. But you got me wrong if you reckon I'm goin' to throw in with your outfit. I kin pay for what I eat a couple of times, anyhow. But I ain't hirin' out to no man."

"Go back in the patio and Juan will get you some chuck," said The Spider abruptly.

"Which I'm payin' for," said Pete.

"Which you're paying for," said The Spider.

Following its usual course, the devil-wind died down suddenly at dusk of the third day. A few Mexicans drifted into the saloon that evening and following them several white men up from the border. Pete, who sat in the patio where he could watch the outer doorway of the saloon, smoked and endeavored to shape a plan for his future. He was vaguely surprised that a posse had not yet ridden into Showdown; for The Spider had said nothing of Houck and his men, and Pete was alert to that contingency, in that he had planned to slip quietly from the patio to the corral at the back, in case they did ride in, estimating that he would have time to saddle a horse and get away before they could search the premises, even if they went that far; and he doubted that they would risk that much without The Spider's consent. Would The Spider give such consent? Pete doubted it, not because he trusted The Spider so much, but rather because the deliberate searching of premises by a posse would break an established precedent, observed in more than one desert rendezvous. That simple and eloquent statement, "Go right ahead and search—but you'll search her in smoke," had backed down more than one posse, as Pete knew.

Already the monotony of loafing at The Spider's place had begun to wear on Pete, who had slept much for two days and nights, and he was itching to do something. He had thought of riding down and across the border and had said so to The Spider, who had advised him against it. During their talk Malvey's name was mentioned. Pete wondered why that individual had chosen to keep from sight so long, not aware that The Spider had sent word to Malvey, who was at Mescalero's ranch, a few miles east of Showdown, that a posse from the Blue had ridden in and might be somewhere in the vicinity.

Little by little Pete began to realize that his present as well as his future welfare depended on caution quite as much as upon sheer courage. Insidiously The Spider's influence was working upon Pete, who saw in him a gambler who played for big stakes with a coldness and soullessness that was amazing—and yet Pete realized that there was something hidden deep in The Spider's cosmos that was intensely human. For instance, when Pete had given up the idea of crossing the border and had expressed, as much by his countenance as his speech, his imperative need to be out and earning a living, The Spider had offered to put him to work on his ranch, which he told Pete was of considerable extent, and lay just north of the national boundary and well out of the way of chance visitors. "Cattle"—The Spider had said—"and some horses."

Pete thought he knew about how that ranch had been stocked, and why it was located where it was. But then, cattle-stealing was not confined to any one locality. Any of the boys riding for the Blue or the Concho or the T-Bar-T were only too eager to brand a stray calf and consider that they were but serving their employer's interests, knowing that their strays were quite as apt to be branded by a rival outfit. So it went among men supposed to be living under the law.

The Spider's proffer of work was accepted, but Pete asserted that he would not leave Showdown until he had got his horse.

"I'll see that you get him," said The Spider.

"Thanks. But I aim to git him myself."

And it was shortly after this understanding that Pete sat in the patio back of the saloon—waiting impatiently for Malvey to show up, and half-inclined to go out and look for him. But experience had taught Pete the folly of hot-headed haste, so, like The Spider, he withdrew into himself, apparently indifferent to the loud talk of the men in the saloon, the raw jokes and the truculent swaggering, with the implication, voiced loudly by one half-drunken renegade, that the stranger was a short-horn and naturally afraid to herd in with "the bunch."

"He's got business of his own," said The Spider.

"That's different. I 'poligish."

The men laughed, and the bibulous outlaw straightway considered himself a wit. But those who carried their liquor better knew that The Spider's interruption was significant. The young stranger was playing a lone hand, and the rules of the game called for strict attention to their own business.

Presently a Mexican strode in and spoke to The Spider. The Spider called to a man at one of the tables. The noisy talk ceased suddenly. "One," said The Spider. "From the south."

Pete heard and he shifted his position a little, approximating the distance between himself and the outer doorway. Card-games were resumed as before when a figure filled the doorway. Pete's hand slid slowly to his hip. His fingers stiffened, then relaxed, as he got to his feet.

It was Boca—alone, and smiling in the soft glow of lamplight. The Spider hobbled from behind the bar. Some one called a laughing greeting. "It's Boca, boys! We'll sure cut loose to-night! When Boca comes to town the bars is down!"

Pete heard—and anger and surprise darkened his face. These men seemed to know Boca too well. One of them had risen, leaving his card-game, and was shaking hands with her. Another asked her to sing "La Paloma." Even The Spider seemed gracious to her. Pete, leaning against the doorway of the patio, stared at her as though offended by her presence. She nodded to him and smiled. He raised his hat awkwardly. Boca read jealousy in his eye. She was happy. She wanted him to care. "I brought your saddle, señor," she said, nodding again. The men laughed, turning to glance at Pete. Still Pete did not quite realize the significance of her coming. "Thanks," he said abruptly.

Boca deliberately turned her back on him and talked with The Spider. She was hurt, and a little angry. Surely she had been his good friend. Was Pete so stupid that he did not realize why she had ridden to Showdown?

The Spider, who had just learned why she was there, called to his Mexican, who presently set a table in the patio. Slowly it dawned on Pete that Boca had made a long ride—that she must be tired and hungry. He felt ashamed of himself. She had been a friend to him when he sorely needed a friend. And of course these men knew her. No doubt they had seen her often at the Flores rancho. She had brought his saddle back—which meant that she had found the buckskin, riderless, and fearing that something serious had happened, had caught up the pony and ridden to Showdown, alone, and no doubt against the wishes of her father and mother. It was mighty fine of her! He had never realized that girls did such things. Well, doggone it! he would let her know that he was mighty proud to have such a pardner!

The Spider hobbled to the patio and placed a chair for Boca, who brushed past Pete as though he had not been there.

"That's right!" laughed Pete. "But say, Boca, what made *me* sore was the way them hombres out there got fresh, joshin' you and askin' you to sing, jest like they had a rope on you—"

"You think of that Malvey?"

"Well, I ain't forgittin' the way he—"

Boca's eyes flashed. "Yes! But here it is different. The Spider, he is my friend. It is that when I have rested and eaten he will ask me to sing. Manuelo will play the guitar. I shall sing and laugh, for I am no longer tired. I am happy. Perhaps I shall sing the song of 'The Outlaw,' and for you."

"I'll be listenin'—every minute, Boca. Mebby if I ain't jest *lookin'* at you—it'll be because—"

"Si! Even like the caballero of whom I shall sing." And Boca hummed a tune, gazing at Pete with unreadable eyes, half-smiling, half-sad. How young, smooth-cheeked, and boyish he was, as he glanced up and returned her smile. Yet how quickly his face changed as he turned his head toward the doorway, ever alert for a possible surprise. Boca pushed back her chair. "The guitar," she called, nodding to The Spider.

Manuelo brought the guitar, tuned it, and sat back in the corner of the patio. The men in the saloon rose and shuffled to where Boca stood, seating themselves roundabout in various attitudes of expectancy. Pete, who had risen, recalled The Spider's terse warning, and stepped over to the patio doorway. Manuelo had just swept the silver strings in a sounding prelude, when The Spider, behind the bar, gestured to Pete.

"No, it ain't Malvey," said The Spider, as Pete answered his abrupt summons. "Here, take a drink while I talk. Keep your eye on the front. Don't move your hands off the bar, for there's three men out there, afoot, just beyond the hitching-rail. There was five, a minute ago. I figure two of 'em have gone round to the back. Go ahead—drink a little, and set your glass down, natural. I'm joshin' with you, see!"—and The Spider grinned hideously. "Smile! Don't make a break for the patio. The boys out there wouldn't understand, and Boca might get hurt. She's goin' to sing. You turn slow, and listen. When your back's turned, those hombres out there will step in." The Spider laughed, as though at something Pete had said. "You're mighty surprised to see 'em and you start to talk. Leave the rest to me."

Pete nodded and lifted his glass. From the patio came the sound of Boca's voice and the soft strumming of the guitar. Pete heard but hardly realized the significance of the first line or two of the song—and then:

"A rider stood at the lamplit bar,
tugging the knot of his neckscarf loose, While some one sang to the silver strings,
in the moonlight patio."

It was the song of "The Outlaw." Pete turned slowly and faced the patio. Manuelo swept the strings in a melodious interlude. Boca, her vivid lips parted, smiled at Pete even as she began to sing again. Pete could almost feel the presence of men behind him. He knew that he was trapped, but he kept his gaze fixed on Boca's face. The Spider spoke to some one—a word of surprised

greeting. In spite of his hold on himself Pete felt the sweat start on his lip and forehead. He was curious as to what these men would look like; as to whether he would know them. Perhaps they were not after him, but after some of the men in the patio—

"Annersley!"

Pete swung round, his hands up. He recognized two of the men—deputies of Sheriff Sutton of Concho. The third man was unknown to him.

"You're under arrest for the killing of Steve Gary."

"How's that?" queried The Spider.

"Steve Gary. This kid shot him—over to the Blue. We don't want any trouble about this," continued the deputy. "We've got a couple of men out back—"

"There won't be any trouble," said The Spider.

"No—there won't be any trouble," asserted Pete. "Gimme a drink, Spider."

"No, you don't!" said the deputy. "You got too many friends out there," and he gestured toward the patio with his gun.

"Not my friends," said Pete.

Boca's song ended abruptly as she turned from her audience to glance in Pete's direction. She saw him standing with upraised hands—and in front of him three men—strangers to Showdown.

Came the shuffling of feet as the men in the patio turned to see what she was staring at.

"Sit still!" called The Spider. "This ain't your deal, boys. They got the man they want."

But Boca, wide-eyed and trembling, stepped through the doorway.

"That's close enough!" called a deputy.

She paused, summoning all of her courage and wit to force a laugh. "Si, señor. But you are mistaken. It is not that I care what you do with *him*. I do but come for the wine for which I have asked, but there was no one to bring it to me,"—and she stepped past the end of the bar into The Spider's room. She reappeared almost instantly with a bottle of wine.

"I will open that for you," said The Spider.

"Never mind!" said one of the deputies; "the lady seems to know how."

Boca took a glass from the counter. "I will drink in the patio with my friends." But as she passed round the end of the bar and directly beneath the hanging lamp, she turned and paused. "But no! I will drink once to the young vaquero, with whom is my heart and my life." And she filled the glass and, bowing to Pete, put the glass to her lips.

The deputy nearest Pete shrugged his shoulder. "This ain't a show."

"Of a truth, no!" said Boca, and she swung the bottle. It shivered against the lamp. With the instant darkness came a streak of red and the close roar of a shot. Pete, with his gun out and going, leapt straight into the foremost deputy. They crashed down. Staggering to his feet, Pete broke for the outer doorway. Behind him the room was a pit of flame and smoke. Boca's pony reared as Pete jerked the reins loose, swept into the saddle, and down the moonlit street. He heard a shot and turned his head. In the patch of moonlight round The Spider's place he saw the dim, hurrying forms of men and horses. He leaned forward and quirted the pony with the reins.



"OF A TRUTH, NO!" SAID BOCA, AND SHE SWUNG THE BOTTLE

[Illustration: "Of a truth, no!" said Boca, and she swung the bottle.]

Back in The Spider's place men grouped round a huddled something on the floor. The Spider, who had fetched a lamp from his room, stooped and peered into the upturned face of Boca. A dull, black ooze spread and spread across the floor.

"Boca!" he shrilled, and his face was hideous.

"Did them coyotes git her?"

"Who was it?"

"Where's the kid?"

The Spider straightened and held the lamp high. "Take her in there," and he gestured toward his room. Two of the men carried her to the couch and covered her with the folds of the serape which had slipped from her shoulders as she fell.

"Say the word, Spider, and we'll ride 'em down!" It was "Scar-Face" who spoke, a man notorious even among his kind.

The Spider, strangely quiet, shook his head. "They'll ride back here. They were after Young Pete. She smashed the lamp to give him a chance to shoot his way out. They figured he'd break for the back—but he went right into 'em. They don't know yet that they got her. And he don't know it." He hobbled round to the back of the bar. "Have a drink, boys, and then I'm going to close up till—" and he indicated his room with a movement of the head.

Young Pete, riding into the night, listened for the sound of running horses. Finally he pulled his pony to a walk. He had ridden north—up the trail which the posse had taken to Showdown, and directly away from where they were searching the desert for him. And as Pete rode, he thought continually of Boca. Unaware of what had happened—yet he realized that she had been in great danger. This worried him—an uncertainty that became an obsession—until he could no longer master it with reason. He had ridden free from present hazard, unscratched and foot-loose, with many hours of darkness before him in which to evade the posse. He would be a fool to turn back. And yet he did, slowly, as though an invisible hand were on his bridle-rein; forcing him to ride against his judgment and his will. He reasoned, shrewdly, that the posse would be anywhere but at The Spider's place, just then.

In an hour he had returned and was knocking at the door, surprised that the saloon was closed.

At Pete's word, the door opened. The Spider, ghastly white in the lamplight, blinked his

surprise.

"Playin' a hunch," stated Pete. And, "Boca here?" he queried, as he entered.

"In there," said The Spider, and he took the lamp from the bar.

"What's the use of wakin' her?" said Pete. "I come back—I got a hunch—that somethin' happened when I made my get-away. But if she's all right—"

"You won't wake her," said The Spider, and his voice sounded strange and far-away. "You better go in there."

A hot flash shot through Pete. Then came the cold sweat of a dread anticipation. He followed The Spider to where Boca lay on the couch, as though asleep. Pete turned swiftly, questioning with his eyes. The Spider set the lamp on the table and backed from the room. Breathing hard, Pete stepped forward and lifted a corner of the serape. Boca's pretty mouth smiled up at him—but her eyes were as dead pools in the night.

The full significance of that white face and those dull, unseeing eyes, swept through him like a flame. "Pardner!" he whispered, and flung himself on his knees beside her, his shadow falling across her head and shoulders. In the dim light she seemed to be breathing. Long he gazed at her, recalling her manner as she had raised her glass: "I drink to the young vaquero, with whom is my heart—and *my life*."

Dully Pete wondered why such things should happen; why he had not been killed instead of the girl, and which one of the three deputies had fired the shot that had killed her. But no one could ever know that—for the men had all fired at him when the lamp crashed down—yet he, closer to them than Boca, had broken through their blundering fusillade. He knew that Boca had taken a great risk—and that she must have known it also. And she had taken that risk that he might win free.

Too stunned and shaken to reason it out to any definite conclusion, Pete characteristically accepted the facts as they were as he thrust aside all thought of right or wrong and gave himself over to tearless mourning for that which Boca had been. That dead thing with dark, staring eyes and faintly smiling lips was not Boca. But where was she then?

Slowly the lamplight paled as dawn fought through the heavy shadows of the room. The door swung open noiselessly. The Spider glanced in and softly closed the door again.

The Spider, he of the shriveled heart and body, did the most human thing he had done for years. At the little table opposite the bar he sat with brandy and a glass and deliberately drank until he felt neither the ache of his old wounds nor the sting of this fresh thrust of fate. Then he knew that he was drunk, but that his keen, crooked mind would obey his will, unfeelingly, yet with no hesitation and no stumbling.

He rose and hobbled to the outer door. A vagrant breeze stirred the stale air in the room. Back in the patio his Mexican, Manuelo, lay snoring, wrapped in a tattered blanket. The Spider turned from the doorway and gazed at the sanded spot on the floor, leaning against the bar and drumming on its edge with his nervous fingers. "He'll see her in every night-fire when he's alone—and he'll talk to her. He will see her face among the girls in the halls—and he'll go cold and speak her name, and then some girl will laugh. He will eat out his heart thinking of her—and what she did for him. He's just a kid—but when he comes out of that room ... he won't give a damn if he's bumped off or not. He'll play fast—and go through every time! God! I ought to know!"

The Spider turned and gazed across the morning desert. Far out rode a group of men. One of them led a riderless horse. The Spider's thin lips twisted in a smile.

CHAPTER XXV

"PLANTED—OUT THERE"

Malvey, loafing at the ranch of Mescalero, received The Spider's message about the posse with affected indifference. He had Pete's horse in his possession, which in itself would make trouble should he be seen. When he learned from the messenger that Young Pete was in Showdown, he fumed and blustered until evening, when he saddled Blue Smoke and rode south toward the Flores rancho. From Flores's place he would ride on south, across the line to where he could always find employment for his particular talents. Experience had taught him that it was useless to go against The Spider, whose warning, whether it were based on fact or not, was a hint to leave the country.

The posse from Concho, after circling the midnight desert and failing to find any trace of Pete, finally drew together and decided to wait until daylight made it possible to track him. As they talked together, they saw a dim figure coming toward them. Swinging from their course, they rode abruptly down a draw. Four of them dismounted. The fifth, the chief deputy, volunteered to ride out and interview the horseman. The four men on foot covered the opening of the draw, where the trail passed, and waited.

The deputy sat his horse, as though waiting for some one. Malvey at once thought of Young Pete—then of The Spider's warning—and finally that the solitary horseman might be some companion from below the border, cautiously awaiting his approach. Half-inclined to ride wide, he hesitated—then loosening his gun he spurred his restless pony toward the other, prepared to "bull" through if questioned too closely.

Within thirty feet of the deputy Malvey reined in. "You're ridin' late," he said, with a forced friendliness in his voice.

"This the trail to Showdown?" queried the deputy.

"This is her. Lookin' for anybody in particular?"

"Nope. And I reckon nobody is lookin' for me. I'm ridin my own horse."

It was a chance shot intended to open the way to a parley—and identify the strange horseman by his voice, if possible. It also was a challenge, if the unknown cared to accept it as such. Malvey's slow mind awakened to the situation. A streak of red flashed from his hand as he spurred straight for the deputy, who slipped from his saddle and began firing over it, shielded by his pony. A rifle snarled in the draw. Malvey jerked straight as a soft-nosed slug tore through him. Another slug shattered his thigh. Cursing, he lunged sideways, as Blue Smoke bucked. Malvey toppled and fell—an inert bulk in the dim light of the stars.

The chief deputy struck a match and stooped. "We got the wrong man," he called to his companions.

"It's Bull Malvey," said one of the deputies as the match flickered out. "I knew him in Phoenix."

"Heard of him. He was a wild one," said another deputy.

"Comin' and goin'! One of The Spider's bunch, and a hoss-thief right! I reckon we done a good job."

"He went for his gun," said the chief.

"We had him covered from the start," asserted a deputy. "He sure won't steal no more hosses."

"Catch up his cayuse," commanded the chief deputy.

Two of them, after a hard ride, finally put Blue Smoke within reach of a rope. He was led back to where Malvey lay.

"Concho brand!" exclaimed the chief.

"Young Pete's horse," asserted another.

"There'll be hell to pay if Showdown gets wise to what happened to Bull Malvey," said the deputy, who recognized the dead outlaw.

Dawn was just breaking when the chief deputy, disgusted with what he termed their "luck," finally evolved a plan out of the many discussed by his companions. "We got the cayuse—which will look good to the T-Bar-T boys. We ain't down here for our health and we been up against it from start to finish—and so far as I care, this is the finish. Get it right afore we start. Young Pete is dead. We got his horse." He paused and glanced sharply at Blue Smoke. "He's got the Concho brand!" he exclaimed.

"Young Pete's horse was a blue roan," said a deputy. "I guess this is him—blue roan with a white blaze on his nose—so Cotton told me."

"Looks like it!" said the chief deputy. "Well, say we got his horse, then. We're in luck for once."

"Now it's easy diggin' down there in the draw. And it's gettin' daylight fast. I reckon that's Malvey's saddle and bridle on the blue roan. We'll just cover up all evidence of who was ridin' this hoss, drift into Showdown and eat, and then ride along up north and collect that reward. We'll split her even—and who's goin' to say we didn't earn it?"

"Suits me," said a deputy. His companions nodded.

"Then let's get busy. The sand's loose here. We can drag a blanket over this—and leave the rest to the coyotes."

They scraped a long, shallow hole in the arroyo-bed and buried Malvey along with his saddle and bridle.

The Spider smiled as he saw them coming. He was still smiling as he watched them ride up the street and tie their tired ponies to the hitching-rail. He identified the led horse as the one Malvey had stolen from Pete.

"I see you got him," he said in his high-pitched voice.

The chief deputy nodded. "He's planted—out there."

"I meant the horse," said The Spider.

Ordinarily, The Spider was a strange man. The posse thought him unusually queer just then. His eyes seemed dulled with a peculiar faint, bluish film. His manner was over-deliberate. There was something back of it all that they could not fathom. Moreover, the place was darkened. Some one had hung blankets over the windows. The deputies—four of them—followed The Spider into the saloon.

"I guess you boys want to eat," said The Spider.

"We sure do."

"All right. I'll have Manuelo get you something." And he called to the Mexican, telling him to place a table in the private room—The Spider's own room, back of the bar. While the Mexican prepared breakfast, the posse accepted their chief's invitation to have a drink, which they felt they needed. Presently The Spider led the way to his room. The deputies, somewhat suspicious, hesitated on the threshold as they peered in. A lamp was burning on the table. There were plates, knives and forks, a coffee-pot, a platter of bacon... Beyond the lamp stood Young Pete, his back toward the couch and facing them. His eyes were like the eyes of one who walks in his sleep.

The Spider held up his hand. "You're planted—out there. These gentlemen say so. So you ain't here!"

Pete's belt and gun lay on the floor. The Spider was in his shirt-sleeves and apparently unarmed.

The chief deputy sized up the situation in a flash and pulled his gun. "I guess we got you—this trip, Pete."

"No," said The Spider. "You're wrong. He's planted—out there. What you staring at, boys? Pete, stand over there. Come right in, boys! Come on in! I got something to show you."

"Watch the door, Jim," said the chief. "Ed, you keep your eye on The Spider." The chief deputy stepped to the table and peered across it at a huddled something on the couch, over which was thrown a shimmering serape. He stepped round the table and lifted a corner of the serape. Boca's sightless eyes stared up at him.

"Christ!" he whispered. "It's the girl!" And even as he spoke he knew what had happened—that he and his men were responsible for this. His hand shook as he turned toward The Spider.

"She—she ran into it when she— It's pretty tough, but—"

"Your breakfast is waiting," said The Spider.

"This was accidental," said the deputy, recovering himself, and glancing from one to another of his men. Then he turned to Pete. "Pete, you'll have to ride back with us."

"No," said The Spider with a peculiar stubborn shrug of his shoulders. "He's planted out there. You said so."

"That's all right, Spider. We made a mistake. This is the man we want."

"Then who is planted out there?" queried The Spider in a soft, sing-song voice, high-pitched and startling.

"That's our business," stated the deputy.

"No—mine!" The Spider glanced past the deputy, who turned to face a Mexican standing in the doorway. The Mexican's hands were held belt high and they were both "filled."

"Get the first man that moves," said The Spider in Mexican. And as he spoke his own hand flashed to his armpit, and out again like the stroke of a snake. Behind his gun gleamed a pair of black, beady eyes, as cold as the eyes of a rattler. The deputy read his own doom and the death of

at least two of his men should he move a muscle. He had Young Pete covered and could have shot him down; Pete was unarmed. The deputy lowered his gun.

Pete blinked and drew a deep breath. "Give me a gun, Spider—and we'll shoot it out with 'em, right here."

The Spider laughed. "No. You're planted out there. These gents say so. I'm working this layout."

"Put up your gun, Ed," said the chief, addressing the deputy who had The Spider covered. "He's fooled us, proper."

"Let 'em out, one at a time," and The Spider gestured to the Mexican, Manuelo. "And tell your friends," he continued, addressing the chief deputy, "that Showdown is run peaceful *and that I run her.*"

When they were gone The Spider turned to Pete. "Want to ride back to Concho?"

Pete, who had followed The Spider to the saloon, did not seem to hear the question. Manuelo was already sweeping out with a broom which he had dipped in a water-bucket—as casually busy as though he had never had a gun in his hand. Something in the Mexican's supreme indifference touched Pete's sense of humor. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Who's goin' to tell her father?" he queried, gesturing toward the inner room.

"He knows," said The Spider, who stood staring at the Mexican.

"You're drunk," said Pete.

"Maybe I'm drunk," echoed The Spider. "But I'm her father."

Pete stepped forward and gazed into The Spider's scarred and lined face. "Hell!" Then he thrust out his hand. "Spider, I reckon I'll throw in with you."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE OLLA

The Spider's system of bookkeeping was simple, requiring neither pen nor paper, journal nor day-book. He kept a kind of mental loose-leaf ledger with considerable accuracy, auditing his accounts with impartiality. For example, Scar-Face and three companions just up from the border recently had been credited with twenty head of Mexican cattle which were now grazing on The Spider's border ranch, the Olla. Scar-Face had attempted to sell the cattle to the leader of a Mexican faction whose only assets at the time were ammunition and hope. Scar-Face had met this chieftain by appointment at an abandoned ranch-house. Argument ensued. The Mexican talked grandiloquently of "Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality." Scar-Face held out for cash. The Mexican leader needed beef. Scar-Face needed money. As he had rather carelessly informed the Mexican that he could deliver the cattle immediately, and realizing his mistake,—for he knew that the Mexican would straightway summon his retainers and take the cattle in the name of "Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality,"—Scar-Face promptly shot this self-appointed savior of Mexico, mortally wounded one of his two companions, and finally persuaded the other to help drift the cattle north with a promise of a share of the profits of the enterprise.

The surviving Mexican rode to Showdown with Scar-Face and his companions, received his share of the sale in cash,—which he squandered at The Spider's place,—and straightway rode back across the border to rejoin his captainless comrades and appoint himself their leader, gently insinuating that he himself had shot the captain whom he had apprehended in the treachery of betraying them to a rival aggregation of ragged Liberties, Fraternities, and Equalities.

The Spider's mental ledger read: "Scar-Face—Debit, chuck, liquor, and lodging"—an account of long standing—"and forty dollars in cash. Credit—twenty head of cattle, brand unknown."

Scar-Face's account was squared—for the time being.

Pete was also on The Spider's books, and according to The Spider's system of accounts, Pete was heavily in debt to him. Not that The Spider would have ever mentioned this, or have tried to collect. But when he offered Pete a job on his ranch he shrewdly put Pete in the way of meeting his obligations.

Cattle were in demand, especially in Mexico, so ravaged by lawless soldiery that there was nothing left to steal. One outlaw chieftain, however, was so well established financially that his

agents were able to secure supplies from a mysterious source and pay for them with gold, which also came from an equally mysterious source—and it was with these agents that The Spider had had his dealings. His bank account in El Paso was rolling up fast. Thus far he had been able to supply beef to the hungry liberators of Mexico; but beef on the hoof was becoming scarce on both sides of the border. Even before Pete had come to Showdown, The Spider had perfected a plan to raid the herds of the northern ranches. Occasional cowboys drifting to Showdown had given him considerable information regarding the physical characteristics of the country roundabout these ranches, the water-holes, trails, and grazing.

The Spider knew that he could make only one such raid, with any chance of success. If he made a drive at all, it would be on a big scale. The cattlemen would eventually trail the first stolen herd to his ranch. True, they would not find it there. He would see to it that the cattle were pushed across the border without delay. But a second attempt would be out of the question. The chief factor in the success of the scheme would be the prompt handling of the herd upon its arrival. He had cowboys in his employ who would steal the cattle. What he needed was a man whom he could rely upon to check the tally and turn the herd over to the agents of the Mexican soldiery and collect the money on the spot, while his cowboys guarded the herd from a possible raid by the Mexicans themselves. He knew that should the northern ranchmen happen to organize quickly and in force, they would not hesitate to promptly lynch the raiders, burn his buildings, take all his horses worth taking, and generally put the ranch out of business.

Thus far the ranch had paid well as a sort of isolated clearing-house for The Spider's vicarious accounts. The cowboys who worked there were picked men, each of whom received a straight salary, asked no questions, and rode with a high-power rifle under his knee and a keen eye toward the southern ranches.

Pete, riding south, bore an unsigned letter from The Spider, with instructions to hand it to the foreman of "The Olla" and receive further instructions from that gentleman. Pete knew nothing of the contemplated raid, The Spider shrewdly surmising that Pete would balk at the prospect of stealing cattle from his own countrymen. And it was because of this very fact that The Spider had intrusted Pete—by letter to the foreman—with the even greater responsibility of receiving the money for the cattle and depositing it in a certain bank in El Paso. Heretofore, such payments had been made to The Spider's representative in that city—the president of the Stockmen's Security and Savings Bank—who had but recently notified The Spider that he could no longer act in the capacity of agent on account of local suspicion, already voiced in the current newspapers. Hereafter The Spider would have to deal directly with the Mexican agents. And The Spider unhesitatingly chose Pete as his representative, realizing that Pete was shrewdly capable, fearless, and to be trusted.

Toward evening of the third day out of Showdown, Pete came upon a most unexpected barrier to his progress—a wire fence stretching east and west; a seemingly endless succession of diminishing posts. He estimated that there must be at least forty thousand acres under fence. According to location, this was The Spider's ranch—the Olla—Pete reined around and rode along the fence for a mile or so, searching for a gateway; but the taut barbed wire ran on and on, toward a sun that was rounding swiftly down to the western horizon. He dismounted and pulled the staples from several lengths of wire until he had enough slack to allow the top wire to touch the ground. He stood on the wires and jockeyed Blue Smoke across, tied him to a post, and tacked the wire back in place.

Headed south again, he had just passed a clump of chaparral when up from the draw came a tall, muscular cowboy, riding a big horse—and a fast one, thought Pete.

"Evenin'," drawled the cowboy—a slow-speaking Texan, who was evidently waiting for Pete to explain his presence.

"How!—Is this here the Olla ranch?"

"One end of her."

"I'm lookin' for the foreman."

"What name did you say?"

"I didn't say."

"What's your business down this way?" queried the cowboy.

"It's mine. I dunno as it's any of yours."

"So? Now, that's mighty queer! Lookin' for the fo'man, eh? Well, go ahead and look—they's plenty of room."

"Too much," laughed Pete. "Reckon I got to bush here and do my huntin' in the mornin'—only"—and Pete eyed the other significantly—"I kind of hate to bush on the ground. I was bit by a spider onct—"

"A spider, eh? Now that's right comical. What kind of a spider was it that bit you?"

"Trap-door spider. Only this here one was always home."

"So?" drawled the Texan. "Now, that's right funny. I was bit by a rattler once. Got the marks on my arm yet."

"Well, if it comes to a showdown, that there spider bite—"

"The ranch-house is yonder," said the Texan. "Just you ride along the way you're headed. That's a pretty horse you're settin' on. If it wa'n't so dark I'd say he carried the Concho brand."

"That's him," said Pete.

"He's a long jump from home, friend."

"And good for twice that distance, neighbor."

"You sure please me most to death," drawled the Texan.

"Then I reckon you might call in that there coyote in the brush over there that's been holdin' a gun on me ever since we been talkin',"—and Pete gestured with his bridle hand toward the clump of chaparral.

"Sam," called the Texan, "he says he don't like our way of welcomin' strangers down here. He's right friendly, meetin' one man at a time—but he don't like a crowd, nohow."

A figure loomed in the dusk—a man on foot who carried a rifle across his arm. Pete could not distinguish his features, but he saw that the man was tall, booted and spurred, and evidently a line-rider with the Texan.

"This here young stinging-lizard says he wants to see the fo'man, Sam. Kin you help him out?"

"Go ahead and speak your piece," said the man with the rifle.

"She's spoke," said Pete.

"I'm the man you're huntin'," asserted the other.

"You foreman?"

"The same."

"Thought you was jest a hand—ridin' fence, mebbly." And as Pete spoke he rolled a cigarette. His pony shied at the flare of the match, but Pete caught an instant glimpse of a lean-faced, powerfully built man of perhaps fifty years or more who answered The Spider's description of the foreman. "I got a letter here for Sam Brent, foreman of the Olla," said Pete.

"Now you're talkin' business."

"His business," laughed the Texan.

"Nope—The Spider's," asserted Pete.

"Your letter will keep," said the foreman. "Ed, you drift on along down the fence till you meet Harper. Tell him it's all right." And the foreman disappeared in the dusk to return astride a big cowhorse. "We'll ride over to the house," said he.

Pete estimated that they had covered three or four miles before the ranch-buildings came in sight—a dim huddle of angles against the starlit sky. To his surprise the central building was roomy and furnished with a big table, many chairs, and a phonograph, while the floor was carpeted with Navajo blankets, and a big shaded hanging lamp illumined the table on which were scattered many dog-eared magazines and a few newspapers. Pete had remarked upon the stables while turning his own horse into the corral. "We got some fast ones," was all that the foreman chose to say, just then.

Pete and the foreman had something to eat in the chuck-house, and returned to the larger building. Brent read The Spider's letter, rolled the end of his silver-gray mustache between his thumb and forefinger, and finally glanced up. "So, you're Pete Annersley?"

"That's my name."

"Have a chair. You're right young to be riding alone. How did you come to throw in with The Spider?"

Pete hesitated. Why should he tell this man anything other than that he had been sent by The Spider with the letter which—he had been told—would explain his presence and embody his instructions?

"Don't he say in that letter?" queried Pete.

"He says you were mixed up in a bank robbery over to Enright," stated the foreman.

"That's a dam' lie!" flared Pete.

"I reckon you'll do," said Brent, as he folded the letter. The Spider had made that very statement in his letter to Brent for the purpose of finding out, through the foreman, whether or not Pete had taken it upon himself to read the letter before delivering it. And Brent, aware of The Spider's methods, realized at once why his chief had misstated the facts. It was evident that Pete had not read the letter, otherwise he would most probably have taken his cue from The Spider's assertion about the bank robbery and found himself in difficulties, for directly after the word "Enright" was a tiny "x"—a code letter which meant "This is not so."

"Reckon I'll do what?" queried Pete. "Let The Spider or anybody like him run a whizzer on me after I run a good hoss ragged to git here with his doggone letter—and then git stuck up like I was a hoss-thief? You got another guess, uncle."

The old cowman's eyes twinkled. "You speak right out in meetin', don't you, son?" His drawl was easy and somehow reminded Pete of Pop Annersley. "Now there's some wouldn't like that kind of talk—even from a kid."

"I'd say it to The Spider as quick as I would to you," asserted Pete.

"Which might be takin' a chance, both ways."

"Say"—and Pete smiled—"I guess I been talkin' pretty fast, I was some het up. The Spider used me as white as he could use anybody, I reckon. But ever since that killin' up to his place, I been sore at the whole doggone outfit runnin' this here world. What does a fella git, anyhow, for stickin' up for himself, if he runs against a killer? He gits bumped off—or mebby he kills the other fella and gits run out of the country or hung. Pardners stick, don't they? Well, how would it git you if you had a pardner that—well, mebby was a girl and she got killed by a bunch of deputies jest because she was quick enough to spoil their game? Would you feel like shakin' hands with every doggone hombre you met up with, or like tellin' him to go to hell and sendin' him there if he was lookin to argue with you? I dunno. Mebby I'm wrong—from the start—but I figure all a fella gits out of this game is a throwdown, comin' or goin'—'for the deck is stacked and the wheel is crooked."

"I was fifty-six last February," said Brent.

"And how many notches you got on your gun?" queried Pete.

"Oh, mebby two, three," drawled the foreman.

"That's it! Say you started in callin' yourself a growed man when you was twenty. Every ten years you had to hand some fella his finish to keep from makin' yours. 'Got to kill to live,' is right!"

"Son, you got a good horse, and yonder is the whole State of Texas, where a man can sure lose himself without tryin' hard. There's plenty of work down there for a good cow-hand. And a man's name ain't printed on his face. Nobody's got a rope on you."

"I git you," said Pete. "But I throwed in with The Spider—and that goes."

"That's your business—and as you was sayin' your business ain't mine. But throwin' a fast gun won't do you no good round here."

"Oh, I don't claim to be so doggone fast," stated Pete.

"Faster than Steve Gary?"

Pete's easy glance centered to a curious, tense gaze which was fixed on the third button of Brent's shirt. "What about Steve Gary?" asked Pete, and even Brent, old hand as he was, felt the sinister significance in that slow question. The Spider's letter had said to "give him a try-out," which might have meant almost anything to a casual reader, but to Brent it meant just what he had been doing that evening—seeking for a weak spot in Pete's make-up, if there were such, before hiring him.

"My gun is in the bedroom," said Brent easily.

"Well, Gary's wasn't," said Pete.

"We ain't had a gun-fight on this ranch since I been foreman," said Brent. "And we got some right fast men, at that. Seein' you're goin' to work for me a spell, I'm goin' to kind of give you a line on things. You can pick your own string of horses—anything that you can get your rope on that ain't branded 'J.E.', which is pet stock and no good at workin' cattle. You met up with Ed Brevoort this evenin'. Well, you can ride fence with Ed and he'll show you the high spots and hollows—and the line—south. If you run onto any strangers ridin' too close to the line, find out what they want. If you can't find out, get word to me. That goes for strangers. But if you get to arguin' with any of my boys—talk all you like—but don't start a smoke—for you won't get away

with it. The Spider ain't payin' guns to shoot up his own outfit. If you're lookin' for real trouble, all you got to do is to ride south acrost the line—and you'll find it. And you're gettin' a straight hundred a month and your keep as long as you work for the Olla."

"Which is some different from takin' my hoss and fannin' it easy for Texas," said Pete, grinning.

"Some different," said Brent.

CHAPTER XXVII

OVER THE LINE

Few cattle grazed across the Olla's well-fenced acres—and these cattle were of a poor strain, lean Mexican stock that would never run into weight as beef. Pete had expected to see many cattle—and much work to be done. Instead, there were few cattle; and as for work—he had been put to riding line with big Ed Brevoort. For two weeks he had done nothing else. Slowly it dawned upon Pete that The Spider's ranch was little more than a thoroughfare for the quick handling of occasional small bands of cattle from one questionable owner to another. He saw many brands, and few of them were alike, and among them none that were familiar. Evidently the cattle were from the south line. The saddle-stock was branded "J.E." and "The Olla." These brands appeared on none of the cattle that Pete had seen. About a month after his arrival, and while he was drifting slowly along the fence with Brevoort, Pete caught sight of a number of horsemen, far out beyond the ranch-line, riding slowly toward the north. He spoke to Brevoort, who nodded. "We're like to be right busy soon."

Brevoort and Pete rode to the ranch-house that evening to get supplies for their line shack. The place was all but deserted. The cook was there—and the Mexican José who looked after the "fast ones" in the stables; but Brent, Harper, Sandy Bell, and the rest of the men were gone. Pete thought of the horsemen that he had seen—and of Brevoort's remark, that they would "be right busy soon." Pete wondered how soon, and how busy.

The day after the departure of the men, Brevoort told Pete that they would take turn about riding the north line, in an eight-hour shift, and he cautioned Pete to be on the lookout for a messenger riding a bay horse—"Not a cow-horse, but a thoroughbred."

This was at the line shack.

Several nights later, as Pete was riding his line, he noticed that Blue Smoke occasionally stopped and sniffed, and always toward the north. Near the northwestern angle of the fence, Pete thought he could hear the distant drumming of hoofs. Blue Smoke fretted and fought the bit. Pete dismounted and peered into the darkness. The rhythmic stride of a running horse came to him—not the quick patter of a cow-pony, but the long, sweeping stride of a racer.

Then out of the night burst a rider on a foam-flecked horse that reared almost into the gate, which Pete unlooped and dragged back.

"That you, Brevoort?" called the horseman.

"He's at the shack," Pete shouted, as the other swept past.

"Looks like we're goin' to be right busy," reflected Pete as he swung to the saddle. "We'll jest jog over to the shack and report."

When he arrived at the line shack, Brevoort was talking with the hard-riding messenger. Near them stood the thoroughbred, his flanks heaving, his neck sweat-blackened, his sides quivering with fatigue. He had covered fifty miles in five hours.

"—and countin' the Concho stuff—I'd say something like two hundred head," the messenger was saying. "Brent'll be in to-morrow, long 'bout noon. So far, she worked slick. No trouble and a show of gettin' through without any trouble. Not much young stock, so they're drivin' fast."

Brevoort turned to Pete. "Take this horse over to the corral. Tell Moody that Harper is in, and that the boys will be here in a couple of days. He'll know what to do."

Pete rode at a high lope, leading the thoroughbred, and wondering why the messenger had not gone on to the corral. Moody, the cook, a grizzled, heavy-featured man, too old for hard riding, expressed no surprise at Pete's message, but awakened the Mexican stableman and told him to fetch up a "real one," which the Mexican did with alertness, returning to the house leading another sleek and powerful thoroughbred. "Take him over to the shack," said Moody. "Harper

wants him." And he gave Pete a package of food which he had been preparing while the Mexican was at the stable.

When Pete returned to the line shack he found Brevoort sitting in the doorway smoking, and the messenger asleep on the ground, his head on his saddle.

"Here's your horse," said Brevoort, "and some chuck."

Harper sat up quickly, too quickly for a man who had ridden as far as he had. Pete wondered at the other's hardihood and grit, for Harper was instantly on his feet and saddling the fresh horse, and incidentally cursing the Olla, Brent, and the universe in general, with a gusto which bespoke plenty of unspoiled vigor.

"Tell Brent the coast is clear," said Brevoort as Harper mounted.

They could hear his horse getting into his stride long before the sound of his hoofbeats was swallowed up in the abyss of the night.

Pete turned in. Brevoort rode out to drift along the line fence until daylight.

And Pete dreamed strange dreams of night-riders who came and went swiftly and mysteriously; and of a dusty, shuffling herd that wound its slow way across the desert, hazed by a flitting band of armed riders who continually glanced back as though fearful of pursuit. Suddenly the dream changed. He was lying on a bed in a long, white-walled room, dimly lighted by a flickering gas-jet, and Boca stood beside him gazing down at him wistfully. He tried to speak to her, but could not. Nor did she speak to him, but laid her hand on his forehead, pressing down his eyelids. Her hand was dry and hot. Pete tried to open his eyes—to raise his hand, to speak. Although his eyes were closed and Boca's hot hand was pressed down on them, Pete knew that round-about was a light and warmth of noonday... Boca's hand drew back—and Pete lay staring straight into the morning sun which shone through the open doorway. In the distance he could see Brevoort riding slowly toward him. Pete raised on his elbow and threw back the blankets. As he rose and pulled on his overalls he thought of the messenger. He knew that somewhere back on the northern trail the men of the Olla were pushing a herd of cattle slowly south,—cattle from the T-Bar-T, the Blue, and ... he suddenly recalled Harper's remark—"And countin' the Concho stuff..." Pete thought of Jim Bailey and Andy White, and of pleasant days riding for the Concho. But after all, it was none of his affair. He had had no hand in stealing the cattle. He would do well enough to keep his own hide whole. Let the cattlemen who lived under the law take care of their own stock and themselves. And curiously enough, Pete for the first time wondered what had become of Malvey—if the posse had actually shot him, or if they had simply taken the horse and let Malvey go. The arrival of Brevoort put an end to his pondering.

"Brent will be in to-day," said Brevoort. "You stick around here; and call me about noon."

"The old man ain't takin' chances," remarked Pete.

"You're wrong there," asserted Brevoort. "He's takin' the long chance every time, or he wouldn't be foreman of this outfit. You'll find that out if you stick round here long enough. If you don't call it takin' a chance pullin' off a trick like this one that's comin', jest try it yourself."

"He handles men easy," asserted Pete, recalling Brent's rather fatherly advice in regard to Texas and the opportunity for a young man to go straight.

"You sure please me most to death," drawled Brevoort. "You been a right quiet little pardner, and smilin', so I'm going to tell you somethin' that you can keep right on bein' quiet about. Sam Brent would send you or me or any man into a gun-fight, or a posse, or a jail, and never blink his eye, if he thought it was good business for him. He'd do it pleasant, too, jest like he was sendin' you to a dance, or a show. But he'd go jest as quick hisself, if he had to."

"Then I guess we got no kick," said Pete.

"I ain't kickin'. I'm jest puttin' you wise."

"I ain't forgittin', Ed."

Pete turned, following Brevoort's gaze. The man they were talking about was in sight and riding hard. Presently Brent was close enough to nod to them. Although he had ridden far and fast, he was as casual as sunshine. Neither in his voice nor his bearing was the least trace of fatigue.

"I'm goin' to need you," he told Pete. "We're short of hands right now. If you need anything over in the line shack, go git it and come along down after Ed and me."

Pete took the hint and left Brevoort and Brent to ride to the house together while he rode over to the shack and warmed up some coffee and beans. In an hour he was at the house. A thoroughbred stood at the hitching-rail. Pete noticed that the animal carried Brevoort's saddle. Evidently there was to be more hard riding. As Pete entered the big room, he also noticed that Brevoort was heavily armed, and carried an extra belt of cartridges. Brent was examining a rifle

when Pete stepped in. "You may need this," said Brent, handing the rifle and scabbard to Pete. "Go over to the bunk-house and get another belt and some shells."

When Pete returned, Blue Smoke was in the corral and his own saddle was on a big bay that looked like a splendid running-mate for Brevoort's mount. Pete busied himself slinging the rifle, curious as to what his new venture would or could be, yet too proud to show that he was interested.

Brevoort, hitching up his belt, swung to his horse. Without hesitation Pete followed. Well-fed, eager and spirited, the horses lunged out into the open and settled into a long, swinging stride—a gait that was new to Pete, accustomed as he was to the shorter, quick action of the cow-pony.

They rode south, across the sunlit expanse of emptiness between the hacienda and the line. A few hundred yards beyond the fence, Brevoort reined in. "Mexico," he said, gesturing round about. "Our job is to ride to the Ortez rancho and get that outfit movin' up this way."

"Goin' to turn the cattle over to 'em?" queried Pete.

"Yes—and that quick they won't know they got 'em. It's a big deal, if she goes through. If she don't, it's like to be the finish of the Olla."

"Meanin' if the T-Bar-T and the Concho gits busy, there's like to be some smoke blowin' down this way?"

"The same. Recollect what I was tellin' you this mornin'."

"About Brent sendin' a man into a fight?"

"Yes. But I wasn't figurin' on provin' it to you so quick," drawled the Texan. "Hold your horse down to a walk. We'll save speed for a spell. No, I wasn't figurin' on this. You see, when I hired out to Brent, I knew what I was doin'—so I told him I'd jest earn my pay on the white side of the border—but no Mexico for mine. That was the understandin'. Now he goes to work and sends you and me down into this here country on a job which is only fit for a Greaser. I'm goin' to see it through, but I done made my last ride for the Olla."

"Brent was sayin' he was short of hands," suggested Pete.

"Which is correct. But there's that José who knows every foot of the dry-spot clean to the Ortez—and he knows every hoss-thief in this sun-blasted country. Does he send José? No. He sends two white men, tellin' me that it is too big a deal to trust the Mexican with."

"And a fine chance of gittin' bumped off by a lousy bunch of Cholas callin' themselves soldiers, eh?"

"You said it."

"Well, we got good hosses, anyway. And I sabe the Mexican talk."

"Guess that's why Brent sent you along. He knows I talk mighty little Mexican." And Brevoort gazed curiously at Pete.

"Seein' as you feel that way about it, Ed, I got somethin' I been millin' over in my head. Now, when The Spider sent me down here he said he had some important business he wanted me to handle. Brent was to tell me. Now I don't see anything important about ridin' line or chasin' into Mexico to wake up a bunch of Greasers and tell 'em to get busy. Uncle Sammy Brent's got somethin' hid up his sleeve, Ed."

Brevoort, riding slowly beside Pete, turned from gazing across the desert and looked Pete over from spur to sombrero with a new interest. He thought he knew now why The Spider had sent Pete to the ranch and why Brent, in turn, had sent Pete on this dangerous mission. "Is The Spider much of a friend of yours?" queried Brevoort suddenly.

"Why, I dunno. 'Course he acted like he was—but you can't tell about him. He—he helped me out of a hole onct."

"Did you ever help him out?"

"Me? No, I never had the chanct."

"Uh-huh. Well, just you pull in your hoss and run your good eye over this a minute." And Brevoort drew a folded slip of paper from his shirt-pocket and handed it to Pete. It was a brief note addressed to Brevoort and signed "J.E." It instructed Brevoort to accompany Pete Annersley to El Paso after the sale of the cattle and to see to it that the money which Annersley would have with him was deposited to the credit of James Ewell in the Stockmen's Security and Savings Bank.

Pete had difficulty in reading the note and took some time to read it, finally handing it back to Brevoort in silence. And then, "Where did you git it? Who is 'J.E.'?"

"From Harper. 'J.E.' is Jim Ewell—The Spider."

"So Harper rode to Showdown and back?"

"He took word from Brent to The Spider that the boys had started," said Brevoort.

"And Brent—" Pete hesitated for fear of committing himself even though he trusted Brevoort. But Brevoort had no hesitation. He anticipated Pete's thought and spoke frankly.

"Brent figured it fine. I knew why he sent you and me on this ride—but I was tryin' to find out if you was wise—or ridin' blind. If we come back, Brent won't show his hand. If we don't come back he'll collect the dough and vamoose. Kin you see a hole in the fence?"

"You're whistlin', Ed! It's one crook tryin' to git the best of another crook. But I would 'a' said Brent was straight. I say The Spider's money goes into that there bank."

"Same here. I ain't so dam' honest that it hurts me, but I quit when it comes to stealin' from the man that's payin' my wages."

"Then I reckon you and me is pardners in this deal," and Pete, boyishly proffered his hand.

Big Ed Brevoort grasped Pete's hand, and held it till the horses shied apart. "To the finish," he said.

"To the finish," echoed Pete, and with one accord they slackened rein. The thoroughbreds reached out into that long, tireless running stride that brought their riders nearer and nearer to the Ortez rancho and the Mexican agent of the guerilla captain whose troops were so sadly in need of beef.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A GAMBLE

On either side of a faint trail rose the dreary, angling grotesques of the cactus, and the dried and dead stalks of the soapweed. Beyond, to the south, lay a sea of shimmering space, clear to the light blue that edged the sky-line. The afternoon sun showed copper-red through a faint haze which bespoke a change of weather. The miles between the Olla and that tiny dot on the horizon—the Ortez hacienda—seemed endless, because of no pronounced landmarks. Pete surmised that it would be dark long before they reached their destination. Incidentally he was amazed by the speed of the thoroughbreds, who ran so easily, yet with a long, reaching stride that ate into the miles. To Pete they seemed more like excellent machines than horses—lacking the pert individuality of the cow-pony. Stall-fed and groomed to a satin-smooth glow, stabled and protected from the rains—pets, in Pete's estimation—yet he knew that they would run until they dropped, holding that long, even stride to the very end. He reached out and patted his horse on the neck. Instantly the sensitive ears twitched and the stride lengthened. Pete tightened rein gently. "A quirt would only make him crazy," he thought; and he grinned as he saw that Brevoort's horse had let out a link or two to catch up with its mate.

The low sun, touching the rim of the desert, flung long crimson shafts heavenward—in hues of rose and amethyst, against the deep umber and the purple of far spaces. From monotonous and burning desolation the desert had become a vast momentary solitude of changing beauty and enchantment. Then all at once the colors vanished, space shrank, and occasional stars trembled in the velvet roof of the night. And one star, brighter than the rest, grew gradually larger, until it became a solitary camp-fire on the level of the plain.

"Don't like the looks of that," said Brevoort, as he pulled up his horse. "It's out in front of the 'dobe—and it means the Ortez has got company."

"Soldiers?"

"Looks like it."

"Arguilla's men?"

"I reckon so. And they're up pretty clost to the line—too clost to suit me. We'll ride round and do our talkin' with Ortez."

"Ain't they friendly?" queried Pete.

"Friendly, hell! Any one of 'em would knife you for the hoss you're ridin'! Hear 'em sing! Most like they're all drunk—and you know what that means. Just follow along slow; and whatever you

run into don't get off your hoss."

"Ain't them there coyotes friendly to Ortez?"

"S' long as he feeds 'em. But that don't do us no good. Ought to be some of the Ortez riders hangin' round somewhere. They don't mix much with Arguilla's men."

"She's a lovely lay-out," said Pete. "But I'm with you."

Circling the ranch, Brevoort and Pete rode far out into the desert, until the camp-fire was hidden by the ranch-buildings. Then they angled in cautiously, edging past the 'dobe outbuildings and the corrals toward the hacienda. "Don't see anybody around. Guess they 're all out in front drinkin' with the bunch," whispered Brevoort. Just as Pete was about to make a suggestion, a figure rose almost beneath the horse's head, and a guttural Mexican voice told him to halt. Pete complied, telling the Mexican that they were from the Olla, that they had a message for Ortez.

"No use arguin'," said Brevoort—and Pete caught Brevoort's meaning as another man appeared.

"Ask him if Arguilla is here," said Brevoort. And Pete knew that these were Arguilla's men, for none of the Ortez vaquero's carried bolt-action rifles.

The sentry replied to Pete's question by poking him in the ribs with the muzzle of his rifle, and telling his to get down muy pronto.

"Tell him our message is for Arguilla—not Ortez," suggested Brevoort. "There's something wrong here. No use startin' anything," he added hastily, as he dismounted. "Ortez is agent for Arguilla's outfit. If you get a chance, watch what they do with our horses."

"We came to see El Comandante," said Pete as the sentries marched them to the house. "We're his friends—and you'll be coyote-meat before mornin' if you git too careless with that gun."

The sentry grunted and poked Pete in the back with his rifle, informing him in that terse universal idiom that he could "tell it to El Comandante."

From the outer darkness to the glare of the light in the 'dobe was a blinding transition. Pete and Brevoort blinked at the three figures in the main room: Arguilla, who sat at the long table, his heavy features glistening with sweat, his broad face flushed to a dull red, had his hand on a bottle of American whiskey, from which he had just filled his glass. Near him sat the owner of the rancho, Ortez, a man much older, bearded and lean, with face lined and interlined by weather and age. At the closed door stood a sentry. From without came raucous laughter and the singing of the soldiers. The sentry nearest Pete told Arguilla that the Gringos had been caught sneaking in at the back of the hacienda.

Pete briskly corrected this statement. "We're from the Olla—about the cattle—for your army," added Pete, no whit abashed as he proffered this bit of flattery.

"Si! You would talk with the patron then?"—and Arguilla gestured toward Ortez.

"We got orders from Brent—he's our boss—to make our talk to you," said Pete, glancing quickly at Brevoort.

"How did you know that I was here with my army?" queried Arguilla.

"Shucks! That's easy. It's in all the papers," asserted Pete, rather proud of himself, despite the hazard of the situation.

Arguilla's chest swelled noticeably. He rose and strutted up and down the room, as though pondering a grave and weighty question. Presently he turned to Ortez. "You have heard, señor?"

Ortez nodded. And in that nod Brevoort read the whole story. Ortez was virtually a prisoner on his own ranch. The noble captain of Liberty had been known to use his best friends in this way.

"When will the cattle arrive at the Olla?" asked Arguilla, seating himself.

"To-morrow, Señor Comandante. That is the word from Sam Brent."

"And you have come for the money, then?"

Pete barely hesitated. "No. Brent said there ain't no hurry about that. He said you could figure on two hundred head"—Pete recalled Harper's statement—"and that you would send your agent over to the Olla with the cash."

Arguilla glanced at Ortez. "You have heard, señor?"

Ortez nodded dejectedly. He had heard, but he dare not speak. As the trusted agent of the

financiers backing Arguilla, he had but recently been given the money for the purchase of these supplies, and almost on the heels of the messenger bearing the money had come Arguilla, who at once put Ortez under arrest, conveyed the money to his own coffers, and told the helpless Ortez that he could settle with the Gringo Brent according to the understanding between them.

Brevoort, silently eying Arguilla, saw through the scheme. Arguilla had determined to have both the money and the cattle. This explained his unwonted presence at the Ortez hacienda.

Arguilla took a stiff drink of whiskey, wiped his mustache and turned to Brevoort. "You have heard?" he said.

Brevoort knew enough Mexican to understand the question. "We'll tell Brent that everything is all right," he said easily. "But he's a dam' liar," he added in an undertone to Pete. Brevoort had made the mistake of assuming that because he did not understand Mexican, Arguilla did not understand English. Arguilla did not hear all that Brevoort said, but he caught the one significant word. His broad face darkened. These Gringos knew too much! He would hold them until the cattle had been delivered—and then they could join his army—or be shot. A mere detail, in either event.

"Put these men under arrest!" he commanded the sentries. "If they escape—you are dead men."

"What's the idee—" began Pete, but the noble captain waved his hand, dismissing all argument, along with the sentries, who marched their prisoners to the stable and told them plainly that they had much rather shoot them than be bothered with watching them; a hint that Pete translated for Brevoort's benefit.

One of the sentries lighted a dusty lantern and, placing it on the floor of a box stall, relieved his captives of their belts and guns. The sentries squatted at the open end of the stall and talked together while Brevoort and Pete sat each in a corner staring at the lantern.

Presently Brevoort raised his head. "Find out if either of 'em sabe American talk," he whispered.

"You sabe my talk?" queried Pete.

One of the sentries turned to stare at Pete. The Mexican shook his head.

"You're a liar by the watch—and your father was a pig and the son of a pig, wasn't he?" asked Pete, smiling pleasantly.

"Si!" said the Mexican, grinning as though Pete had made a friendly joke.

"And the other fella there, with ears like the barndoor in a wind, he's jest nacherally a horn-toad that likes whiskey and would jest as soon knife his mother as he would eat a rattlesnake for supper, eh?" And Pete smiled engagingly.

"Si. It is to laugh."

"You sabe whiskey?"

The Mexican shook his head.

"You sabe dam' fool?" Pete's manner was serious as though seeking information.

Again the Mexican shook his head.

"He sure don't," said Pete, turning to Brevoort—"or he'd 'a' jest nacherally plugged me. If a Chola don't know what whiskey or dam' fool means, he don't know American."

Meanwhile the two guards had turned to the natural expedient of gambling for Pete's belt and gun. The elaborately carved holster had taken their fancy. Pete and his companion watched them for a while.

Presently Pete attracted Brevoort's attention by moving a finger. "Hear anything?" he whispered.

"I hear 'em eatin'," said Brevoort. He was afraid to use the word "horses."

Pete nodded. "Speakin' of eatin'—you hungry, Ed?"

"Plumb empty. But I didn't know it till you asked me."

"Well, I been feelin' round in the hay—and right in my corner is a nest full of eggs. There's so doggone many I figure that some of 'em is gettin' kind of ripe. Did you ever git hit in the eye with a ripe egg?"

"Not that I recollect'."

"Well, you would—if you had. Now I don't know what that swelled up gent in there figures on doin' with us. And I don't aim to hang around to find out. These here Cholas is gamblin' for our hosses, right now. It kind of looks to me like if we stayed round here much longer we ain't goin' to need any hosses or anything else. I worked for a Mexican onct—and I sabe 'em. You got to kind of feel what they mean, and never mind what they are sayin'. Now I got a hunch that we don't get back to the Olla, never—'less we start right now."

"But how in—"

"Wait a minute. I'm goin' to dig round like I was goin' to take a sleep—and find these here eggs. Then I'm goin' to count 'em nacheral, and pile 'em handy to you. Then we rig up a deal like we was gamblin' for 'em, to kind of pass the time. If that don't git them two coyotes interested, why, nothin' will. Next to gamblin' a Chola likes to *watch* gamblin' better 'n 'most anything. When you git to win all my eggs, I make a holler like I'm mad. You been cheatin'. And if them two Cholas ain't settin' with their mouths open and lookin' at us, why, I don't know Cholas. They're listenin' right now—but they don't sabe. Go ahead and talk like you was askin' me somethin'."

"What's your game after we start beefin' about the eggs?"

"You pick up a couple—and I pick up a couple. First you want to move round so you kin swing your arm. When I call you a doggone bald-face short-horn, jest let your Chola have the eggs plumb in his eye. If they bust like I figure, we got a chanct to jump 'em—but we got to move quick. They's a old single-tree layin' right clost to your elbow, kind of half under the hay. Mebby it'll come handy. I figure to kick my friend in the face when I jump. Do I find them eggs?"

"Dig for 'em," drawled the Texan.

"If we miss the first jump, then they shoot, and that'll be our finish. But that's a heap better 'n gittin' stood up against a 'dobe wall. I jest found them eggs."

And Pete uttered an exclamation as he drew his hand from the straw behind him, and produced an egg. The Mexicans glanced up. Pete dug in the straw and fetched up another egg—and another. Brevoort leaned forward as though deeply interested in some sleight-of-hand trick. Egg after egg came from the abandoned nest. The Mexicans laughed. The supply of eggs seemed to be endless.

Finally Pete drew out his hand, empty. "Let's count 'em," he said, and straightway began, placing the eggs in a pile midway between himself and his companion. "Twenty-eight. She was a enterprisin' hen."

"I'll match for 'em," said Brevoort, hitching round and facing Pete.

"I'll go you!" And straightway Brevoort and Pete became absorbed in the game, seemingly oblivious to the Mexicans, who sat watching, with open mouths, utterly absorbed in their childish interest. Two Gringoes were gambling for bad eggs.

Pete won for a while. Then he began to lose. "They're ripe all right. I can tell by the color. Plumb ready to bust. The Cholas sabe that. Watch 'em grin. They 're waitin' for one of us to bust a egg. That'll be a big joke, and they'll 'most die a-laughin'—'cause it's a joke—and 'cause we're Gringoes."

"Then here's where I bust one," said Brevoort. "Get a couple in your hand. Act like you was chokin' to death. I'll laugh. Then I'll kind of get the smell of that lame egg and stand up quick. Ready?"

"Shoot," said Pete.

Brevoort tossed an egg on the pile. Several of the eggs broke with a faint "plop." Pete wrinkled his nose, and his face expressed such utter astonishment, disgust, even horror, as the full significance of the age of those eggs ascended to him, that he did not need to act his part. He got to his feet and backed away from those eggs, even as Brevoort rose slowly, as though just aware that the eggs were not altogether innocent. The two Mexicans had risen to their knees and rocked back and forth, laughing at the beautiful joke on the Gringoes. Plop!—Plop!—Plop! and three of the four eggs targeted an accurate twelve o'clock. Pete leaped and kicked viciously. His high heel caught one choking Mexican in the jaw just as Brevoort jumped and swung the single-tree. Pete grabbed up his belt and gun.

Brevoort had no need to strike again.

"You go see if the horses are saddled. I'll watch the door," said Brevoort.

Arguilla was awakened from a heavy sleep by the sound of a shot and the shrill yelp of one of his men. A soldier entered and saluted. "The Americans have gone," he reported.

Arguilla's bloated face went from red to purple, and he reached for his gun which lay on the chair near his bed. But the lieutenant who had reported the escape faced his chief fearlessly.

Arguilla hesitated. "Who guarded them?" he asked hoarsely.

The lieutenant named the men.

"Take them out and shoot them—at once."

"But, Señor Comandante, they may not stand. The Americans have beaten them so that they are as dead."

"Then shoot them where they lay—which will be easier to do."

CHAPTER XXIX

QUERY

Far out across the starlit gloom the two thoroughbreds raced side by side. They seemed to know what was required of them. A mile, two miles, three miles, and the night-fire of Arguilla's men was a flickering dot against the black wall of the night.

Brevoort pulled his horse to a walk. "We done left 'em looking at each other," he drawled.

"Two of 'em ain't," said Pete succinctly.

Brevoort chuckled. "I was tryin' that hard not to laugh when you smelled them aigs, that I come nigh missin' my chanct. You sure are some play-actor."

"Play-actor nothin'! I was doggone near sick. I kin smell 'em yet. Say, I'd like to know what'll happen to them two Cholas."

"Ain't you satisfied with what we done to 'em?"

"Yep. But Arguilla won't be. I'd hate to be in their boots—" From the south came the faint, sinister "pop! pop!" of rifle shots. Pete turned quickly toward his companion. "Right now," he concluded, shrugging his shoulders.

"We got trouble of our own," said Brevoort. "Brent tried to run his iron on us—but he got hold of the wrong iron. Now the deal will have to go through like The Spider figured. Mebby Brent knows that Arguilla's men are at the Ortez—and mebby he don't. But we don't say. We ride in and repo't that Ortez says O.K.—that his vaqueros are comin' for the cattle and that he is comin' with the cash. Brent won't bat an eye. I know him. He'll jest tell you to take the dough and ride to Sanborn and take the train for El Paso. Then he'll vamoze."

"How's that?"

"'Cause he knows that this is the finish. When he was handlin' stock from south of the line,—in small bunches, and pushin' it through fast,—we was all right. The Mexican punchers was doin' the stealin', sellin' the stuff to Brent. And Brent was sellin' to Arguilla's agent—which is Ortez. All Ortez did was pay for it and turn it over to Arguilla. Mexicans was stealin' from Mexicans and sellin' to Brent cheap, 'cause he paid cash, and Brent was sellin' it to Mexicans. The fellas that stole the stuff knew better 'n to try to sell to Arguilla. All they would 'a' got would 'a' been a promise. So they sells to Brent, who bought mighty cheap, but paid real money. That worked fine. But when Brent starts stealin' from white men on his side of the line—why, he knows that it is the finish—so he figures on a big haul—or The Spider does—kind of takes them ranchers up north by surprise and gets away with a couple of hundred head. But he knows, as sure's he's a foot high, that they'll trail him—so he forgets that The Spider said you was to collect from Ortez and bank the dough—and figures on collectin' it himself."

"Kind of a cold deal, eh, Ed?"

"All crooked deals is cold."

"But I wonder why Brent didn't send me down to the Ortez alone. What did he ring you in for?"

"Brent figured that I'd get wise to his scheme. You see, the understandin' with The Spider is, that I'm fo'man of the Olla, case Brent gets bumped off. Mebby The Spider thinks I'm square. Mebby he jest plays me against Brent to keep us watchin' each other. I dunno."

"You figure Arguilla will send old man Ortez over the line with the cash?"

"Yes. He will now. We done spoiled his game by gittin' loose. But I don't say that Arguilla won't try to raid the Olla and get that money back, after he's got the cattle movin' south. You see the high-steppers that are backin' Arguilla ain't trustin' him with a whole lot of cash, personal."

'Course, what he loots is his. But their money is goin' for grub and ammunition. They figure if he gets enough cash, he'll quit. And they don't want him to quit. He thinks he's the big smoke—but all he is is hired man to big money."

"He's been played, right along—same as us, eh?"

"Same as us."

"Well, Ed, I don't mind takin' a long chanct—but I sure don't aim to let any man make a monkey of me."

"Then you want to quit this game," said Brevoort. "Why don't you kind of change hosses and take a fresh start? You ain't been in the game so long but what you can pull out."

"I was thinkin' of that. But what's a fella goin' to do? Here we be, ridin' straight for the Olla. Right soon the sun'll be shinin' and the hosses millin' round in the corral and gittin' warmed up, and Brent'll be tellin' us he can use us helpin' push them cattle through to the south end: and I reckon we'll change our saddles and git right to work, thinkin' all the time of quittin', but keepin' along with the job jest the same. A fella kind of hates to quit any job till it's done. And I figure this here deal ain't even started to make trouble—yet. Wait till the T-Bar-T outfit gits a-goin'; and mebbly the Concho, and the Blue Range boys."

"Hand over your canteen a minute," said Brevoort. "I lost mine in the get-away."

Dawn found them inside the south line fence. In an hour they were at the 'dobe and clamoring for breakfast. The cook told them that Brent was at the north line camp, and had left no word for them.

Brevoort glanced quickly at Pete. Evidently Brent had not expected them to return so soon, if at all.

After breakfast they sauntered to the bunk-house, and pulled off their boots and lay down.

It was about noon when the cook called them. "The bunch is back," he said. "Harper just rode in. He says the old man is sore about somethin'."

"The Spider?" queried Brevoort.

"Nope, Sam."

"Goin' to ride over?" asked Pete, after the cook had left.

"No. But I'm goin' to throw a saddle on one of the never-sweats and I'm goin' to pick a good one."

"I reckon Blue Smoke'll do for me. You goin' to pull your freight, Ed?"

"We got our runnin' orders. The minute old man Ortez hands over that cash, there'll be a hole in the scenery where we was."

"That's my idee. But suppose we make it through to El Paso all right. What do we do next?"

"That's kind of like jumpin' off the aidge of the Grand Cañon and askin' yourself what you're goin' to do while you're in the air. We ain't lit yet."

CHAPTER XXX

BRENT'S MISTAKE

Following the trail that Brevoort and Pete had taken from the Ortez rancho, Arguilla and his men rode north and with them rode Ortez and several of his vaqueros. Within a few miles of the Olla the ragged soldiery swung west to the shelter of the low hills that ran parallel to the Olla line, while Ortez and his men rode directly to the Olla fence and entered a coulee near the big gate, where they waited the arrival of Brent and the herd.

About two hours before sundown one of Arguilla's lieutenants appeared on the edge of the coulee where he could overlook the country. At his signal the soldiers were to join the Ortez riders, but not until Brent and his men had the cattle delivered.

Arguilla, who was to keep out of sight, had told Ortez to pay the amount stipulated by Brent—and at the old established rate of twenty dollars a head—which meant that upon receipt of the

cattle Ortez would give the foreman of the Olla four thousand dollars in gold. Ortez knew that Arguilla contemplated killing Brent and his men and recovering the money. Although his sympathies were with his own people, Ortez felt that such treachery was too black, even for a leader of guerillas.

He realized that the first word of warning to Brent would mean his own doom and the death of his men in the battle which would follow, for he knew the Gringo cowboys would fight to the last man. Against this he weighed the probability of a fight if he did not speak. In either event he would be dishonored in the eyes of the powers who had trusted him with handling the finances of the cause. It was in this state of mind that he waited for the arrival of the men whom he considered doomed, never imagining for a moment that Brent himself anticipated treachery.

The sun had almost touched the western sky-line when a solitary rider spurred out from the great gate of the Olla and up to Ortez, who recognized in him one of the young vaqueros that had escaped from Arguilla's guards the preceding night.

"Here's our tally." Pete handed Ortez a slip of paper. "Two hundred and three head. My patron says to call it two hundred even, and to give you a receipt for the money when you turn it over to me."

Arguilla's lieutenant had expected to see the herd turned over to Ortez before the payment of any moneys. He hesitated as to whether or not he should ride to the rim of the coulee and signal his company to interfere with the transaction then and there in the name of his superior officer. The lieutenant did not believe that Ortez would turn over the money for a mere slip of paper. But Ortez, strangely enough, seemed only too eager to close the transaction. Stepping to his horse, he took two small canvas sacks from his saddle-pockets. Still the lieutenant hesitated. He had had no instructions covering such a contingency.

"I await your receipt, señor," said Ortez as he handed the money to Pete.

Pete drew a folded slip of paper from his pocket and gave it quickly to Ortez. "Brent'll push the cattle through muy pronto." And whirling his horse round under spur, he was halfway back to the Olla gate before the lieutenant thought of signaling to Arguilla.

From the vantage of the higher ground the lieutenant could see that the gate was already open—that the Gringos were slowly pushing the cattle through, and out to the desert. He waved his serape. Almost on the instant Arguilla's men appeared in the distance, quiring their ponies as they raced toward the coulee. The lieutenant turned and gazed at the herd, which, from bunching through the gateway, had spread out fanwise. Already the Ortez vaqueros were riding out to take charge. But something was happening over near the Olla gate. The American cowboys had scattered and were riding hard, and behind them faint flashes cut the dusk and answering flashes came from those who fled. The lieutenant shouted and spread his arms, signaling Arguilla to stop as he and his men swung round the mouth of the coulee below. Some thirty riders from the T-Bar-T, the Blue Range, and the Concho swept through the gateway and began shooting at the Ortez vaqueros. Arguilla saw that his own plan had gone glimmering. Ortez had in some way played the traitor. Moreover, they were all on American territory. The herd had stampeded and scattered. In the fading light Arguilla saw one after another of the Ortez vaqueros go down. Did this noble captain of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity rush to the rescue of his countrymen? He did not. Cursing, he swung his horse toward the south, followed by his amazed and altogether uncomprehending soldiery. There had been too many Gringos in that wild, shrilling cavalcade to suit his fancy. Meanwhile the Mexican lieutenant wisely disappeared down the western edge of the coulee and rode wide until he deemed it safe to change his course and follow in the dusty wake of his noble leader's "strategic retreat."

Only one of the Ortez riders escaped the sudden and furious visitation of the northern cattlemen, and he escaped because his horse, mortally wounded, had fallen upon him. In the succeeding darkness he was passed unnoticed by the returning Americans.

The Olla men, also taken by surprise, had acted quickly. Better mounted than most of their pursuers, who rode tired horses, the Olla riders spread at the first warning shout. Familiar with the country, they were able to get away unscathed, partly because the attention of the pursuers was centered chiefly on the herd.

It had been a case of each man for himself with the Olla riders, the exceptions to this being Brevoort and Pete, who had ridden together from the moment that Pete had shouted that sudden warning to his companions at the gateway, where they had sat their horses waiting for him to return from his mission to Ortez. Brent himself had posted a lookout at the northern gateway of the ranch, with instructions to watch for any possible pursuit. This cowboy, wise in his generation, had caught sight of a large body of riders bearing down from the north. He knew by the way they rode that they meant business. He knew also that they were too many for the Olla men. He focused his glass on them, got one good look, and calmly turned his horse and rode along the line fence to an arroyo, where he dismounted and waited until the visiting gentlemen had got well onto the Olla territory. Then he mounted and took his leisurely way toward space. He knew that the Olla, as a safe and paying proposition, had ceased to exist.

Brent, mounted on one of the thoroughbreds, lost no time in heading for Sanborn and the

railroad, once he had ridden clear of the running skirmish with the northerners. He surmised that Pete and Brevoort would make for Sanborn—and they had The Spider's money. Brent also knew that he had a faster horse than either of them. If he could reach Sanborn ahead of them, he would have the advantage of cover—and of taking them by surprise...

The country was fairly open from the eastern boundary of the Olla to within a few miles of Sanborn, where a veritable forest of cacti had sprung up—one of those peculiar patches of desert growth, outlined in a huge square as definitely as though it had been planted by man. The wagon-road passed close to the northern edge of this freakish forest, and having passed, swung off toward the railroad, which it finally paralleled. It was in this vantage-ground of heavy shadow that Brent had planned to waylay Brevoort and Pete. To avoid chance discovery, Brent had ridden considerably out of his way to keep clear of the regular trail from the Olla to Sanborn, and had lost more time than he realized. Brevoort, on the contrary, had taken the regular trail, which joined the main wagon-road.

Pete and Brevoort rode easily, as the local made the Sanborn stop at six in the morning. Moreover, they did not care to spend any great length of time in Sanborn. They had planned to leave their horses at the livery stable—to be called for later.

At first they talked of the raid, the probable fate of Ortez and his men, and of Arguilla's flight. And from that they came to considering their own plans which, if successful, would find them in El Paso with several thousand dollars which belonged in reality to Arguilla's backers. There was an unvoiced but evident understanding between them that they would keep together so long as safety permitted. Pete had made up his mind to look for work on some southern ranch—and have done with the high trails of outlawry. Brevoort, falling into his mood, as much because he liked Pete as anything else, had decided to "throw in" with him. Had Pete suggested robbing a bank, or holding up a train, the big, easy-going Texan would have fallen in with the suggestion quite as readily, not because Pete had any special influence over him, but purely because Pete's sprightliness amused and interested him. Moreover, Pete was a partner that could be depended upon in fair weather or foul.

Their plan once made, they became silent, each busy with his own more intimate thoughts: Brevoort wondering what Pete would say if he were to suggest dividing the money and making for the coast and Alaska—and Pete endeavoring to reconcile himself to the idea that The Spider was actually Boca's father. For Pete had been thinking of Boca, even while he had been talking with Brevoort. It seemed that he always thought of her just before some hidden danger threatened. He had been thinking of her—even aside from her presence in the patio—that night when the posse had entered Showdown. He had thought of her while riding to the Ortez rancho—and now he was thinking of her again... He raised his head and glanced around. The starlit desert was as soundless as the very sky itself. The soft creak of the saddles, the breathing of the horses, the sand-muffled sound of their feet... Directly ahead loomed a wall of darkness. Pete touched Brevoort's arm and gestured toward it.

"They call it the Devil's Graveyard," said Brevoort. "A sizable bunch of cactus alongside the road. We're closer to Sanborn than I figured."

"Well, we can't go any slower 'less we git off and set down," Pete remarked. "Blue Smoke here is fightin' the bit. He ain't no graveyard hoss."

"I notice he's been actin' nervous—and only jest recent."

"He always runs his fool head off—if I let him," asserted Pete. And he fell silent, thinking of Boca and the strange tricks that Fate plays on the righteous and wicked alike. He was startled out of his reverie by Brevoort. "Mebby I'm dreamin'," whispered the Texan, "but I'm plumb certain I seen somethin' drift into that cactus-patch."

"Cattle," said Pete.

"No. No cattle in these parts."

"Stray—mebby."

"I dunno. Jest sit light in your saddle and watch your hoss's ears. He'll tell you right quick if there's another hoss in there."

Pete knew that the Texan would not have spoken without some pertinent reason. They were drawing close to the deeper shadow of the cacti, which loomed strangely ominous in the faint light of the stars. Brevoort's horse, being the faster walker, was a little ahead and seemingly unconscious of anything unusual in the shadows, when Blue Smoke, range-bred and alert, suddenly stopped.

"Put 'em up—quick!" came from the shadows.

Pete's hand dropped to his holster, but before he could jerk out his gun, Brevoort had fired at the sound—once, twice, three times... Pete heard the trampling of a frightened horse somewhere in the brush.

"I got him," Brevoort was saying.

Pete's face was cold with sweat. "Are you hit, Ed?" he said.

"No, he missed me. He was right quick, but I had him lined against that openin' there before he said a word. If he'd 'a' stood back and kept still he could have plugged us when we rode past. He was too sure of his game."

"Who was it, Ed?"

"I got one guess. We got the money. And he got what was comin' to him." Brevoort swung down and struck a match. "I owed you that, Brent," he said as the match flared up and went out.

"Brent!" exclaimed Pete.

Brevoort mounted and they rode on past the sinister place, in the chill silence of reaction from the tense and sudden moment when death had spoken to them from the shadows where now was silence and that voiceless thing that had once been a man. "Got to kill to live!" Pete shivered as they swung from the shadows and rode out across the open, and on down the dim, meandering road that led toward the faint, greenish light glimmering above the desert station of Sanborn.

CHAPTER XXXI

FUGITIVE

Rodeo, Hachita, Monument—long hours between each town as the local did its variable thirty-five miles an hour across the southern end of New Mexico. It was Pete's first experience in traveling by rail, and true to himself he made the most of it. He used his eyes, and came to the conclusion that they were aboard a very fast train—a train that "would sure give a thoroughbred the run of its life"—Pete's standard of speed being altogether of the saddle—and that more people got on and off that train than could possibly have homes in that vast and uninhabited region. The conductor was an exceedingly popular individual. Every one called him by his "front name," which he acknowledged pleasantly in like manner. Pete wondered if the uniformed gentleman packed a gun; and was somewhat disappointed when he discovered that that protuberance beneath the conductor's brass-buttoned coat was nothing more deadly than a leather wallet, pretty well filled with bills and loose silver—for that isolated railroad did a good cash business and discriminating conductors grew unobtrusively wealthy. And what was still more strange to Pete was the fact that the conductor seemed to know where each person was going, without having to refer to any penciled notation or other evident data.

The conductor was surprisingly genial, even to strangers, for, having announced that the next station was El Paso, he took the end seat of the combination baggage and smoking car, spread out his report sheet, and as he sorted and arranged the canceled tickets, he chatted with Pete and Brevoort, who sat facing him. Had they heard the news? Brevoort shook his head. Well, there had been a big fight down along the line, between the northern cattlemen and Arguilla's soldiers. It was rumored that several American cowboys had been killed. He had heard this from the agent at Hermanas, who had "listened in" on the wire to El Paso. Perhaps they had heard about it, though, as they had come up from that way. No? Well, the El Paso papers already had the news, by wire. How was the cattle business going, anyway?

Brevoort said that it was pretty fair.

The conductor knew of a nice little hotel near the station—in fact he stopped there himself. El Paso was the end of his run. If the boys were going to see the town, they couldn't do better than to stop at this hotel. Clean beds, good food, quiet, and reasonable as to rates.

Pete was about to say something when Brevoort touched him gently with his knee.

"We was lookin' for a place like that," said Brevoort, suddenly loquacious. "We sure aim to see this town. We just been paid off—we was workin' for the Bar-Cross—and we figured on seein' a little high life a-fore we went to punchin' again. Is that hotel you was speakin' about open all night?"

The conductor chuckled. "Ain't been closed a minute for six years that I know. Mostly railroad men. And say, if you figure on being in town more than a couple of days, you can save money by taking your room by the week."

"Thanks," said Brevoort. "We aim to stay a week, anyhow."

"Well, they'll use you all right," asserted the conductor. "And if you're looking for a place to buy anything—clothes or collars or shirts—why, right across from the hotel there's as fine a little clothing-store as you can find in town. The man that runs is a friend of mine, and he'll use you white. Just tell him I sent you. Stokes is his name—Len Stokes."

"Thanks, neighbor," said Brevoort, and Pete thought that Brevoort's tone was the least bit sarcastic.

"That's all right," said the genial conductor. "I always like to see the boys have a good time."

Pete himself was a trifle suspicious of the conductor's solicitude as to their welfare, naturally unaware that that worthy official got a rake-off on all customers mentioning his name at the hotel and clothing-store.

He gathered up his reports and tickets, snapped a rubber band round them, and dropped them in his capacious pocket. "We're eight minutes late," he remarked, glancing at his watch. "Now what—" He rose and made for the end door as the train slowed up and stopped at an isolated siding. Pete glanced out and saw a little red box of a building, four or five empty freight cars, and a curve of rail that swung off south from the main line. No passengers got on or off the train, but Pete noticed that the conductor was talking earnestly with a hollow-cheeked, blue-overalled man who had just handed him a slip of paper.

The conductor waved his arm. The train pulled out. A little later he came and took his seat opposite Pete. Conductor Stokes seemed even more genial than ever, elaborating on the opportunities for "a good time" in El Paso, and reiterating the hope that they would make themselves at home at his hotel. He joked and talked familiarly about the more notorious sections of the town, warned them to be on the lookout for thugs, and finally excused himself and entered the baggage compartment.

Pete saw Brevoort lean forward and hastily snatch up a crumpled slip of paper which had dropped from the conductor's pocket as he got up. Brevoort scanned the paper, crumpled it, and tossed it out in the aisle.

"We didn't see that," he told Pete.

"What was it?"

"Forget it," said Brevoort, as the door opened and the conductor, glancing about, finally saw and recovered the service wire. "Running orders," he said, as he stuffed it in his pocket and moved on down the aisle. Pete gazed out of the window, apparently absorbed in looking at the desert. Brevoort rolled a cigarette, and nodded casually.

The door in the far end of the car slammed. Brevoort turned to Pete. "Look straight ahead and—listen. That paper you saw was a telegraph from the agent at Sanborn sayin' a man had been found shot, and to watch out for two cow-punchers that bought tickets for El Paso—which is us. That's how we came to stop at the junction back there, which ain't a regular stop. It means there'll be a marshal waitin' for us at El Paso."

"Then let's git off this doggone thing," suggested Pete.

"She stops onct before we git in," said Brevoort. "It's gittin' dark—and we got one chanct. When she slows down, we go into the baggage-car there and tell the boss we're lookin' for our war-bag, which we didn't have. Jest about the time she stops, we drop off. The side door's open."

"We'll be plumb afoot," said Pete.

"Yes. And we'll have to hole up somewhere till we git some store-clothes—and change our looks—and mebbey our luck, which is runnin' bad right now."

"Do we split up when we hit town?" queried Pete.

"We got to: and you want to git rid of that there cash just as quick as you kin. Got any of your own money on you?"

"Got a couple of month's pay. You got the tickets. I'll give you that."

"Forget it! Small change don't count right now. Awhile back I was thinkin' of puttin' it up to you that we split the big money and take a little pasear up to Alaska, where it ain't so warm. The Spider dassent squeal to the law, bein' in bad hisself. We could sure make a get-away with it. But that there telegraph done settled that deal."

"It was settled afore that, Ed."

"Meanin' you wouldn't split, anyhow?"

"That's what."

"But it's crooked money, Pete. And it ain't lucky. Supposin' we get caught? Who gits the

money? The Spider, or Arguilla's bunch, or you or me? Not on your life! The cops get it—and keep it."

"That's all right. But if I git through, these here pesos goes to that bank. Anyhow, you said it ain't lucky money. So I aim to git away from it pronto. Then I'm square with The Spider—and I quit."

"You can't shake the game that easy, Pete. I quit when we started for Sanborn—and what did we run into? And you bein' with me gits you in bad, likewise."

"If that's what's botherin' you, why, I'll take the chanct, and stick," said Pete.

"Nope. Right now I'm lookin' out for myself, and nobody else. If they kin hang that last deal onto me—and you know what I mean—why, your Uncle Ed'll sure have to take the long trail. And I aim to keep a-ridin' in the sun for a spell yet. We're gittin' clost to town. Mebby we can drop off easy and sift out of sight without any fuss. Then we got a chanct to change our clothes and git rid of that dough. They'll be lightin' the lamps right soon. Them saddle-bags buckled?"

"They sure are."

"All right. When you hear 'em whistle for the crossin' jest stand up and drop 'em out of the window. Nobody kin see you from behind. Then we mosey into the baggage-car and tell the agent in there we're lookin' for our war-bag. Bein' express messenger, he packs a gun. You want to step lively for that side door."

"I git you, Ed. What's all them lights out there?"

"That's the town. She's jest whistlin' for the crossin'. Dump your freight—easy, like you was lookin' out at the scenery. That's her. Now, stretch your arms and kind of look round. The conductor is out on the back platform. Come on!"

The express messenger was leaning from the side door in the act of swinging a parcel to the local agent at the Grossing, when Brevoort and Pete entered. With his back toward them and absorbed in launching the package he did not see them as they angled quickly to the other door and dropped off into the night. The train slowed almost to a stop, the grinding brakes eased, and it drew away, leaving Pete and Brevoort squatting behind a row of empty oil barrels along the track.

CHAPTER XXXII

EL PASO

As the tail-lights of the train disappeared, Pete and Brevoort rose and walked down the track several hundred yards. Pete was certain that they had retraced too far, but Brevoort assured him that he knew about where to look for the saddle-bags. "I noticed that we passed a pile of new ties, jest after you dropped 'em," said the Texan.

Pete insisted that they had come too far until they almost walked into the ties. They searched about in the darkness, feeling along the ground with their feet, until finally Brevoort stumbled over the saddle-bags at the bottom of the ditch along the right-of-way. He picked them up. Pete was still rummaging around as Brevoort straightened. For an instant the Texan was tempted to keep up the pretense of searching and so drift farther from Pete, until under cover of darkness he could decamp with the money—across the border and make a fresh start with it—as he told himself, "something to start on."

But suddenly, and most absurdly alien to his present mood, came the vivid recollection of Pete's face when he had smelled those unforgettable eggs in the box-stall of the Ortez stables. Why this should have changed Brevoort's hasty inclination is explainable, perhaps, through that strange transition from the serious to the humorous; that quick relief from nervous tension that allows a man to readjust himself toward the universe. Brevoort cursed softly to himself as he strode to Pete. "Here they are. Found them back there a piece. Now we got to foot it acrost this end of the town and drift wide of the white-lights. Down to the south end we kin get somethin' to eat, and some new clothes. Them Jew stores is open late."

Following the river road they skirted the town until opposite the Mexican quarter, where, Brevoort explained, they would be comparatively safe, so long as they attended to their own business.

Pete was amazed by the lights and the clamor—a stringed orchestra playing in this open front, and a hot-dog vender declaiming in this open front; a moving-picture entrance brilliantly

illuminated, and a constant movement of folk up and down the streets in free-and-easy fashion, and he almost forgot the cumulative hazards of their companionship in experiencing his first plunge into city life. Brevoort, who knew the town, made for a Mexican lodging-house, where they took a room above the noisy saloon, washed, and after downing a drink of vile whiskey, crossed the street to a dingy restaurant. Later they purchased some inconspicuous "town-clothes" which they carried back to their room.

Pete was for staying right where they were until morning, but Brevoort, naturally restless, suggested that they go to a moving-picture theater. They changed their clothes. Pete felt decidedly uncomfortable in the coat, and was only persuaded to wear it when Brevoort pointed out that it was a case of either leave their guns in the room or wear something to cover them. Then came the question of what they were to do with the money. Pete was for taking it along with them, but Brevoort vetoed the suggestion. "It's as safe here as in a bank," he said, and taking the two sacks from the saddle-pockets he lowered each one gently into the big water-pitcher. "Nothin' in there but water, which don't interest a Chola nohow. But I'll cinch it." Which he did downstairs, as he drew a handful of gold pieces from his pocket, counted them carefully, and left something like fifty dollars with the proprietor, asking him to take care of the money for them, as they did not want to get "plumb broke" the first night in town. The Mexican grinned understandingly. He was familiar with the ways of cowboys. Their money would be safe with him.

Outside Pete asked Brevoort if he had not "jest about made a present of fifty to that Mex."

"Not any. He figures he'll get his share of it when we git to hittin' the high-spots—which we don't aim to hit, this journey. That Mexican sure thinks he's got all the money we own except what's on us right now. So he won't ever think of goin' through our stuff upstairs. That fifty was insurance on the big money. Let's go where we kin git a real drink—and then we'll have a look at a show."

The "real drink" was followed by another. When Brevoort suggested a third, Pete shook his head. "It's all right, if you want to hit it, Ed—but it's takin' a big chanct. Somethin' might slip. 'T ain't the drinkin'—but it's the drinkin' right now."

"Reckon you 're right," concurred Brevoort. "But I ain't had a drink for so long—let's go see that show."

They crowded into a cheap and odoriferous nickel theater, and straightway Pete forgot where he was and all about who he was in watching the amazing offerings of the screen. The comedy feature puzzled him. He thought that he was expected to laugh—folks all round him were laughing—but the unreality of the performance left him staring curiously at the final tangle of a comedy which struggled to be funny to the bitter end. His attention was keen for the next picture, a Western drama, entitled "The Battle of the Border," which ran swiftly to lurid climax after climax, until even Pete's unsophisticated mind doubted that any hero could have the astounding ability to get out of tight places as did the cowboy hero of this picture. This sprightly adventurer had just killed a carload of Mexicans, leaped from the roof of an adobe to his horse, and made off into the hills—they were real hills of the desert country, sure enough—as buoyantly as though he had just received his pay-check and was in great haste to spend it, never once glancing back, and putting his horse up grades at a pace that would have made an old-timer ashamed of himself had he to ride sixty miles to the next ranch before sundown—as the lead on the picture stated. Still, Pete liked that picture. He knew that kind of country—when suddenly he became aware of the tightly packed room, the foul air laden with the fumes of humanity, stale whiskey, and tobacco, the shuffling of feet as people rose and stumbled through the darkness toward the street. Pete thought that was the end of the show, but as Brevoort made no move to go, he fixed his attention on the screen again. Immediately another scene jumped into the flickering square. Pete stiffened. Before him spread a wide cañon. A tiny rider was coming down the trail from the rim. At the bottom was a Mexican 'dobe, a ramshackle stable and corral. And there hung the Olla beneath an acacia. A saddle lay near the corral bars. Several horses moved about lazily... The hero of the recent gun-fight was riding into the yard... Some one was coming from the 'dobe. Pete almost gasped as a Mexican girl, young, lithe, and smiling, stepped into the foreground and held out her hands as the hero swung from his horse. The girl was taller and more slender than Boca—yet in the close-up which followed, while her lover told her of the tribulations he had recently experienced, the girl's face was the face of Boca—the same sweetly curved and smiling mouth, the large dark eyes, even the manner in which her hair was arranged...

Pete nudged Brevoort. "I reckon we better drift," he whispered.

"How's that, Pete?"

"The girl there in the picture. Mebby you think I'm loco, but there's somethin' always happens every time I see her."

"You got a hunch, eh?"

"I sure got one."

"Then we play it." And Brevoort rose. They blinked their way to the entrance, pushed through

the crowd at the doorway, and started toward their room. "I didn't want to say anything in there," Brevoort explained. "You can't tell who's sittin' behind you. But what was you gettin' at, anyhow?"

"You recollect my tellin' you about that trouble at Showdown? And the girl was my friend? Well, I never said nothin' to you about it, but I git to thinkin' of her and I can kind of see her face like she was tryin' to tell me somethin', every doggone time somethin's goin' to go wrong. First off, I said to myself I was loco and it only happened that way. But the second time—which was when we rode to the Ortez ranch—I seen her again. Then when we was driftin' along by that cactus over to Sanborn I come right clost to tellin' you that I seen her—not like I kin see you, but kind of inside—and I knowed that somethin' was a-comin' wrong. Then, first thing I know—and I sure wasn't thinkin' of her nohow—there is her face in that picture. I tell you, Ed, figuring out your trail is all right, and sure wise—but I'm gettin' so I feel like playin' a hunch every time."

"Well, a drink will fix you up. Then we'll mosey over to the room. Our stuff'll be there all right."

"T ain't the money I'm thinkin' about. It's you and me."

"Forget it!" Brevoort slapped Pete on the shoulder. "Come on in here and have something."

"I'll go you one more—and then I quit," said Pete. For Pete began to realize that Brevoort's manner was slowly changing. Outwardly he was the same slow-speaking Texan, but his voice had taken on a curious inflection of recklessness which Pete attributed to the few but generous drinks of whiskey the Texan had taken. And Pete knew what whiskey could do to a man. He had learned enough about that when with the horse-trader. Moreover, Pete considered it a sort of weakness—to indulge in liquor when either in danger or about to face it. He had no moral scruples whatever. He simply viewed it from a utilitarian angle. A man with the fine edge of his wits benumbed by whiskey was apt to blunder. And Pete knew only too well that they would have need for all of their wits and caution to get safely out of El Paso. And to blunder now meant perhaps a fight with the police—for Pete knew that Brevoort would never suffer arrest without making a fight—imprisonment, and perhaps hanging. He knew little of Brevoort's past record, but he knew that his own would bulk big against him. Brevoort had taken another drink after they had tacitly agreed to quit. Brevoort was the older man, and Pete had rather relied on his judgment. Now he felt that Brevoort's companionship would eventually become a menace to their safety.

"Let's get back to the room, Ed," he suggested as they came out of the saloon.

"Hell, we ain't seen one end of the town yet."

"I'm goin' back," declared Pete.

"Got another hunch?"—and Brevoort laughed.

"Nope. I'm jest figurin' this cold. A good gambler don't drink when he's playin'. And we're sure gamblin'—big."

"Reckon you're right, pardner. Well, we ain't far from our blankets. Come on."

The proprietor of the rooming-house was surprised to see them return so soon and so unauspiciously. He counted out Brevoort's money and gave it back to him.

"Which calls for a round before we hit the hay," said Brevoort.

The room upstairs was hot and stuffy. Brevoort raised the window, rolled a cigarette and smoked, gazing down on the street, which had become noisier toward midnight. Pete emptied the pitcher and stowed the wet sacks of gold in his saddle-pockets.

"Told you everything was all right," said Brevoort, turning to watch Pete as he placed the saddlebags at the head of the bed.

"All right, so far," concurred Pete.

"Say, pardner, you losin' your nerve? You act so dam' serious. Hell, we ain't dead yet!"

"No, I ain't losin' my nerve. But I'm tellin' you I been plumb scared ever since I seen that picture. I don't feel right, Ed."

"I ain't feelin' so happy myself," muttered Brevoort, turning toward the window.

Pete, sitting on the edge of the bed, noticed that Brevoort's face was tense and unnatural. Presently Brevoort tossed his cigarette out of the window and turned to Pete. "I been thinkin' it out," he began slowly. "That hunch of yours kind of got me goin'. The best thing we kin do is to get out of this town quick. We got to split—no way round that. We're all right so far, but by tomorrow they'll be watchin' every train and every hotel, and doggin' every stranger to see what he's doin'. What you want to do is to take them sacks, wrap 'em up in paper, put ole E. H. Hodges's name on it—he's president of the Stockmen's Security Bank here, and a ole pal of The Spider's—and pack it over to the express company and git a receipt. *They'll* sure git that money to the bank. And then you want to fan it. If you jest was to walk out of town, no'th, you could

catch a train for Alamogordo, mebby, and then git a hoss and work over toward the Organ Range, which is sure open country—and cattle. You can't go back the way we come—and they'll be watchin' the border south."

"Where is that express outfit, anyhow?"

"You know that street where we seen the show? Well, if you keep right on you'll come to the Square and the express company is right on the corner."

"All right, Ed. But what you goin' to do?"

"I'm goin' to git a soogun to-morrow mornin', roll my stuff and head for the border, afoot. I'm a ranch-hand lookin' for work. I know where I kin get across the river. Then I aim to hit for the dry spot, bush out, and cross the line where they won't be lookin' for a man afoot, nohow."

"Why don't you git to movin' right now?" Brevoort smiled curiously. "They's two reasons, pardner; one is that I don't want to git stood up by a somebody wantin' to know where I'm goin' at night with my war-bag—and I sure aim to take my chaps and boots and spurs and stuff along, for I'm like to need 'em. Then you ain't out of town yet."

"Which is why you're stickin' around."

"If we only had a couple of hosses, Pete. It's sure hell bein' afoot, ain't it?"

"It sure is. Say, Ed, we got to split, anyhow. Why don't you git to goin'? It ain't like you was quittin' me cold."

"You're a mighty white kid, Pete. And I'm goin' to tell you right now that you got a heap more sense and nerve than me, at any turn of the game. You been goin' round to-night on cold nerve and I been travelin' on whiskey. And I come so close to gittin' drunk that I ain't sure I ain't yet. It was liquor first started me ridin' the high trail."

Brevoort had seated himself on the bed beside Pete. As the big Texan rolled a cigarette, Pete saw that his hands trembled. For the first time that evening Pete noticed that his companion was under a high tension. He could hardly believe that Brevoort's nerve was really shaken.

The street below had grown quieter. From below came the sound of a door being closed. Brevoort started, cursed, and glanced at Pete. "Closin' up for the night," he said. Pete quickly shifted his gaze to the open window. He did not want Brevoort to know that he had noticed the start, or those hands that trembled.

They rose early, had breakfast at the restaurant across the street, and returned to the room, Brevoort with a sogun in which he rolled and corded his effects and Pete with some brown paper in which he wrapped the sacks of gold. Brevoort borrowed a pencil from the proprietor and addressed the package.

"But how's the bank goin' to know who it's from?" queried Pete,

"That's right. I'll put The Spider's name here in the corner. Say, do you know we're takin' a whole lot of trouble for a man that wouldn't lift a hand to keep us from bein' sent up?" And Brevoort weighed the package thoughtfully. "By rights we ought to hang onto this dough. We earned it."

"I sure don't want any of it, Ed. I'm through with this game."

"I reckon you're right. Well, next off, you git it to that express office. I'll wait till you git back."

"What's the use of my comin' back, anyhow?" queried Pete. "We paid for our room last night."

"Ain't you goin' to take your stuff along? You can pack it same as mine. Then when you git to a ranch you are hooked up to ride."

"Guess you're right, Ed. Well, so-long."

"See you later."

Brevoort, who seemed to have recovered his nerve, added, "I aim to light out jest as quick as you git back."

Pete was so intent on his errand that he did not see Conductor Stokes, who stood in the doorway of the El Paso House, talking to a man who had a rowdy rolled under his arm, wore overalls, and carried a dinner-pail. The conductor glanced sharply at Pete as he passed, then turned abruptly, and stepped to a man who stood talking to the clerk at the desk.

"I jest saw one of 'em," said the conductor. "I never forget a face. He was rigged out in town-clothes—but it was him—all right."

"You sure, Len?"

"Pretty darned sure."

"Well, we can find out. You set down over there in the window and be reading a paper. I'll go out and follow him. If he comes back this way, you take a good look at him and give me the high sign if it's one of 'em. And if it is, he'll be connectin' up with the other one, sooner or later. I'll jest keep my eye on him, anyway. You say he had on a dark suit and is dark-complexioned and young?"

"Yes—that one. The other was bigger and taller and had light hair and gray eyes. Both of 'em were in their range clothes on number three."

"All right." And the plain-clothes man hastened out and up the street until he had "spotted" Pete, just entering the doorway of the express office.

Pete came out presently, glanced about casually, and started back for the room. Half a block behind him followed the plain-clothes man, who glanced in as he passed the hotel. The conductor nodded. The plain-clothes man hastened on down the street. He saw Pete turn a corner several blocks south. When the detective arrived at the corner Pete was just entering the door of the little clothing-store next to the restaurant. Presently Pete came out and crossed to the saloon. The detective sauntered down the opposite walk and entering the restaurant telephoned to headquarters. Then he called for coffee and sat watching the saloon across the way.

Brevoort, who had been sitting on the bed gazing down at the street, saw Pete turn the corner and enter the store. He also saw the plain-clothes man enter the restaurant and thought nothing of it until presently he saw another man enter the place. These two were talking together at the table near the front window. Brevoort grew suspicious. The latest arrival had not ordered anything to eat, nor had he greeted the other as men do when they meet. And they did not seem quite the type of men to dine in such a place. Pete, cording his belongings in the new sogan, heard Brevoort muttering something, and turned his head.

"I'm watchin' a couple of fellas acrost the street," explained Brevoort. "Keep back out of sight a minute."

Pete, on his knees, watched Brevoort's face. "Anything wrong, Ed?" he queried presently.

"I dunno. Jest step round behind me. Kin you see that eatin'-place?"

"Yes."

"Did you see either of them guys when you was out on the street?"

"Why, no. Hold on a minute! That one with the gray clothes was standin' on the corner by the express office when I come out. I recollect now. He was smokin' a cigar."

"Yes. And he thrun it away when he went in there. I seen him at the telephone there on the desk—and pretty soon along comes his friend. Looks kind of queer that he was up at the Square when you was, and then trails down here where we be."

"You think mebbby—"

"I dunno. If it is we better drift out at the back afore any of 'em gits round there."

"And leave our stuff, eh?"

"Yes. We got to move quick. They 're sizin' up this buildin' right now. Don't show yourself. Wait! One of 'em is comin' out and he's headed over here."

Brevoort drew back, and stepping to the door opened it and strode swiftly down the dim hall to a window at its farther end. Below the window was a shed, and beyond the farther edge of the shed-roof was an alley. He hastened back to the room and closed and locked the door. "You loco?" he growled. Pete had drawn a chair to the window and was sitting there, looking out as casually as though there was no danger whatever.

"I thought you made your get-away," said Pete, turning. "I was jest keepin' that hombre interested in watchin' me. Thought if he seen somebody here he wouldn't make no quick move to follow you."

"So you figured I quit you, eh? And you go and set in that winda so they'd think we was in the room here? And you done it to give me a chanct? Well, you got me wrong. I stick."

"Then I reckon somebody's goin' to git hurt," said Pete, "for I'm goin' to stick too."

Brevoort shook his head. "The first guy most like come over to ask the boss who's up here in this room. The boss tells him about us. Now, them coyotes sure would like it a heap better to git us out on the street—from behind—than to run up against us holed up here, for they figure somebody'll git hurt. Now you slip down that hall, easy, and drop onto the shed under the winda

and fan it down the alley back there. You got a chanct. I sized up the layout."

"Nothin' doin'. Why don't you try it yourself?"

"'Cause they'll git one of us, anyhow, and it'll be the fella that stays."

"Then I'll flip a dollar to see which stays," said Pete.

Before Brevoort could speak, Pete drew a dollar from his pocket and flipped it toward his companion. It fell between them. "I say heads," said Pete. And he glanced at the coin, which showed tails. "The dollar says you go, Ed. You want to git a-movin'!"

Brevoort hesitated; Pete rose and urged him toward the door. "So-long, Ed. If you'd 'a' stayed we'd both got shot up. I'll set in the winda so they'll think we 're both here."

"I'll try her," said Brevoort. "But I'd 'a' stayed—only I knowed you wouldn't go. So-long, pardner." He pulled his gun and softly unlocked the door. There was no one in the hall—and no one on the narrow stairway to the right. He tiptoed to the window, climbed out, and let himself down to the shed-roof. From the roof he dropped to the alley, glanced round, and then ran.

Pete locked the door and went back to his chair in front of the window. He watched the man in the restaurant, who had risen and waved his hand, evidently acknowledging a signal from some one. It was the man Pete had seen near the express office—there was no doubt about that. Pete noticed that he was broad of shoulder, stocky, and wore a heavy gold watch-chain. He disappeared within the doorway below. Presently Pete heard some one coming up the uncarpeted stairway—some one who walked with the tread of a heavy person endeavoring to go silently. A brief interval in which Pete could hear his own heart thumping, and some one else ascended the stairway. The boards in the hallway creaked. Some one rapped on the door.

"I guess this is the finish," said Pete to himself. Had he been apprehended in the open, in a crowd on the street, he would not have made a fight. He had told himself that. But to be run to earth this way—trapped in a mean and squalid room, away from the sunlight and no slightest chance to get away... He surmised that these men knew that the men that they hunted would not hesitate to kill. Evidently they did not know that Brevoort was gone. How could he hold them that Brevoort might have more time? He hesitated. Should he speak, or keep silent?

He thought it better to answer the summons. "What do you want?" he called.

"We want to talk to your partner," said a voice.

"He's sleepin'," called Pete. "He was out 'most all night."

"Well, we'll talk with you then."

"Go ahead. I'm listenin'."

"Suppose you open the door."

"And jest suppose I don't? My pardner ain't like to be friendly if he's woke up sudden."

Pete could hear the murmuring of voices as if in consultation. Then, "All right. We'll come back later."

"Who'll I say wants to see him?" asked Pete.

"He'll know when he sees us. Old friends of his."

Meanwhile Pete had risen and moved softly toward the door. Standing to one side he listened. He heard footsteps along the hall—and the sound of some one descending the stairs. "One of 'em has gone down. The other is in the hall waitin'," he thought. "And both of 'em scared to bust in that door."

He tiptoed back to the window and glanced down. The heavy-shouldered man had crossed the street and was again in the restaurant. Pete saw him step to the telephone. Surmising that the other was telephoning for reinforcements, Pete knew that he would have to act quickly, or surrender. He was not afraid to risk being killed in a running fight. He was willing to take that chance. But the thought of imprisonment appalled him. To be shut from the sun and the space of the range—perhaps for life—or to be sentenced to be hanged, powerless to make any kind of a fight, without friends or money... He thought of The Spider, of Boca, of Montoya, and of Pop Annersley; of Andy White and Bailey. He wondered if Ed Brevoort had got clear of El Paso. He knew that there was some one in the hall, waiting. To make a break for liberty in that direction meant a killing, especially as Brevoort was supposed to be in the room. "I'll keep 'em guessin'," he told himself, and went back to his chair by the window. And if there was supposed to be another man in the room, why not carry on the play—for the benefit of the watcher across the street? Every minute would count for or against Brevoort's escape.

Thrusting aside all thought of his own precarious situation, Pete began a brisk conversation with his supposed companion. "How does your head feel?" he queried, leaning forward and

addressing the empty bed. He nodded as if concurring in the answer.

Then, "Uh-huh! Well, you look it, all right!"

"You don't want no breakfast? Well, I done had mine."

.....

"What's the time? 'Bout ten. Goin' to git up?"

.....

Pete gestured as he described an imaginative incident relative to his supposed companion's behavior the preceding night. "Some folks been here askin' for you." Pete shook his head as though he had been asked who the callers were. He had turned sideways to the open window to carry on this pantomimic dialogue. He glanced at the restaurant across the street. The heavy-shouldered man had disappeared. Pete heard a faint shuffling sound in the hall outside. Before he could turn the door crashed inward. He leapt to his feet. With the leap his hand flashed to his side. Unaccustomed to a coat, his thumb caught in the pocket just as the man who had shouldered the flimsy door down, reeled and sprawled on the floor. Pete jerked his hand free, but in that lost instant a gun roared in the doorway. He crumpled to the floor. The heavy-shouldered man, followed by two officers, stepped into the room and glanced about.

"Thought there was two? Where's the other guy?" queried the policeman.

The man on the floor rose and picked up his gun.

"Well, we got one, anyhow. Bill, 'phone the chief that one of 'em got away. Have 'em send the wagon. This kid here is done for, I guess."

"He went for his gun," said the heavy-shouldered man. "It's a dam' good thing you went down with that door. Gave me a chance to get him."

"Here's their stuff," said an officer, kicking Pete's pack that lay corded on the floor.

"Well, Tim," said the man who had shouldered the door down, "you stay here till the wagon comes. Bill and I will look around when he gets back. Guess the other one made for the line. Don't know how he worked it. Keep the crowd out."

"Is he all in?" queried the officer.

"No; he's breathin' yet. But he ain't got long. He's a young bird to be a killer."

Late that afternoon Pete was taken from the Emergency to the General Hospital. Lights were just being turned on in the surgical ward and the newsboys were shouting an extra, headlining a border raid by the Mexicans and the shooting of a notorious bandit in El Paso.

The president of the Stockmen's Security and Savings Bank bought a paper as he stepped into his car that evening and was driven toward home. He read the account of the police raid, of the escape of one of the so-called outlaws, the finding of the murdered man near Sanborn, and a highly colored account of what was designated as the invasion of the United States territory by armed troops of Mexico.

Four thousand dollars in gold had been delivered to him personally that day by the express company—a local delivery from a local source. "Jim's man," he said to himself as the car passed through the Plaza and turned toward the eastern side of the town. Upon reaching home the president told his chauffeur to wait. Slitting an envelope he wrapped the paper and addressed it to James Ewell, Showdown, Arizona.

"Mail it at the first box," he said. "Then you can put the car up. I won't need it to-night."

The surgeon at the General Hospital was bending over Pete. The surgeon shook his head, then turning he gave the attendant nurse a few brief directions, and passed on to another cot. As the nurse sponged Pete's arm, an interne poised a little glittering needle. "There's just a chance," the surgeon had said.

At the quick stab of the needle, Pete's heavy eyes opened. The little gray-eyed nurse smiled. The interne rubbed Pete's arm and stepped back. Pete's lips moved. The nurse bent her head. "Did—Ed"—Pete's face twitched—"make it?"

"You mustn't talk," said the nurse gently. And wishing with all her heart to still the question that struggled in those dark, anxious eyes, she smiled again. "Yes, he made it," she said, wondering if Ed were the other outlaw that the papers had said had escaped. She walked briskly to the end of the room and returned with a dampened towel and wiped the dank sweat from

Pete's forehead. He stared up at her, his face white and expressionless. "It was the coat—my hand caught," he murmured.

She nodded brightly, as though she understood. She did not know what his name was. There had been nothing by which to identify him. And she could hardly believe that this youth, lying there under that black shadow that she thought never would lift again, could be the desperate character the interne made him out to be, retailing the newspaper account of his capture to her.

It was understood, even before the doctor had examined Pete, that he could not live long. The police surgeon had done what he could. Pete had been removed to the General Hospital, as the Emergency was crowded.

The little nurse was wondering if he had any relatives, any one for whom he wished to send. Surely he must realize that he was dying! She was gazing at Pete when his eyes slowly opened and the faintest trace of a smile touched his lips. His eyes begged so piteously that she stepped close to the cot and stooped. She saw that he wanted to ask her something, or tell her something that was worrying him. "What did it matter?" she thought. At any moment he might drift into unconsciousness...

"Would you—write—to The Spider—and say I delivered the—goods?"

"But who is he—where—"

"Jim Ewell, Showdown—over in—Arizona."

"Jim Ewell, Showdown, Arizona." she repeated. "And what name shall I sign?"

"Jest Pete," he whispered, and his eyes closed.

Pete's case puzzled Andover, the head-surgeon at, the General. It was the third day since Pete's arrival and he was alive—but just alive and that was all. One peculiar feature of the case was the fact that the bullet—a thirty-eight—which had pierced the right lung, had not gone entirely through the body. Andover, experienced in gun-shot wounds, knew that bullets fired at close range often did freakish things. There had been a man recently discharged from the General as convalescent, who had been shot in the shoulder, and the bullet, striking the collar-bone, had taken a curious tangent, following up the muscle of the neck and lodging just beneath the ear. In that case there had been the external evidence of the bullet's location. In this case there was no such evidence to go by.

The afternoon of the third day, Pete was taken to the operating room and another examination made. The X-ray showed a curious blur near the right side of the spine. To extract the bullet would be a difficult and savage operation, an operation which the surgeon thought his patient in his present weakened condition could not stand. Pete lay in a heavy stupor, his left arm and the left side of his face partially paralyzed.

The day after his arrival at the General two plain-clothes men came to question him. He was conscious and could talk a little. But they had learned nothing of his companion, the killing of Brent, nor how Brevoort managed to evade them. They gathered little of Pete's history save that he told them his name, his age, and that he had no relatives nor friends. On all other subjects he was silent. Incidentally the officials gave his name to the papers, and the papers dug into their back files for reference to an article they had clipped from the "Arizona Sentinel," which gave them a brief account of the Annersley raid and the shooting of Gary. They made the most of all this, writing a considerable "story," which the president of the Stockmen's Security read and straightway mailed to his old acquaintance, The Spider.

The officers from the police station had told Pete bluntly that he could not live, hoping to get him to confess to or give evidence as to the killing of Brent. Pete at once knew the heavy-shouldered man—the man who had shot him down and who was now keen on getting evidence in the case.

"So I'm goin' to cross over?" Pete had said, eying the other curiously. "Well, all I wish is that I could git on my feet long enough—to—get a crack at you—on an even break. I wouldn't wear no coat, neither."

The fact that Pete had bungled seemed to worry him much more than his condition. He felt that it was a reflection on his craftsmanship. The plain-clothes man naturally thought that Pete was incorrigible, failing to appreciate that it was the pride of youth that spoke rather than the personal hatred of an enemy.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SPIDER'S ACCOUNT

That the news of Pete's serious condition should hit The Spider as hard as it did was as big a surprise to The Spider himself as it could ever have been to his closest acquaintance. Yet it was a fact—and The Spider never quarreled with facts.

The spider of the web-weaving species who leaves his web, invites disaster unless he immediately weaves another, and The Spider of Showdown was only too well aware of this. Always a fatalist, he took things as they came, but had never yet gone out of his way to tempt the possibilities.

Shriveled and aged beyond his natural years, with scarcely a true friend among his acquaintances, weary of the monotony of life—not in incident but in prospect—too shrewd to drug himself with drink, and realizing that the money he had got together both by hook and by crook and banked in El Paso could never make him other than he was, he faced the alternative of binding himself to Pete's dire need and desperate condition, or riding to Baxter and taking the train from thence to El Paso—his eyes open to what he was doing, both as a self-appointed Samaritan and as a much-wanted individual in the town where Pete lay unconscious, on the very last thin edge of Nothingness.

The Spider's preparations for leaving Showdown were simple enough. He had his Mexican bale and cord the choicest of the rugs and blankets, the silver-studded saddle and bridle, the Bayeta cloth—rare and priceless—and the finest of his Indian beadwork. Each bale was tagged, and on each tag was written the name of Boca's mother. All these things were left in his private room, which he locked. Whether or not he surmised what was going to happen is a question—but he did not disregard possibilities.

His Mexican was left in charge of the saloon with instructions to keep it open as usual, tell no one where his master had gone, and wait for further instructions.

The Spider chose a most ordinary horse from his string and wore a most ordinary suit of clothes. The only things in keeping with his lined and weathered face were his black Stetson and his high-heeled boots. He knew that it would be impossible to disguise himself. He would be foolish to make the attempt. His bowed legs, the scar running from chin to temple, his very gait made disguise impossible. To those who did not know him he would be an "old-timer" in from the desert. To those who did know him... Well, they were not many nor over-anxious to advertise the fact.

He left at night, alone, and struck south across the desert, riding easily—a shrunken and odd figure, but every inch a horseman. Just beneath his unbuttoned vest, under his left arm, hung the service-polished holster of his earlier days. He had more than enough money to last him until he reached El Paso, and a plentiful stock of cigars. It was about nine o'clock next morning when he pulled up at Flores's 'dobe and dismounted stiffly. Flores was visibly surprised and fawningly obsequious. His chief was dressed for a long journey. It had been many years since The Spider had ridden so far from Showdown. Something portentous was about to happen, or had happened.

Flores's wife, however, showed no surprise, but accepted The Spider's presence in her usual listless manner. To her he addressed himself as she made coffee and placed a chair for him. They talked of Boca—and once The Spider spoke of Boca's mother, whom the Señora Flores had known in Mexico.

Old Flores fed The Spider's horse, meanwhile wondering what had drawn the chief from the security of his web. He concluded that The Spider was fleeing from some danger—the law, perhaps, or from some ancient grudge that had at last found him out to harry him into the desert, a hunted man and desperate. The Mexican surmised that The Spider had money with him, perhaps all his money—for local rumor had it that The Spider possessed great wealth. And of course he would sleep there that night...

Upon returning to the 'dobe Flores was told by The Spider to say nothing of having seen him. This confirmed the old Mexican's suspicion that The Spider had fled from danger. And Flores swore by the saints that none should know, while The Spider listened and his thin lips twitched.

"You'd knife me in my bed for less than half the money on me," he told Flores.

The Mexican started back, as though caught in the very act, and whined his allegiance to The Spider. Had he not always been faithful?

"No," said The Spider, "but the señora has."

Flores turned and shuffled toward the corral. The Spider, standing in the doorway of the 'dobe, spoke to Flores's wife over his shoulder: "If I don't show up before next Sunday, señora, get your man to take you to Showdown. Juan will give you the money, and the things I left up there."

"You will not come back," said the Mexican woman.

"Don't know but that you are right—but you needn't tell Flores that."

An hour later The Spider had Flores bring up his horse. He mounted and turned to glance round the place. He shrugged his shoulders. In a few minutes he was lost to sight on the trail south which ran along the cañon-bed.

That night he arrived at Baxter, weary and stiff from his long ride. He put his horse in the livery-stable and paid for its keep in advance—"a week," he said, and "I'll be back."

Next morning he boarded the local for El Paso. He sat in the smoking-compartment, gazing out on the hurrying landscape. At noon he got off the train and entered an eating-house across from the station. When he again took his seat in the smoker he happened to glance out. On the platform was a square-built, sombrero'd gentleman, his back to the coach and talking to an acquaintance. There was something familiar in the set of those shoulders. The Spider leaned forward that he might catch a glimpse of the man's face. Satisfied as to the other's identity, he leaned back in his seat and puffed his cigar. The Spider made no attempt to keep from sight. The square-shouldered man was the town marshal of Hermanas. As the train pulled out, the marshal turned and all but glanced up when the brakeman, swinging to the steps of the smoker, reached out and playfully slapped him on the shoulder. The car slid past. The Spider settled himself in his seat.

With the superstition of the gambler he believed that he would find an enemy in the third person to recognize him, and with a gambler's stolid acceptance of the inevitable he relaxed and allowed himself to plan for the immediate future. On Pete's actual condition would depend what should be done. The Spider drew a newspaper clipping from his pocket. The El Paso paper stated that there was one chance in a thousand of Pete recovering. The paper also stated that there had been money involved—a considerable sum in gold—which had not been found. The entire affair was more or less of a mystery. It was hinted that the money might not have been honestly come by in the first place, and—sententiously—that crime breeds crime, in proof of which, the article went on to say; "the man who had been shot by the police was none other than Pete Annersley, notorious as a gunman in the service of the even more notorious Jim Ewell, of Showdown, or 'The Spider,' as he was known to his associates." Followed a garbled account of the raid on the Annersley homestead and the later circumstance of the shooting of Gary, all of which, concluded the item, spoke for itself.

"More than Pete had a chance to do," soliloquized The Spider. "They got the kid chalked up as a crook—and he's as straight as a die." And strangely enough this thought seemed to please The Spider.

Shouldering through the crowd at the El Paso station, The Spider rubbed against a well-dressed, portly Mexican who half-turned, showed surprise as he saw the back of a figure which seemed familiar—the bowed legs and peculiar walk—and the portly Mexican, up from the south because certain financial interests had backed him politically were becoming decidedly uncertain, named a name, not loudly, but distinctly and with peculiar emphasis. The Spider heard, but did not heed nor hurry. A black-shawled Mexican woman carrying a baby blundered into the portly Mexican. He shoved her roughly aside. She cursed him for a pig who robbed the poor—for he was known to most Mexicans—and he so far forgot his dignity and station as to curse her heartily in return. The Spider meanwhile was lost in the crowd that banked the station platform.

El Paso had grown—was not the El Paso of The Spider's earlier days, and for a brief while he forgot his mission in endeavoring mentally to reconstruct the old town as he had known it. Arrived at the Plaza he turned and gazed about. "Number two," he said to himself, recalling the portly Mexican—and the voice. He shrugged his shoulders.

His request to see the president of the Stockmen's Bank was borne hesitatingly to that individual's private office, the messenger returning promptly with instructions to "show the gentleman in."

Contrary to all precedent the president, Hodges, was not portly, but a man almost as lean as The Spider himself; a quick, nervous man, forceful and quite evidently "self-made."

"Sit down, Jim."

The Spider pulled up a chair. "About that last deposit—"

The president thrust his hand into a pigeon-hole and handed The Spider a slip of paper.

"So he got here with the cash before they nailed him?" And The Spider's face expressed surprise.

"The money came by express—local shipment. I tried to keep it out of the papers. None of their dam' business."

"I'm going to close my account," stated The Spider.

"Going south?"

"No. I got some business in town. After that—"

"You mean you've got *no* business in town. Why didn't you write?"

"You couldn't handle it. Figure up my credit—and give me a draft for it, I'll give you my check. Make it out to Peter Annersley," said The Spider.

"One of your gunmen, eh? I see by the papers he's got a poor chance of using this."

"So have I," and The Spider almost smiled.

Hodges pushed back his chair. "See here, Jim. You've got no business in this town and you know it! And you've got enough money to keep you comfortable anywhere—South America, for instance. Somebody'll spot you before you've been here twenty-four hours. Why don't you let me call a taxi—there's a train south at eleven-thirty."

"Thanks, E.H.—but I'm only going over to the hospital."

"You sure will, if you stick around this town long."

"I'm going to see that boy through," said The Spider.

"Then you're not after any one?"

"No, not that way."

"Well, you got me guessing. I thought I knew you."

"Mebby, Ed. Now, if the boy comes through all right, and I don't, I want you to see that he gets this money. There's nobody in town can identify him but me—and mebbly I won't be around here to do it. If he comes here and tells you he's Pete Annersley and that The Spider told him to come, hand him the draft. 'Course, if things go smooth, I'll take care of that draft myself."

"Making your will, Jim?"

"Something like that."

"All right. I might as well talk to the moon. I used to think that you were a wise one—"

"Just plain dam' fool, same as you, E.H. The only difference is that you're tryin' to help *me* out—and I aim to help out a kid that is plumb straight."

"But I have some excuse. If it hadn't been for you when I was down south on that Union Oil deal—"

"Ed, we're both as crooked as they make 'em, only you play your game with stocks and cash, inside—and I play mine outside, and she's a lone hand. This kid, Pete, is sure a bad hombre to stack up against—but he's plumb straight."

"You seem to think a whole lot of him."

"I do," said The Spider simply.

The president shook his head. The Spider rose and stuck out his hand. "So-long, Ed."

"So-long, Jim. I'll handle this for you. But I hate like hell to think it's the last time I *can* handle a deal for you."

"You can't tell," said The Spider.

The president of the Stockmen's Security sat turning over the papers on his desk. It had been a long while since he had been in the saddle—some eighteen or twenty years. As a young man he had been sent into Mexico to prospect for oil. There were few white men in Mexico then. But despite their vicarious callings they usually stood by each other. The Spider, happening along during a quarrel among the natives and the oil-men, took a hand in the matter, which was merely incidental to his profession. The oil-men had managed to get out of that part of the country with the loss of but two men—a pretty fair average, as things went those days. Years afterwards the president of the Stockmen's Security happened to meet The Spider in El Paso—and he did not forget what he owed him. The Spider at that time had considerable gold which he finally banked with the Stockmen's Security at the other's suggestion. The arrangement was mutually agreeable. The Spider knew that the president of the Stockmen's Security would never disclose his identity to the authorities—and Hodges felt that as a sort of unofficial trustee he was able to repay The Spider for his considerable assistance down in Mexico.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DORIS

Contrast to the rules of the hospital, the head-surgeon was chatting rather intimately with Pete's nurse. They were in the anteroom of the surgical ward. She was getting ready to go on duty.

"No, Miss Gray," said the surgeon positively, "he can't hold out much longer unless we operate. And I don't think he could stand an operation. He has amazing vitality, he's young, and in wonderful condition—outdoor life and pretty clean living. But he don't seem to care whether he lives or not. Has he said anything to you about—" The surgeon paused and cleared his throat.

"No. He just stares at me. Sometimes he smiles—and, Dr. Andover, I've been here two years—and I'm used to it, but I simply can't help feeling—that he ought to have a chance."

The surgeon studied her wistful face and for a moment forgot that he was the head-surgeon of the General, and that she was a nurse. He liked Doris Gray because of her personality and ability. Two years of hard work at the General had not affected her quietly cheerful manner.

"You're wearing yourself out worrying about this case," said the surgeon presently. "And that won't do at all."

She flushed and her seriousness vanished. "I'm willing to," she said simply.

The doctor smiled and shook his finger at her. "Miss Gray, you know a good nurse—"

"I know, Dr. Andover, but he hasn't a friend in the world. I asked him yesterday if I should write to any one, or do anything for him. He just smiled and shook his head. He doesn't seem to be afraid of anything—nor interested in anything. He—oh, his eyes are just like the eyes of a dog that is hurt and wants so much to tell you something, and can't. I don't care what the newspapers say—and those men from the police station! I don't believe he is really bad. Now please don't smile and tell me I'm silly."

"I thought you just said he didn't have a friend in the world."

"Oh, I don't count—that way." Then hurriedly: "I forgot—he did ask me to write to some one—the first day—a Jim Ewell, in Arizona. He asked me to say he had 'delivered the goods.' I don't know that I should have done it without reporting it, but—well, you said he couldn't live—"

"Some outlaw pal of his, probably," said Andover, frowning. "But that has nothing to do with his—er—condition right now."

"And sometimes he talks when he is half-conscious, and he often speaks to some one he calls 'The Spider,'" asserted Doris.

"Queer affair. Well, I'll think about it. If we do operate, I'll want you—"

The surgeon was interrupted by a nurse who told him there was a man who wanted to see Peter Annersley: that the man was insistent. The head-nurse was having supper, and should the caller be allowed in after visiting hours?

"Send him in," said the surgeon, and he stepped into the superintendent's office. Almost immediately The Spider sidled across the hallway and entered the room. The surgeon saw a short, shriveled, bow-legged man, inconspicuously dressed save for his black Stetson and the riding-boots which showed below the bottom of his trousers. The Spider's black beady eyes burned in his weather-beaten and scarred face—"the eyes of a hunted man"—thought the surgeon. In a peculiar, high-pitched voice, he asked Andover if he were the doctor in charge.

"I'm Andover, head-surgeon," said the other. "Won't you sit down?"

The other glanced round. Andover got up and closed the door. "You wish to see young Annersley, I understand."

"You looking after him?"

Andover nodded.

"Is he hurt pretty bad?"

"Yes. I doubt if he will recover."

"Can I see him?"

"Well,"—and the surgeon hesitated,—"it's after hours. But I don't suppose it will do any harm."

You are a friend of his?"

"About the only one, I reckon."

"Well—I'll step in with you. He may be asleep. If he is—"

"I won't bother him."

The nurse met them, and put her finger to her lips. Andover nodded and stepped aside as The Spider hobbled to the cot and gazed silently at Pete's white face. Then The Spider turned abruptly and hobbled down the aisle, followed by Andover. "Come in here," said the surgeon as The Spider hesitated.

Andover told him briefly that there was one chance in a thousand of Pete's recovery; that the shock had been terrific, describing just where the bullet was lodged and its effect upon the sensory nerves. Andover was somewhat surprised to find that this queer person knew considerable about gun-shot wounds and was even more surprised when The Spider drew a flat sheaf of bills from his pocket and asked what an operation would cost. Andover told him.

The Spider immediately counted out the money and handed it to Andover. "And get him in a room where he can be by himself. I'll pay for it."

"That's all right, but if he should not recover from the operation—"

"I'm gambling that he'll pull through," said The Spider. "And there's my ante. It's up to you."

"I'll have a receipt made out—"

The Spider shook his head. "His life'll be my receipt. And you're writing it—don't make no mistake."

Andover's pale face flushed. "I'm not accustomed to having my reputation as a surgeon questioned."

"See here," said The Spider, laying another packet of bills on the surgeon's desk. "Where I come from money talks. And I reckon it ain't got tongue-tied since I was in El Paso last. Here's a thousand. Pull that boy through and forget where you got the money."

"I couldn't do more if you said ten thousand," asserted Andover.

"Gambling is my business," said The Spider. "I raise the ante. Do you come in?"

"This is not a sporting proposition,"—Andover hesitated,—"but I'll come in," he added slowly.

"You're wrong," said The Spider; "everything is a sporting proposition from the day a man is born till he cashes in, and mebbly after. I don't know about that, and I didn't come here to talk. My money 'll talk for me."

Andover, quite humanly, was thinking that a thousand dollars would help considerably toward paying for the new car that he had had in mind for some time. He used a car in his work and he worked for the General Hospital. His desire to possess a new car was not altogether professional, and he knew it. But he also knew that he was overworked and underpaid.

"Who shall I say called?" asked Andover, picking up the packet of bills.

"Just tell him it was a friend."

Andover was quite as shrewd in his way as was this strange visitor, who evidently did not wish to be known. "This entire matter is rather irregular," he said,—"and the—er—bonus—is necessarily a confidential matter!"

"Which suits me,"—and The Spider blinked queerly.

Dr. Andover stepped to the main doorway. As he bade The Spider good-night, he told him to call up on the telephone about ten-thirty the next morning, or to call personally if he preferred.

The Spider hesitated directly beneath the arc-light at the entrance. "If I don't call up or show up—you needn't say anything about this deal to him—but you can tell him he's got a friend on the job."

The doctor nodded and walked briskly back to the superintendent's office, where he waited until the secretary appeared, when he turned over the money that had been paid to him for the operation and a private room, which The Spider had engaged for two weeks. He told the secretary to make out a receipt in Peter Annersley's name. "A friend is handling this for him," he explained.

Then he sent for the head-nurse. "I would like to have Miss Gray and Miss Barlow help me," he told her, in speaking of the proposed operation.

"Miss Gray is on duty to-night," said the head-nurse.

"Then if you will arrange to have her get a rest, please. And—oh, yes, we'll probably need the oxygen. And you might tell Dr. Gleason that this is a special case and I'd like to have him administer the anaesthetic."

Andover strode briskly to the surgical ward and stopped at Pete's couch. As he stooped and listened to Pete's breathing, the packet of crisp bills slipped from his inside pocket, and dropped to the floor.

He was in the lobby, on his way to his car, when Doris came running after him. "Dr. Andover," she called. "I think you dropped this,"—and she gave him the packet of bills.

"Mighty careless of me," he said, feeling in his inside pocket. "Handkerchief—slipped them in on top of it. Thank you."

Doris gazed at him curiously. His eyes wavered. "We're going to do our best to pull him through," he said with forced sprightliness.

Doris smiled and nodded. But her expression changed as she again entered the long, dim aisle between the double row of cots. Only that evening, just before she had talked with Andover about Pete, she had heard the surgeon tell the house-physician jokingly that all that stood between him and absolute destitution was a very thin and exceedingly popular check-book—and Andover had written his personal check for ten dollars which he had cashed at the office. Doris wondered who the strange man was that had come in with Andover, an hour ago, and how Dr. Andover had so suddenly become possessed of a thousand dollars.

CHAPTER XXXV

"CAUGHT IT JUST IN TIME"

At exactly ten-thirty the next morning The Spider was at the information desk of the General Hospital, inquiring for Andover.

"He's in the operating-room," said the clerk.

"Then I'll wait." The Spider sidled across to the reception-room and sat nervously fingering the arm of his chair. Nurses passed and repassed the doorway, going quietly through the hall. From somewhere came the faint animal-like wail of a newly born babe. The Spider had gripped the arm of his chair. A well-gowned woman stopped at the information desk and left a great armful of gorgeous roses wrapped in white tissue paper. Presently a man—evidently a laborer—hobbled past on crutches, his foot bandaged; a huge, grotesque white foot that he held stiffly in front of him and which he seemed to be following, rather than guiding. A nurse walked slowly beside him. The Spider drummed the chair-arm with nervous fingers. His little beady eyes were constantly in motion, glancing here and there,—at the empty chairs in the room, at the table with its neatly piled magazines, at a large picture of the hospital, and a great group of nurses standing on the stone steps, and then toward the doorway. Presently a nurse came in and told him that Dr. Andover would be unable to see him for some time: that the patient just operated on was doing as well as could be expected.

"He—he's come through all right?"

"Yes. You might call up in an hour or so."

The Spider rose stiffly and put on his hat.

"Thanks," he said and hobbled out and across the lobby. A cab was waiting for him, and the driver seemed to know his destination, for he whipped up his horse and drove south toward the Mexican quarter, finally stopping at an inconspicuous house on a dingy side street that led toward the river. The Spider glanced up and down the street before he alighted. Then he gave the driver a bill quite out of proportion to his recent service. "You can come about the same time to-morrow," said The Spider, and he turned and hobbled to the house.

About noon he came out, and after walking several blocks stopped at a corner grocery and telephoned to the hospital, asking for Andover, who informed him that the operation had been successful, as an operation, but that the patient was in a critical condition—that it would be several hours before they would dare risk a definite statement as to his chances of recovery. The surgeon told The Spider that they were using oxygen, which fact in itself was significant.

The Spider crossed the street to a restaurant, drank several cups of coffee, and on his way

out bought a supply of cigars. He played solitaire in his room all that afternoon, smoking and muttering to himself until the fading light caused him to glance at his watch. He slipped into his coat and made his way uptown.

Shortly after seven he entered the hospital. Andover had left word that he be allowed to see Pete. And again The Spider stood beside Pete's cot, gazing down upon a face startlingly white in contrast to his dark hair and black eyebrows—a face drawn, the cheeks pinched, and the lips bloodless. "You taking care of him?"—and The Spider turned to Doris. She nodded, wondering if this queer, almost deformed creature were "The Spider" that Pete had so often talked to when half-conscious. Whoever he was, her quick, feminine intuition told her that this man's stiff and awkward silence signified more than any spoken solicitude; that behind those beady black eyes was a soul that was tormented with doubt and hope, a soul that had battled through dark ways to this one great unselfish moment... How could one know that this man risked his life in coming there? Yet she did know it. The very fact that he was Pete's friend would almost substantiate that. Had not the papers said that Peter Annersley was a hired gunman of The Spider's? And although this man had not given his name, she knew that he was The Spider of Pete's incoherent mutterings. And The Spider, glancing about the room, gazed curiously at the metal oxygen tank and then at the other cot.

"You staying here right along?" he queried.

"For a while until he is out of danger."

"When will that be?"

"I don't know. But I do know that he is going to live."

"Did the doc say so?"

Doris shook her head. "No, Dr. Andover thinks he has a chance, but I *know* that he will get well."

"Does Pete know that I been here?"

"No. The doctor thought it best not to say anything about that yet."

"I reckon that's right."

"Is he your son?" asked Doris.

"No. Just a kid that used to—work for me."

And without further word, The Spider hobbled to the doorway and was gone.

Hour after hour Doris sat by the cot watching the faintly flickering life that, bereft of conscious will, fought for existence with each deep-drawn breath. About two in the morning Pete's breathing seemed to stop. Doris felt the hesitant throb of the pulse and, rising, stepped to the hall and telephoned for the house-surgeon.

"Caught it just in time," he said to the nurse as he stepped back and watched the patient react to the powerful heart-stimulant. Pete's breathing became more regular.

The surgeon had been gone for a few minutes when Pete's heavy lids opened.

"It—was gittin'—mighty dark—down there," he whispered. And Pete stared up at her, his great dark eyes slowly brightening under the artificial stimulant. Doris bent over him and smoothed his hair back from his forehead. "I'm the—the Ridin' Kid—from—Powder River," he whispered hoarsely. "I kin ride 'em comin' or goin'—but I don't wear no coat next journey. My hand caught in the pocket." He glanced toward the doorway. "But we fooled 'em. Ed got away, so I reckon I'll throw in with you, Spider." Pete tried to lift himself up, but the nurse pressed him gently back. Tiny beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. Doris put her hand on the back of his. At the touch his lips moved. "Boca was down there—in the dark—smilin' and tellin' me it was all right and to come ahead," he whispered. "I was tryin' to climb out—of that there—cañon... Andy throwed his rope... Caught it just in time... And Andy he laughs. Reckon he didn't know—I was—all in..." Pete breathed deeply, muttered, and drifted into an easy sleep. Doris watched him for a while, fighting her own desire to sleep. She knew that the crisis was past, and with that knowledge came a physical let-down that left her worn and desperately weary: not because she had been on duty almost twenty-four hours without rest—she was young and could stand that—but because she had given so much of herself to this case from the day Pete had been brought in—through the operation which was necessarily savage, and up to the moment when he had fallen asleep, after having passed so close to the border of the dark Unknown. And now that she knew he would recover, she felt strangely disinterested in her work at the hospital. But being a rather practical young person, never in the least morbid, she attributed this unusual indifference to her own condition. She would not allow herself to believe that the life she had seen slipping away, and which she had drawn back from the shadows, could ever mean anything to her, aside from

her profession. And why should it? This dark-eyed boy was a stranger, an outcast, even worse, if she were to believe what the papers said of him. Yet he had been so patient and uncomplaining that first night when she knew that he must have been suffering terribly. Time and again she had wiped the red spume from his lips, until at last he ceased to gasp and cough and lay back exhausted. And Doris could never forget how he had tried to smile as he told her, whispering hoarsely, "that he was plumb ashamed of makin' such a doggone fuss." Then day after day his suffering had grown less as his vitality ebbed. Following, came the operation, an almost hopeless experiment ... and that strange creature, The Spider ... who had paid for the operation and for this private room... Doris thought of the thousand dollars in bills that she had found and returned to Andover; and while admiring his skill as a surgeon, she experienced a sudden dislike for him as a man. It seemed to her that he had been actually bribed to save Pete's life, and had pocketed the bribe ... again it was The Spider... What a name for a human being—yet how well it fitted! The thin bow-legs, the quick, sidling walk, the furtive manner, the black, blinking eyes... Doris yawned and shivered. Dawn was battling its slow way into the room. A nurse stepped in softly. Doris rose and made a notation on the chart, told the nurse that her patient had been sleeping since two o'clock, and nodding pleasantly left the room.

The new nurse sniffed audibly. Miss Gray was one of Dr. Andover's pets! She knew! She had seen them talking together, often enough. And Andover knew better than to try to flirt with her. What a fuss they were making about "Miss Gray's cowboy," as Pete had come to be known among some of the nurses who were not "pets." Her pleasant soliloquy was interrupted by a movement of Pete's hand. "Kin I have a drink?" he asked faintly.

"Yes, dearie," said the nurse, and smiled a large, and toothful smile as she turned and stepped out into the hall. Pete's listless, dark eyes followed her. "Fer Gawd's sake!" he muttered. His eyes closed. He wondered what had become of his honest-to-Gosh nurse, Miss Gray.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WHITE-EYE

The third time that The Spider called at the hospital, and, as usual, in the evening, he was told by the young house-doctor, temporarily in charge, that he could not see the patient in room 218 without permission from the physician in charge of the case, as it was after visiting hours, and, moreover, there had been altogether too much freedom allowed visitors as it was. This young doctor knew nothing of The Spider's connection with the Annersley case, and was altogether unimpressed by The Spider's appearance, save that he mentally labeled him a "rough-neck" who was evidently pretty badly crippled by rheumatism.

The Spider felt tempted to resort to bribery, but there was something so officious and aggressively professional in the manner of this "straw-boss"—as The Spider mentally labeled him—that The Spider hesitated to flatter his egotism by admitting that he held the whip-hand.

"Then mebbly you can find out how he's getting along?" queried The Spider, in his high-pitched voice.

"No objection to that," said the young doctor, reaching for the desk 'phone. "Two-eighteen, please. Two-eighteen? How is your patient to-night? That so? H-m-m! Oh, this is Miss Gray talking? H-m-m! Thanks." And he hung up the receiver.

"The patient is doing very well—exceptionally well. Would you care to leave any message?"

"You might tell Doc Andover to leave word that when I call, I get to see the folks I come to see—and I reckon he'll set you straight."

"Oh, I didn't—er—know you were a friend of Dr. Andover's. What is the name, please?"

"'T wouldn't interest you none, little man. Thanks for the information." And The Spider hobbled out and clumped stiffly down the wide stone stairway.

The young doctor adjusted his glasses and stared into vacancy. "H-m-m! And he had the nerve to call *me* 'little man.' Now I should call him a decidedly suspicious character. Looks something like an overgrown spider. Birds of a feather," he added sententiously, with an air of conscious rectitude, and a disregard for the propriety of the implied metaphor. It is not quite certain whether he had Andover or Pete in mind. But it is most probable that had he allowed The Spider to see Pete that evening and talk with him, The Spider would have left El Paso the next day, as he had planned, instead of waiting until the following evening, against his own judgment and in direct opposition to that peculiar mental reaction called "a hunch" by those not familiar with the niceties of the English language, and called nothing really more expressive by those who are.

So far as The Spider knew, he had not been recognized by any one. Yet with that peculiar intuition of the gunman and killer he knew that he was marked. He wondered which of his old enemies had found him out—and when and how that enemy would strike.

That night he wrote a short letter to Pete, stating that he was in town and would call to see him the following evening, adding that if he failed to call Pete was to go to the Stockmen's Security and ask for the president when he was able to be about. He mailed the letter himself, walking several blocks to find a box. On his way back a man passed him who peered at him curiously. The Spider's hand had crept toward his upper vest-pocket as the other approached. After he passed, The Spider drew out a fresh cigar and lighted it from the one he was smoking. And he tossed the butt away and turned and glanced back. "I wonder what White-Eye is doing in El Paso?" he asked himself. "He knew me all right." The Spider shrugged his shoulders. His hunch had proved itself. There was still time to leave town, but the fact that White-Eye had recognized him and had not spoken was an insidious challenge, the kind of a challenge which a killer never lets pass. For the killer, strangely enough, is drawn to his kind through the instinct of self-preservation, a psychological paradox to the layman, who does not understand that peculiar pride of the gunman which leads him to remove a menace rather than to avoid it. Curiosity as to a rival's ability, his personal appearance, his quality of nerve, the sound of his voice, has drawn many noted killers together—each anxious to prove conclusively that he was the better man. And this curiosity, driven by the high nervous tension of the man who must ever be on the alert, is insatiable, and is assuaged only by insanity or his own death. The removal of a rival does not satisfy this hunger to kill, but rather creates a greater hunger, until, without the least provocation, the killer will shoot down a man merely to satisfy temporarily this inhuman and terrible craving. The killer veritably feeds upon death, until that universal abhorrence of the abnormal, triumphant in the end, adjusts the quivering balance—and Boot Hill boasts one more wooden cross.

The Spider, limping up the stairway to his room, knew that he would not leave El Paso, knew that he could not leave the town until satisfied as to what White-Eye's silence meant. And not only that, but he would find out. He lighted the oil-lamp on the dresser and gazed at himself in the glass. Then he took off his coat, shaved, washed, and put on a clean shirt and collar. He took some gold and loose silver from his money-belt, put on his hat and coat, and hobbled downstairs. He thought he knew where he could get word of White-Eye's whereabouts, stopped at a cigar-stand and telephoned for his cab—and his regular driver. In a few minutes the cab was at the corner. He mentioned a street number to the driver, who nodded knowingly. Pony Baxter's place—where the game ran big. No place for a tin-horn. Only the real ones played at Pony's. So this old-timer who paid so well was going to take a whirl at the game? The cabby thought he saw a big tip coming. Being somewhat of a sportsman in his way, and grateful for what The Spider had already done for him, he drew up within a block of his destination and, stepping down, told The Spider that Pony's place was being watched—and had been for more than a week: that the bulls were out for some strangers who were wanted bad.

The Spider showed no sign of surprise. "Suppose I was one of 'em, eh?" he queried.

"That's none of my business, Captain. I ain't workin' for the force; I'm workin' for myself."

"All right. I'll walk down to Pony's place. After I go up, you can drive down there and wait. I may be five minutes—or a couple of hours. Here's something to make you forget who you're waiting for if anybody should ask you."

The cabby tucked the money in his pocket and climbed back to his seat. "Don't know if somebody was to ask me," he said to himself, as he watched The Spider hobble down the next block. "Lemme see," he continued as he drove slowly along. "Some guy comes up and asks me for a match and starts talkin' friendly, and mebbly asks me to have a drink, and I get friendly and tell him about that young sport from the East that's been seein' the town and how somebody over to his hotel must 'a' told him about the game at Pony's—and how he's upstairs, gettin' his hair cut—short. Oh, I guess I ain't been in this business eight years for nothin'."

But the inquisitive stranger did not appear and the cabby's invention was wasted.

The Spider entered the first door to the left of the long hallway. The room was fitted up as an office, with huge leather-upholstered chairs, a mahogany center table, and a mahogany desk. In one corner stood a large safe. On the safe-door was lettered "A. L. Baxter & Co."

A man with a young, smooth face and silver-white hair was sitting at the desk. He turned and nodded pleasantly.

"I want to see Pony," said The Spider.

"You're talking to him," said the other. "What can I do for you?"

"You can tell Pony that I want to see him, here," said The Spider. "And don't worry, he knows me."

"The name, please."

"Never mind that. Just take a good look at me—and tell him. He'll come."

The other rose and, stepping to the inner door, beckoned to some one in the room beyond. The Spider seated himself, lighted a cigar, and leaned back as though thoroughly at home. Presently a big man came in briskly: a full-bodied, smooth-cheeked man who looked like the prosperous manager of some legitimate business enterprise, save for the large diamond horseshoe scintillating in his gray silk tie.

"Why, hello, Jim!" he cried, evidently surprised. He told his partner casually that he could go on inside and look after things for a few minutes. When the other had gone he turned to The Spider. "What can I do for you, Jim?"

"Tell me where I can find White-Eye."

"White-Eye? He hasn't been in here for three or four years. I didn't know he was in town."

"That might go with the bulls, Pony. I know White-Eye doesn't hang out reg'lar here—ain't his kind of a joint. But you can tell me where he does hang out. And I want to know."

"You looking for him, Jim?"

"No. But I've got a hunch he's looking for me."

"Just how bad do you think he wants to see you?" queried Baxter, tilting back his swing-chair and glancing sideways at The Spider.

"About as bad as I want to see him," said The Spider.

"You haven't been in town for quite a while, Jim."

"No. Fifteen years, I reckon."

"You don't change much."

"I was thinking the same of you; always playing safe. You ought to know better than to pull a bluff like that on me. But if that is your game, I call. I want White-Eye."

Pony Baxter had plenty of nerve. But he knew The Spider. "I haven't seen White-eye for over three years," he said, turning to his desk. He tore a memorandum slip from a pad and wrote something on it and handed it to The Spider. It was simply a number on Aliso Street. The Spider glanced at it and tore the slip in two.

"He's stayin' with friends?" queried The Spider.

"Yes. And I think you know most of them."

"Thanks for the tip, Pony."

"You going down there alone, Jim?"

"I might."

"I wouldn't," said Baxter.

"I know dam' well *you* wouldn't," laughed The Spider.

Scarcely had The Spider stepped into the cab when four men slouched from a dark stairway entrance a few doors down the street and watched the cab turn a distant corner.

"Well, you missed a good chance," said one of the men, as they moved slowly toward the entrance to Pony Baxter's.

"How about you? If you ain't forgetting it was the first one of us that seen him was to get him."

"And White-Eye, here, seen him first, when he crawled out of that rig. If we'd 'a' gone up, instead of standin' here lettin' our feet git cold—"

"He must 'a' had his roll with him," said Pino, one of White-Eye's companions and incidentally a member of that inglorious legion, "The Men Who Can't Come Back."

"T ain't his roll I want," said White-Eye.

"Too dam' bad about you not wantin' his roll. Any time—"

"Any time you git The Spider's roll, you got to git him," asserted another member of this nocturnal quartette, a man whose right arm and shoulder sagged queerly.

"The Spider ain't no *kid*, neither,"—and White-Eye paused at the dimly lighted stairway entrance.

The man with the deformed shoulder cursed White-Eye. The others laughed.

"Let's go git a drink—and then we'll have a talk with Pony. Come on, Steve."

They turned and drifted on up the street. Presently they were back at the stairway entrance. "Pony won't stand for no rough stuff," advised White-Eye as they turned and climbed the stair. "I'll do the talkin'."

"I reckon he'll stand for anything we hand him," said Pino. "Fancy clothes don't cut any figure with me."

"Nobody that ever got a good look at you would say so," asserted White-Eye. He paused at the head of the stairs. "I aim to find out what The Spider wanted up here."

"Go to it!"—and Pino grinned.

As they entered the "office," Baxter was talking with his partner, with whom he exchanged a significant glance as he realized who his visitors were. The partner excused himself and stepped into the room beyond.

"Well, boys, what can I do for you?" Baxter's manner was suavely affable.

"We're lookin' for a friend," declared White-Eye.

"I don't think he's here." And Baxter smiled his professional smile.

"But he's been here," asserted White-Eye. "We ain't here to make a noise. We jest want to know what The Spider was doin' up here a spell ago."

"Oh, Jim? Why, he dropped in to shake hands. I hadn't seen him for several years. Didn't know he was in town."

"Feed that soft stuff to the yearlins'," snarled White-Eye. "The Spider ain't chousin' around El Paso for his health, or yours."

Baxter was about to say something when Pino stooped and picked up the pieces of paper which The Spider had torn in two just before he left. Pino had no special motive in picking up those torn bits of paper. He simply saw them, picked them up, and rolled them nervously in his fingers. White-Eye, watching Baxter, saw him blink and in turn watch Pino's fingers as he twisted and untwisted the bits of paper.

"He can't keep his hands still," said White-Eye, shrugging his shoulder toward Pino. "Ever meet Pino. No? Well, he's a artist—when it comes to drawin'—"

Pino dropped the bits of paper, rose, and shook hands indifferently with Baxter. As Pino sat down again, Baxter stooped and casually picked up the torn pad-leaf on which he had written White-Eye's address. He turned to his desk and taking a box of cigars from a drawer passed it around. White-Eye's pin-point pupils glittered. Pony Baxter seemed mighty anxious to get those two bits of paper out of sight. White-Eye had seen him drop them in the drawer as he opened it.

"Where did you send The Spider?" asked White-Eye quickly.

"Send him! Didn't send him anywhere. He said he was going back to his hotel."

White-Eye blinked. He knew that The Spider was not stopping at a hotel. For some reason Baxter had lied.

"How's the game to-night?" queried White-Eye.

"Quiet," replied Baxter.

"Any strangers inside?"

"No—not the kind of strangers you mean."

"Then I reckon we'll take a look in. Don't mind takin' a whirl at the wheel myself."

"Come right in," said Baxter, as though relieved, and he opened the door and stood aside to let them pass.

A quiet game of poker was running at a table near the door. Farther down the room, which was spacious and brilliantly lighted, a group were playing the wheel. At the table beyond the usual faro game was in progress. All told there were some fifteen men in the room, not counting the dealers and lookout. One or two men glanced up as White-Eye and his companions entered and sauntered from table to table. To the regular habitues of the place, White-Eye and his companions were simply "rough-necks" to whom Baxter was showing "the joint."

Presently Baxter excused himself and, telling his visitors to make themselves at home, strode back to his office. White-Eye and Pino watched the wheel, while the man with the deformed

shoulder and his companion stood watching the faro game. The room was quiet save for the soft click of the chips, the whirring of the ball, an occasional oath, and the monotonous voice of the faro-dealer.

Pino nudged White-Eye and indicated the little pile of gold that was stacked before a player at the faro table. White-Eye shook his head and stepped casually back. Pino sauntered over to him.

"Chanct for a clean-up?" whispered Pino.

"No show. The lookout's a gun. I know him. So is that guy at the wheel. Pony's pardner packs a gat; and that guy standin' over by the wall, smoking is drawin' down reg'lar pay for jest standin' there, every night. 'Sides, they ain't enough stuff in sight to take a chanct for. We ain't organized for this kind of a deal."

"Then what's the use of hangin' around?"

"'Cause they was somethin' on that piece of paper you picked up out there that Pony didn't want us to see—and I aim to find out what it was."

"The number of some dame, most like," said Pino, grinning.

"Did you hear him say The Spider went back to his *hote*? Well, Pony is double-crossin' somebody. Jest stick around and keep your eye on the door."

Meanwhile The Spider had arrived at the address given him—an empty basement store in the south end of town. The place was dark and evidently abandoned. Back of the store was a room in which were two cheap iron beds, a washstand, and two chairs. The rear door of this room opened on an alley, and it was through this door that White-Eye and his companions entered and left the premises, which they had rented at a low rate from the lessee of the place who now ran a grocery on the street level, near the corner.

The Spider had no means of knowing of the back room and thought that Baxter had sent him to a chance number to get rid of him; or that the latter would possibly suggest that White-Eye must have left the neighborhood.

"Is there a back stairs to Pony's place?" queried The Spider as he stood by the cab.

"No. But there's a fire-escape in the alley back of the block. The last time they raided Pony the bulls got six gents comin' down the iron ladder."

"Just drive round that way." The Spider stepped into the cab.

"You ain't a Government man, are you?" queried cabby.

"No. I play a lone hand," said The Spider.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"CLOSE THE CASES"

Pony Baxter's place, located near the middle of what is commonly termed a "business block," embraced the space once occupied by a number of small offices, one of which he had retained as a sort of reception-room, near the head of the stairway. That he might have a spacious room for his business, the partitions of the former offices had been removed, with the exception of those enclosing his office, and a room at the extreme end of the building which opened on the hall, near the end window, just over the fire-escape. This room was expensively fitted up as a lavatory, with marble panels, basins, and tiling. A uniformed negro with the inevitable whisk-broom was always in attendance, quite as keen at "getting the dust" as was his employer. The door to this room was fitted with a spring lock which allowed it to be opened only from the inside, except with a pass-key.

The Spider's cab, swinging into the alley, stopped directly beneath the lower extension of the fire-escape. "Pull over closer to the wall," he told the driver. Then he climbed to the driver's seat and stepped onto the iron ladder. "You can drive round to the front and wait," he told the cabby, who lost no time in getting out of the alley. Like most nocturnal cabmen, he was quite willing to drive anywhere; but he sincerely preferred to do his waiting for his fare in a more open street.

The window at the rear end of the hall was fastened. The Spider broke the glass just below the catch with the butt of his gun. He raised the window and slid into the hallway.

"Who dat?" came from the lavatory.

"It's me, Sam," said The Spider thickly, imitating the voice of a man overcome by drink. "I cut my hand on the window. Want to get in—wash up—blood—"

"I ask Misto Baxtuh, suh."

"Lemme in—quick—or you lose a five-spot. Bleeding bad—want to wash up—"

The spring lock clicked softly. Before Sam knew what had happened, The Spider was in the lavatory and between him and the door to the main room. "Get going," said The Spider. The amazed negro backed away from that eloquent menace in The Spider's right hand. "M-m-m-misto—misto—Captain— Ah ain't done nuffin!"

"Git!"—and The Spider indicated the rear window.

The negro backed into the hall, saw the open window, and vanished through it without parley. He dropped from the last step of the fire-escape and picking himself up started to run, with no definite destination in mind save space.

As Baxter had said, things were quiet that night. The poker table had been deserted and the players had left. A few "regulars" still hung about the faro layout and the wheel. The hired "bouncer" had stepped into the office to speak to Baxter. It was past twelve. There were no strangers present save the four roughly dressed men. Baxter was just telling the bouncer that he knew them, and that he surmised they were after a certain party, but that that party would not be back there. As he talked Baxter stepped to the outer door and locked it. It was too late to expect any worth-while business.

The Spider, who was in reality looking for Baxter, whom he suspected of trickery, opened the lavatory door far enough to see into the main room. In a flash he had placed three of the four men who "wanted" him.

White-Eye and Longtree were standing near a player at the faro table, evidently interested for the moment in the play. Near White-Eye, Pino was rolling a cigarette. Beyond them, at the next table, stood a man with a deformed shoulder—and The Spider recognized Gary of the T-Bar-T, watching the few players at the wheel... A film of cigar smoke eddied round the lamps above the tables. Presently the players at the faro table rose and left. The dealer put away his cases. The lookout yawned and took off his green eye-shade. The man with the deformed shoulder and his companion were moving toward White-Eye when The Spider slipped through the doorway and sidled toward the middle of the room. His hat was pushed back. He fumbled at his tie with his right hand. "White-Eye!" he called.

The faro-dealer and the lookout jerked round—then slowly backed toward the side of the room. The man at the wheel paused with his hand in the air. The players, intent upon the game, glanced up curiously. Pino, who stood near White-Eye and almost in front of him, dropped his cigarette. The room became as still as the noon desert. Three of the four men who bore ancient grudge against The Spider, knew that there would be no parley—that talk would be useless. The fourth, the man whom they had addressed as Steve, had but recently associated himself with them, and had no quarrel with The Spider. In that tense moment, Gary wished himself well out of it.

"Lost your nerve, Pino?" laughed The Spider, in his queer, high voice. "You dropped your cigarette."

One of the roulette players giggled hysterically. At the sound of that laugh, White-Eye jerked Pino in front of him. The Spider's gun appeared as though he had caught it from the air. As it roared, Pino staggered sideways and fell. White-Eye fired as The Spider, throwing shot after shot, walked slowly toward him. Suddenly White-Eye coughed and staggered against the table. With his last shot The Spider dropped White-Eye, then jerked a second gun from his waistband. Gary, kneeling behind the faro table, fired over its top. The Spider whirled half-round, recovered himself, and, sidling toward the table, threw down on the kneeling man, who sank forward coughing horribly. Within eight feet of him The Spider's gun roared again. Gary's body jerked stiff at the shock and then slowly collapsed. The fourth man, Longtree, with his hands above his head, begged The Spider not to kill his old pal! The Spider's face, horribly distorted, venomous as a snake's, colorless and glistening with sweat, twisted queerly as he spoke: "Kill you, you damned coyote?" And he shot Longtree down as a man would shoot a trapped wolf.

Framed in the office doorway stood Pony Baxter, a blue automatic in his hand. The Spider, leaning against the roulette table, laughed. "Gave me the double-cross, eh, Pony? How do you like the layout?" He swayed and clutched at the table. "Don't kill me, Pony!" he cried, in ghastly mimicry of Longtree's voice. "Don't kill an old pal, Pony!" And the sound of his voice was lost in the blunt roar of a shot that loosened Baxter's fingers from the automatic. It clattered to the floor. Baxter braced himself against the door-frame and, turning, staggered to the desk 'phone.

The Spider nodded to the faro-dealer. "Close your cases," he said, and he hiccoughed and spat viciously. "Get me downstairs—I'm done."

The dealer, who possessed plenty of nerve himself, was dumb with wonder that this man, who had deliberately walked into a fight against three fast guns, was still on his feet. Yet he realized that The Spider had made his last fight. He was hard hit. "God, what a mess!" said the dealer as he took The Spider's arm and steadied him to the office. "You better lay down," he suggested.

"Got a cab downstairs. General Hospital."

The driver, who had been taking a nap inside the cab, heard the sound of shooting, started up, threw back the lap-robe, and stepped to the sidewalk. He listened, trying to count the shots. Then came silence. Then another shot. He was aware that his best policy was to leave that neighborhood quickly. Yet curiosity held him, and finally drew him toward the dimly lighted stairway. He wondered what had happened.

"Cab?" somebody called from above. The cabby answered.

"Give us a hand here," cried a voice from the top of the stairs. "A man's been shot—bad."

The cabby clumped up and helped get The Spider to the street. "Where'll I take him?" he stammered nervously, as he recognized the shrunken figure.

"He said something about the General Hospital. He's going—fast."

"He used to call there, regular," asserted the cabby. "Anybody else git hurt?"

"Christ, yes! It's a slaughter-pen up there. Beat it, or he'll cash in before you can get him to the hospital."

The cabby pulled up at the General Hospital, leapt down, and hastened round to the garage. He wakened the night ambulance-driver, stayed until the driver and an interne had carried The Spider into the hospital, and then drove away before he could be questioned.

The house-doctor saw at once that The Spider could not live, administered a stimulant, and telephoned to the police station, later asking the ambulance-driver for the cabman's number, which the other had failed to notice in the excitement. As he hung up the receiver a nurse told him that the patient was conscious and wanted to speak to Dr. Andover. The house-doctor asked The Spider if he wished to make a statement.

The Spider moved his head in the negative. "I'm done," he whispered, "but I'd like to see Pete a minute."

"Pete?"

"Room 218," said the nurse.

"Oh, you mean young Annersley. Well, I don't know."

"He's my boy," said The Spider, using the last desperate argument—an appeal difficult to ignore.

"Take him to 218," said the doctor, gesturing toward the stretcher.

The nurse, who went with them, roused Pete out of a quiet sleep and told him that they were bringing some one to see him. "Your father," she said, "who has been seriously injured. He asked to see you."

Pete could not at first understand what she meant. "All right," he said, turning his head and gazing toward the doorway. The nurse stepped into the hall and nodded to the attendants and the doctor.

They were about to move forward when The Spider gestured feebly to the doctor. "Get me to my feet." "I won't bother you much after that." And The Spider, who felt that his strength was going fast, tried to raise himself on the stretcher. This effort brought the internes to his side. They lifted him to his feet and shuffled awkwardly through the doorway.

Swaying between the internes, his shriveled body held upright by a desperate effort of will, he fought for breath.

Pete raised on his elbow, his dark eyes wide. "Spider!" he exclaimed.

The internes felt The Spider's slackened muscles grow tense as he endeavored to get closer to the cot. They helped him a step forward. He pulled his arm free and thrust out his hand. Pete's hand closed on those limp, clammy fingers.

"I come ahead of time, pardner. Come to see how—you was—gettin' along." The Spider's arm dropped to his side.

"Take him to the other bed there," said the doctor.

The Spider shook his head. "Just a minute." He nodded toward Pete. "I want you to do

something for me. Go see that party—in letter—fix you up—he's played square with me—same as you done."

"But who was it—" began Pete.

"Old bunch. Trailed me—too close. Got 'em—every dam' one. A más ver. Tengo que marcharme, compadre." And then, "Close the cases," said The Spider.

The internes helped him to the cot on which Doris had rested as she watched Pete through those dark hours, refusing to leave him till she knew the great danger had passed.

Pete lay back staring at the ceiling. He was, stunned by this sudden calamity. And all at once he realized that it must have been The Spider who had called to see him several times. Doris had hinted to Pete that some friend asked after him daily. So The Spider had come to El Paso to find out if the money had been delivered—risking his life for the sake of a few thousand dollars! Pete turned and glanced at the other cot. The doctor was bending over The Spider, who mumbled incoherently. Presently brisk footsteps sounded in the hallway, and two men entered the room and stepped to where The Spider lay. They spoke in low tones to the doctor, who moved back. One of the men—a heavy-shouldered, red-faced man, whom Pete recognized—asked The Spider who had shot him, and if he had been in Pony Baxter's place that night. The Spider's lips moved. The other leaned closer. Dimly The Spider realized that this was the Law that questioned him. Even at the last moment his old enemy had come to hunt him out. The Spider's beady black eyes suddenly brightened. With a last vicious effort he raised his head and spat in the officer's face.

The doctor stepped quickly forward. The Spider lay staring at the ceiling, his sightless eyes dulled by the black shadow of eternal night.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

GETTING ACQUAINTED

It was Pony Baxter who gave the names of the dead gunmen to the police, confirming the records of White-Eye, Pino, Longtree, and Jim Ewell—known as The Spider. The identity of the fourth man, he of the deformed shoulder and shriveled arm, was unknown to Baxter. The police had no record of him under any alias, and he would have been entered on their report of findings as "unknown," had not the faro-dealer and the lookout both asserted that The Spider had called him Gary—in fact had singled him out unmistakably, asking him what he had to do with the quarrel, which evidently concerned but three of the four men whom The Spider had killed. Pony Baxter, slowly recovering from an all but fatal gun-shot wound, disclaimed any knowledge of a "frame-up" to get The Spider, stating that, while aware that the gunmen and The Spider were enemies, The Spider's sudden appearance was as much of a surprise to him as it evidently was to the gunmen—and Baxter's serious condition pretty well substantiated this statement. Baxter's negro was also questioned—concerning Baxter's story and explaining the circumstances under which he had admitted The Spider to the back room.

When confronted with the torn slip of paper on which was written the address of White-Eye, Baxter admitted that he knew of the rendezvous of the gunmen, but refused to explain why he had their address in his possession, and he put a quietus on that phase of the situation by asking the police why they had not raided the place themselves before the shooting occurred, as they seemed to have known of it for several months. Eventually Baxter and the police "fixed it up." The gambler did a thriving business through the notoriety the affair had given him. Many came to see the rooms where The Spider had made his last venomous fight, men who had never turned a card in their lives, and who doubted the rumors current in the sporting world until actually in the room and listening to the faro-dealer's cold and impassive account of the men and the battle. And more often than not these curious souls, who came to scoff, remained to play.

Pete, convalescing rapidly, had asked day after day if he might not be allowed to sit with the other patients who, warmly blanketed, enjoyed the sunshine on the wide veranda overlooking the city. One morning Andover gave his consent, restricting Pete's first visit to thirty minutes. Pete was only too glad of a respite from the monotony of back-rest and pillow, bare walls, and the essential but soul-weariness of professional attention.

Not until Doris had helped him into the wheel-chair did he realize how weak he was.

Out on the veranda, his weakness, the pallid faces of the other convalescents, and even Doris herself, were forgotten as he gazed across the city and beyond to the sunlit spaces softly glowing beneath a cloudless sky. Sunlight! He had never known how much it meant, until then. He breathed deep. His dark eyes closed. Life, which he had hitherto valued only through sheer animal instinct, seemed to mean so much more than he had ever imagined it could. Yet not in any definite way, nor through contemplating any definite attainment. It was simply good to be alive—

to feel the pleasant, natural warmth of the sun—to breathe the clear, keen air. And all his curiosity as to what the world might look like—for to one who has come out of the eternal shadows the world is ever strange—was drowned in the supreme indifference of absolute ease and rest. It seemed to him as though he were floating midway between the earth and the sun, not in a weird dream wherein the subconscious mind says, "This is not real; I know that I dream"; but actual, in that Pete could feel nothing above nor beneath him. Being of a very practical turn of mind he straightway opened his eyes and was at once conscious of the arm of the wheel-chair beneath his hand and the blanket across his knees.

He was not aware that some of the patients were gazing at him curiously—that gossip had passed his name from room to room and that the papers had that morning printed a sort of revised sequel to the original story of "The Spider Mystery"—as they chose to call it.

Doris glanced at her watch. "We'll have to go in," she said, rising and adjusting Pete's pillow.

"Oh, shucks! We jest come out!"

"You've been asleep," said Doris.

Pete shook his head. "Nope. But I sure did git one good rest. Doc Andover calls this a vacation, eh? Well, then I guess I got to go back to work—and it sure is work, holdin' down that bed in there—and nothin' to do but sleep and eat and—but it ain't so bad when you're there. Now that there cow-bunny with the front teeth—"

"S-sh!" Doris flushed, and Pete glanced around, realizing that they were not alone.

"Well, I reckon we got to go back to the corral!" Pete sighed heavily.

Back in bed he watched Doris as she made a notation on the chart of his "case." He frowned irritably when she took his temperature.

"The doctor will want to know how you stood your first outing," she said, smiling.

Pete wriggled the little glass thermometer round in his mouth until it stuck up at an assertive angle, as some men hold a cigar, and glanced mischievously at his nurse. "Why don't you light it?" he mumbled.

Doris tried not to laugh as she took the thermometer, glanced at it, and charted a slight rise in the patient's temperature.

"Puttin' it in that glass of water to cool it off?" queried Pete.

She smiled as she carefully charted the temperature line.

"Kin I look at it?" queried Pete.

She gave the chart to him and he studied it frowningly. "What's this here that looks like a range of mountains?" he asked.

"Your temperature." And she explained the meaning of the wavering line.

"Gee! Back here I sure was climbin' the high hills! That's a interestin' tally-sheet."

Pete saw a peculiar expression in her gray eyes. It was as though she were searching for something beneath the surface of his superficial humor; for she knew that there was something that he wanted to say—something entirely alien to these chance pleasantries. She all but anticipated his question.

"Would you mind tellin' me somethin'?" he queried abruptly.

"No. If there is anything that I can tell you."

"I was wonderin' who was payin' for this here private room—and reg'lar nurse. I been sizin' up things—and folks like me don't get such fancy trimmin's without payin'."

"Why—it was your—your father."

Pete sat up quickly. "My father! I ain't got no father. I—I reckon somebody got things twisted."

"Why, the papers"—and Doris bit her lip—"I mean Miss Howard, the nurse who was here that night..."

"When The Spider cashed in?"

Doris nodded.

"The Spider wasn't my father. But I guess mebbly that nurse thought he was, and got things mixed."

"The house-doctor would not have had him brought up here if he had thought he was any one else."

"So The Spider said he was my father—so he could git to see me!" Pete seemed to be talking to himself. "Was he the friend you was tellin' me called regular?"

"Yes. I don't know, but I think he paid for your room and the operation."

"Don't they make those operations on folks, anyhow, if they ain't got money?"

"Yes, but in your case it was a very difficult and dangerous operation. I saw that Dr. Andover hardly wanted to take the risk."

"So The Spider pays for everything!" Pete shook his head. "I don't just sabe."

"I saw him watching you once—when you were asleep," said Doris. "He seemed terribly anxious. I was afraid of him—and I felt sorry for him—"

Pete lay back and stared at the opposite wall. "He sure was game!" he murmured. "And he was my friend."

Pete turned his head quickly as Doris stepped toward the door. "Could you git me some of them papers—about The Spider?"

"Yes," she answered hesitatingly, as she left the room.

Pete closed his eyes. He could see The Spider standing beside his bed supported by two internes, dying on his feet, fighting for breath as he told Pete to "see that party—in the letter"—and "that some one had trailed him too close." And "close the cases," The Spider had said. The game was ended.

When Doris came in again Pete was asleep. She laid a folded newspaper by his pillow, gazed at him for a moment, and stepped softly from the room.

At noon she brought his luncheon. When she came back for the tray she noticed that he had not eaten, nor would he talk while she was there. But that evening he seemed more like himself. After she had taken his temperature he jokingly asked her if he bit that there little glass dingus in two what would happen?"

"Why, I'd have to buy a new one," she replied, smiling.

Pete's face expressed surprise. "Say!" he queried, sitting up, "did The Spider pay you for bein' my private nurse, too?"

"He must have made some arrangement with Dr. Andover. He put me in charge of your case."

"But don't you git anything extra for—for smilin' at folks—and—coaxin' 'em to eat—and wastin' your time botherin' around 'em most all day?"

"The hospital gets the extra money. I get my usual salary."

"You ain't mad at me, be you?"

"Why, no, why should I be?"

"I dunno. I reckon I talk kind of rough—and that mebbly I said somethin'—but—would you mind if I was to tell you somethin'. I been thinkin' about it ever since you brung that paper. It's somethin' mighty important—and—"

"Your dinner is getting cold," said Doris.

"Shucks! I jest got to tell somebody! Did you read what was in that paper?"

Doris nodded.

"About that fella called Steve Gary that The Spider bumped off in that gamblin'-joint?"

"Yes."

"Well, if that's right—and the papers ain't got things twisted, like when they said The Spider was my father—why, if it *was* Steve Gary—I kin go back to the Concho and kind o' start over ag'in."

"I don't understand."

"Course you don't! You see, me and Gary mixed onct—and—"

Doris' gray eyes grew big as Pete spoke rapidly of his early life, of the horse-trader, of Annersley and Bailey and Montoya, and young Andy White—characters who passed swiftly before

her vision as she followed Pete's fortunes up to the moment when he was brought into the hospital. And presently she understood that he was trying to tell her that if the newspaper report was authentic he was a free man. His eagerness to vindicate himself was only too apparent.

Suddenly he ceased talking. The animation died from his dark eyes. "Mebby it wa'n't the same Steve Gary," he said.

"If it had been, you mean that you could go back to your friends—and there would be no trouble—?"

Pete nodded. "But I don't know."

"Is there any way of finding out—before you leave here?" she asked.

"I might write a letter and ask Jim Bailey, or Andy. They would know."

"I'll get you a pen and paper."

Pete flushed. "Would you mind writin' it for me? I ain't no reg'lar, professional writer. Pop Annersley learned me some—but I reckon Jim could read your writin' better."

"Of course I'll write the letter, if you want me to. If you'll just tell me what you wish to say I'll take it down on this pad and copy it in my room."

"Can't you write it here? Mebby we might want to change somethin'."

"Well, if you'll eat your dinner—" And Doris went for pen and paper. When she returned she found that Pete had stacked the dishes in a perilous pyramid on the floor, that the bed-tray might serve as a table on which to write.

He watched her curiously as she unscrewed the cap of her fountain pen and dated the letter.

"Jim Bailey, Concho—that's over in Arizona," he said, then he hesitated. "I reckon I got to tell you the whole thing first and mebby you kin put it down after I git through." Doris saw him eying the pen intently. "You didn't fetch the ink," he said suddenly.

Doris laughed as she explained the fountain pen to him. Then she listened while he told her what to say.

The letter written, Doris went to her room. Pete lay thinking of her pleasant gray eyes and the way that she smiled understandingly and nodded—"When most folks," he soliloquized, "would say something or ask you what you was drivin' at."

To him she was an altogether wonderful person, so quietly cheerful, natural, and unobtrusively competent... Then, through some queer trick of memory, Boca's face was visioned to him and his thoughts were of the desert, of men and horses and a far sky-line. "I got to get out of here," he told himself sleepily. And he wondered if he would ever see Doris Gray again after he left the hospital.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A PUZZLE GAME

Dr. Andover, brisk and professionally cheerful, was telling Pete that so far as he was concerned he could not do anything more for him, except to advise him to be careful about lifting or straining—to take it easy for at least a month—and to do no hard riding until the incision was thoroughly healed. "You'll know when you are really fit," he said, smiling, "because your back will tell you better than I can. You're a mighty fortunate young man!"

"You sure fixed me up fine, Doc. You was sayin' I could leave here next week?"

"Yes, if you keep on improving—and I can't see why you should not. And I don't have to tell you to thank Miss Gray for what she has done for you. If it hadn't been for her, my boy, I doubt that you would be here!"

"She sure is one jim-dandy nurse."

"She is more than that, young man." Andover cleared his throat. "There's one little matter that I thought best not to mention until you were—pretty well out of the woods. I suppose you know that the authorities will want to—er—talk with you about that shooting scrape—that chap that was found somewhere out in the desert. The chief of detectives asked me the other day when

you would be around again."

"So, when I git out of here they're goin' to arrest me?"

"Well, frankly, you are under arrest now. I thought it best that you should know it now. In a general way I gathered that the police suspect you of having had a hand in the killing of that man who was found near Sanborn."

"Well, they can wait till hell freezes afore I'll tell 'em," said Pete.

"And, meanwhile, you'll also have to—er—wait, I imagine. Have you any friends who might—er—use their influence? I think you might get out on bail. I can't say."

"Nope."

"Then the best thing that you can do is to tell a straight story and hope that the authorities will believe you. Well, I've got to go. By the way, how are you fixed financially? Just let me know if you want anything?"

"Thanks, Doc. From what you say I reckon the county will be payin' my board."

"I hope not. But you'll need some clothing and underwear—the things you had on are—"

Pete nodded.

"Don't hesitate to ask me,"—and Andover rose. "Your friend—er—Ewell—arranged for any little contingency that might arise."

"Then I kin go most any time?" queried Pete.

"We'll see how you are feeling next week. Meanwhile keep out in the sun—but wrap up well. Good-bye!"

Pete realized that to make a fresh start in life he would have to begin at the bottom.

He had ever been inclined to look forward rather than backward—to put each day's happenings behind him as mere incidents in his general progress—and he began to realize that these happenings had accumulated to a bulk that could not be ignored, if the fresh start that he contemplated were to be made successfully. He recalled how he had felt when he had squared himself with Roth for that six-gun. But the surreptitious taking of the six-gun had been rather a mistake than a deliberate intent to steal. And Pete tried to justify himself with the thought that all his subsequent trouble had been the result of mistakes due to conditions thrust upon him by a fate which had slowly driven him to his present untenable position—that of a fugitive from the law, without money and without friends. He came to the bitter conclusion that his whole life had been a mistake—possibly not through his own initiative, but a mistake nevertheless. He knew that his only course was to retrace and untangle the snarl of events in which his feet were snared. Accustomed to rely upon his own efforts—he had always been able to make his living—he suddenly realized the potency of money; that money could alleviate suffering, influence authority, command freedom—at least temporary freedom—and even in some instances save life itself.

Yet it was characteristic of Pete that he did not regret anything that he had done, in a moral sense. He had made mistakes—and he would have to pay for them—but only once. He would not make these mistakes again. A man was a fool who deliberately rode his horse into the same box cañon twice.

Pete wondered if his letter to Jim Bailey had been received and what Bailey's answer would be. The letter must have reached Bailey by this time. And then Pete thought of The Spider's note, advising him to call at the Stockmen's Security; and of The Spider's peculiar insistence that he do so—that Hodges would "use him square."

Pete wondered what it all signified. He knew that The Spider had money deposited with the Stockmen's Security. The request had something to do with money, without doubt. Perhaps The Spider had wished him to attend to some matter of trust—for Pete was aware that The Spider had trusted him, and had said so, almost with his last breath. But Pete hesitated to become entangled further in The Spider's affairs. He did not intend to make a second mistake of that kind.

Monday of the following week Pete was out on the veranda—listening to little Ruth, a blue-eyed baby patient who as gravely explained the mysteries of a wonderful puzzle game of pasteboard cows and horses and a farmyard "most all cut to pieces," as Ruth said, when Doris stepped from the hall doorway and, glancing about, finally discovered Pete in the far corner of the veranda—deeply absorbed in searching for the hind leg of a noble horse to which little Ruth had insisted upon attaching the sedate and ignoble hind quarters of a maternal cow. So intent were they upon their game that neither of them saw Doris as she moved toward them, nodding brightly to many convalescents seated about the veranda.

"Whoa!" said Pete, as Ruth disarranged the noble steed in her eagerness to fit the bit of pasteboard Pete had handed to her. "Now, I reckon he'll stand till we find that barn-door and the water-trough. Do you reckon he wants a drink?"

"He looks very firsty," said Ruth.

"Mebby he's hungry, too,"—and Pete found the segment of a mechanically correct haystack.

"No!" cried Ruth positively, taking the bit of haystack from Pete; "wet's put some hay in his house."

"Then that there cow'll git it—and she's plumb fed up already."

"Den I give 'at 'tittle cow his breakfuss,"—and the solicitous Ruth placed the section of haystack within easy reach of a wide-eyed and slightly disjointed calf—evidently the offspring of the well-fed cow, judging from the paint-markings of each.

But suddenly little Ruth's face lost its sunshine. Her mouth quivered. Pete glanced up at her, his dark eyes questioning.

"There's lots more hay," he stammered, "for all of 'em."

"It hurted me," sobbed Ruth.

"Your foot?" Pete glanced down at the child's bandaged foot, and then looked quickly away.

"Ess. It hurted me—and oo didn't hit it."

"I'll bet it was that doggone ole cow! Let's git her out of this here corral and turn her loose!" Pete shuffled the cow into a disjointed heap. "Now she's turned loose—and she won't come back."

Ruth ceased sobbing and turned to gaze at Doris, who patted her head and smiled. "We was—stockin' up our ranch," Pete explained almost apologetically. "Ruth and me is pardners."

Doris gazed at Pete, her gray eyes warm with a peculiar light. "It's awfully nice of you to amuse Ruth."

"Amuse her! My Gosh! Miss Gray, she's doin' the amusin'! When we're visitin' like this, I plumb forgit—everything."

"Here's a letter for you," said Doris. "I thought that perhaps you might want to have it as soon as possible."

"Thanks, Miss Gray. I reckon it's from Jim Bailey. I—" Pete tore off the end of the envelope with trembling fingers. Little Ruth watched him curiously. Doris had turned away and was looking out across the city. A tiny hand tugged at her sleeve. "Make Pete play wif me," said Ruth. "My cow's all broke."

Pete glanced up, slowly slid the unread letter back into the envelope and tucked it into his shirt. "You bet we'll find that cow if we have to comb every draw on the ranch! Hello, pardner! Here's her ole head. She was sure enough investigatin' that there haystack."

Doris turned away. There was a tense throbbing in her throat as she moved back to the doorway. Despite herself she glanced back for an instant. The dark head and the golden head were together over the wonderful puzzle picture. Just why Pete should look up then could hardly be explained by either himself or Doris. He waved his hand boyishly. Doris turned and walked rapidly down the hallway. Her emotion irritated her. Why should she feel so absolutely silly and sentimental because a patient, who really meant nothing to her aside from her profession, should choose to play puzzle picture with a crippled child, that he might forget for a while his very identity and those terrible happenings? Had he not said so? And yet he had put aside the letter that might mean much to him, that he might make Little Ruth forget her pain in searching for a dismembered pasteboard cow.

Doris glanced in as she passed Pete's room. Two men were standing there, expressing in their impatient attitudes that they had expected to find some one in the room. She knew who they were—men from the police station—for she had seen them before.

"You were looking for Mr. Annorsley?" she asked.

"Yes, mam. We got a little business—"

"He's out on the veranda, playing puzzle picture with a little girl patient."

"Well, we got a puzzle picture for him—" began one of the men, but Doris, her eyes flashing, interrupted him.

"Dr. Andover left word that he does not want Mr. Annorsley to see visitors without his permission."

"Reckon we can see him, miss. I had a talk with Doc Andover."

"Then let me call Mr. Annorsley, please. There are so many—patients out there."

"All right, miss."

Doris took Pete's place as she told him. Little Ruth entered a demurrer, although she liked Doris. "Pete knew all about forces and cows. He must come wight back . . ."

"What a beautiful bossy!" said Doris as Ruth rearranged the slightly disjointed cow.

"Dat a *cow*," said Ruth positively. "Pete says dat a *cow*!"

"And what a wonderful pony!"

"Dat a *force*, Miss Dowis. Pete say dat a force."

It was evident to Doris that Pete was an authority, not without honor in his own country, and an authority not to be questioned, for Ruth gravely informed Doris that Pete could "wide" and "wope" and knew everything about "forces" and "cows."

Meanwhile Pete, seated on the edge of his cot, was telling the plain-clothes men that he was willing to go with them whenever they were ready, stipulating, however, that he wanted to visit the Stockmen's Security and Savings Bank first, and as soon as possible. Incidentally he stubbornly refused to admit that he had anything to do with the killing of Brent, whom the sheriff of Sanborn had finally identified as the aforetime foreman of the Olla.

"There's nothing personal about this, young fella," said one of the men as Pete's dark eyes blinked somberly. "It's our business, that's all."

"And it's a dam' crawlin' business," asserted Pete. "You couldn't even let The Spider cross over peaceful."

"I reckon he earned all he got," said one of the men.

"Mebby. But it took three fast guns to git him—and he put *them* out of business first. I'd 'a' liked to seen some of you rubber-heeled heifers tryin' to put the irons on him."

"That kind of talk won't do you no good when you're on the stand, young fella. It ain't likely that Sam Brent was your first job. Your record reads pretty strong for a kid."

"Meanin' Gary? Well, about Gary"—Pete fumbled in his shirt. "I got a letter here" . . . He studied the closely written sheet for a few seconds, then his face cleared. "Jest run your eye over that. It's from Jim Bailey, who used to be my fo'man on the Concho."

The officers read the letter, one gazing over the other's shoulder, "Who's this Jim Bailey, anyhow?"

"He's a white man—fo'man of the Concho, and my boss, onct."

"Well, you're lucky if what he says is so. But that don't square you with the other deal."

"There's only one man that could do that," said Pete. "And I reckon he ain't ridin' where you could git him."

"That's all right, Annersley. But even if you didn't get Brent, you were on that job. You were running with a tough bunch."

"Who's got my gun?" queried Pete abruptly.

"It's over to the station with the rest of your stuff."

"Well, it wa'n't a forty-five that put Brent out of business. My gun is."

"You can tell that to the sheriff of Sanborn County. And you'll have a hard time proving that you never packed any other gun."

"You say it's the sheriff of Sanborn County that'll be wantin' to know?"

"Yes. We're holding you for him."

"That's different. I reckon I kin talk to *him*."

"Well, you'll get a chance. He's in town—waiting to take you over to Sanborn."

"I sure would like to have a talk with him," said Pete. "Would you mind tellin' him that?"

"Why—no. We'll tell him."

"'Cause I aim to take a little walk this afternoon," asserted Pete, "and mebbly he'd kind o' like to keep me comp'ny."

"You'll have company—if you take a walk," said one of the detectives significantly.

CHAPTER XL

THE MAN DOWNSTAIRS

Pete did not return to the veranda to finish his puzzle game with little Ruth. He smiled rather grimly as he realized that he had a puzzle game of his own to solve. He lay on the cot and his eyes closed as he reviewed the vivid events in his life, from the beginning of the trail, at Concho, to its end, here in El Paso. It seemed to spread out before him like a great map: the desert and its towns, the hills and mesas, trails and highways over which men scurried like black and red ants, commingling, separating, hastening off at queer tangents, meeting in combat, disappearing in crevices, reappearing and setting off again in haste, searching for food, bearing strange burdens, scrambling blindly over obstacles—collectively without seeming purpose—yet individually bent upon some quest, impetuous and headstrong in their strange activities. "And gittin' nowhere," soliloquized Pete, "except in trouble."

He thought of the letter from Bailey, and, sitting up, re-read it slowly. So Steve Gary had survived, only to meet the inevitable end of his kind. Well, Gary was always hunting trouble... Roth, the storekeeper at Concho, ought to have the number of that gun which Pete packed. If the sheriff of Sanborn was an old-timer he would know that a man who packed a gun for business reasons did not go round the country experimenting with different makes and calibers. Only the "showcase" boys in the towns swapped guns. Ed Brevoort had always used a Luger. Pete wondered if there had been any evidence of the caliber of the bullet which had killed Brent. If the sheriff were an old-timer such evidence would not be overlooked.

Pete got up and wandered out to the veranda. The place was deserted. He suddenly realized that those who were able had gone to their noon meal. He had forgotten about that. He walked back to his room and sat on the edge of his cot. He was lonesome and dispirited. He was not hungry, but he felt decidedly empty. This was the first time that Doris had allowed him to miss a meal, and it was her fault! She might have called him. But what did she care? In raw justice to her—why *should* she care?

Pete's brooding eyes brightened as Doris came in with a tray. She had thought that he had rather have his dinner there. "I noticed that you did not come down with the others," she said.

Pete was angry with himself. Adam-like he said he wasn't hungry anyhow.

"Then I'll take it back," said Doris sweetly,

Adam-like, Pete decided that he was hungry. "Miss Gray," he blurted, "I—I'm a doggone short-horn! I'm goin' to eat. I sure want to square myself."

"For what?"

Doris was gazing at him with a serene directness that made him feel that his clothing was several sizes too large for him. He realized that generalities would hardly serve his turn just then.

"I was settin' here feelin' sore at the whole doggone outfit," he explained. "Sore at you—and everybody."

"Well?" said Doris unsmilingly.

"I'm askin' you to forgit that I was sore at you." Pete was not ordinarily of an apologetic turn, and he felt that he pretty thoroughly squared himself.

"It really doesn't matter," said Doris, as she placed his tray on the table and turned to go.

"I reckon you're right." And his dark eyes grew moody again.

"There's a man in the reception-room waiting to see you," said Doris. "I told him you were having your dinner."

"Another one, eh? Oh, I was forgittin'. I got a letter from Jim Bailey"—Pete fumbled in his shirt—"and I thought mebbly—"

"I hope it's good news."

"It sure is! Would you mind readin' it—to yourself—sometime?"

"I—think I'd rather not," said Doris hesitatingly.

Pete's face showed so plainly that he was hurt that Doris regretted her refusal to read the

letter. To make matters worse—for himself—Pete asked that exceedingly irritating and youthful question, "Why?" which elicits that distinctly unsatisfactory feminine answer, "Because." That lively team "Why" and "Because" have run away with more chariots of romance, upset more matrimonial bandwagons, and spilled more beans than all the other questions and answers men and women have uttered since that immemorial hour when Adam made the mistake of asking Eve why she insisted upon his eating an apple right after breakfast.

Doris was not indifferent to his request that she read the letter, but she was unwilling to let Pete know it, and a little fearful that he might interpret her interest for just what it was—the evidence of a greater solicitude for his welfare than she cared to have him know.

Pete, like most lusty sons of saddle-leather, shied at even the shadow of sentiment—in this instance shying at his own shadow. He rode wide of the issue, turning from the pleasant vista of who knows what imaginings, to face the imperative challenge of immediate necessity, which was, first, to eat something, and then to meet the man who waited for him downstairs who, Pete surmised, was the sheriff of Sanborn County.

"If you don't mind tellin' him I'll come down as soon as I eat," said Pete as he pulled up a chair.

Doris nodded and turned to leave. Pete glanced up. She had not gone. "Your letter,"—and Doris proffered the letter which he had left on the cot. Pete was about to take it when he glanced up at her. She was smiling at him. "You don't know how funny you look when you frown and act—like—like a spoiled child," she laughed. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"I—I reckon I am," said Pete, grinning boyishly.

"Ashamed of yourself?"

"Nope! A spoiled kid, like you said. And I ain't forgittin' who spoiled me."

The letter, the man downstairs and all that his presence implied, past and future possibilities, were forgotten in the brief glance that Doris gave him as she turned in the doorway. And glory-be, she had taken the letter with her! Pete gazed about the room to make sure that he was not dreaming. No, the letter had disappeared—and but a moment ago Doris had had it. And she still had it. "Well, she'll know I got one or two friends, anyhow," reflected Pete as he ate his dinner. "When she sees how Jim talks—and what he said Ma Bailey has to say to me—mebby she'll—mebby—Doggone it! Most like she'll just hand it back and smile and say she's mighty glad—and—but that ain't no sign that I'm the only guy that ever got shot up, and fixed up, and turned loose by a sure-enough angel... Nope! She ain't a angel—she's real folks, like Ma Bailey and Andy and Jim. If I ain't darned careful I'm like to find I done rid my hoss into a gopher-hole and got throwed bad."

Meanwhile "the man downstairs" was doing some thinking himself. That morning he had visited police headquarters and inspected Pete's gun and belongings—noting especially the hand-carved holster and the heavy-caliber gun, the factory number of which he jotted down in his notebook. Incidentally he had borrowed a Luger automatic from the miscellaneous collection of weapons taken from criminals, assured himself that it was not loaded, and slipped it into his coat-pocket. Later he had talked with the officials, visited the Mexican lodging-house, where he had obtained a description of the man who had occupied the room with Pete, and stopping at a restaurant for coffee and doughnuts, had finally arrived at the hospital prepared to hear what young Annersley had to say for himself.

Sheriff Jim Owen, unofficially designated as "Sunny Jim" because of an amiable disposition, which in no way affected his official responsibilities, was a dyed-in-the-wool, hair-cinched, range-branded, double-fisted official, who scorned nickel-plated firearms, hard-boiled hats, fancy drinks, and smiled his contempt for the rubber-heeled methods of the city police. Sheriff Owen had no rubber-heeled tendencies. He was frankness itself, both in peace and in war. It was once said of him, by a lank humorist of Sanborn, that Jim Owen never wasted any time palaverin' when *he* was flirtin' with death. That he just met you with a gun in one hand and a smile in the other, and you could take your choice—or both, if you was wishful.

The sheriff was thinking, his hands crossed upon his rotund stomach and his bowed legs as near crossed as they could ever be without an operation. He was pretty well satisfied that the man upstairs, who that pretty little nurse had said would be down in a few minutes, had not killed Sam Brent. He had a few pertinent reasons for this conclusion. First, Brent had been killed by a thirty-caliber, soft-nosed bullet, which the sheriff had in his vest-pocket. Then, from what he had been told, he judged that the man who actually killed Brent would not have remained in plain sight in the lodging-house window while his companion made his get-away. This act alone seemed to indicate that of the two the man who had escaped was in the greater danger if apprehended, and that young Annersley had generously offered to cover his retreat so far as possible. Then, from the lodging-house keeper's description of the other man, Jim Owen concluded that he was either Ed Brevoort or Slim Harper, both of whom were known to have been riding for the Olla. And the sheriff knew something of Brevoort's record.

Incidentally Sheriff Owen also looked up Pete's record. He determined to get Pete's story and

compare it with what the newspapers said and see how close this combined evidence came to his own theory of the killing of Brent. He was mentally piecing together possibilities and probabilities, and the exact evidence he had, when Pete walked into the reception-room.

"Have a chair," said Sheriff Owen. "I got one."

"I'm Pete Annersley," said Pete. "Did you want to see me?"

"Thought I'd call and introduce myself. I'm Jim Owen to my friends. I'm sheriff of Sanborn County to others."

"All right, Mr. Owen," said Pete, smiling in spite of himself.

"That's the idea—only make it Jim. Did you ever use one of these?" And suddenly Sheriff Owen had a Luger automatic in his hand. Pete wondered that a man as fat as the little sheriff could pull a gun so quickly.

"Why—no. I ain't got no use for one of them doggone stutlerin' smoke-wagons."

"Here, too," said Owen, slipping the Luger back into his pocket. "Never shot one of 'em in my life. Ever try one?"

"I—" Pete caught himself on the verge of saying that he had tried Ed Brevoort's Luger once. He realized in a flash how close the sheriff had come to trapping him. "I never took to them automatics," he asserted lamely.

Pete had dodged the question. On the face of it this looked as though Pete might have been trying to shield himself by disclaiming any knowledge of that kind of weapon. But Owen knew the type of man he was talking to—knew that he would shield a companion even more quickly than he would shield himself.

"Sam Brent was killed by a bullet from a Luger," stated Owen.

Pete's face expressed just the faintest shade of relief, but he said nothing.

"I got the bullet here in my pocket. Want to see it?" And before Pete could reply, the sheriff fished out the flattened and twisted bullet and handed it to Pete, who turned it over and over, gazing at it curiously.

"Spreads out most as big as a forty-five," said Pete, handing it back.

"Yes—but it acts different. Travels faster—and takes more along with it. Lot of 'em used in Texas and across the line. Ever have words with Sam Brent?"

"No. Got along with him all right."

"Did he pay your wages reg'lar?"

"Yes."

"Ever have any trouble with a man named Steve Gary?"

"Yes, but he's—"

"I know. Used to know the man that got him. Wizard with a gun. Meaner than dirt—"

"Hold on!" said Pete. "He was my friend."

"—to most folks," continued the rotund sheriff. "But I've heard said he'd do anything for a man he liked. Trouble with him was he didn't like anybody."

"Mebby he didn't," said Pete indifferently.

"Because he couldn't trust anybody. Ever eat ice-cream?"

"Who—me?"

The sheriff smiled and nodded.

"Nope. Ma Bailey made some onct, but—"

"Let's go out and get some. It's cooling and refreshing and it's—ice-cream. Got a hat?"

"Up in my room."

"Go get it. I'll wait."

"You mean?"—and Pete hesitated.

"I don't mean anything. Heard you was going for a walk this afternoon. Thought I'd come

along. Want to get acquainted. Lonesome. Nobody to talk to. Get your hat."

"Suppose I was to make a break—when we git outside?" said Pete.

Sheriff Owen smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "That little nurse, the one with the gray eyes—that said you were having dinner—is she your reg'lar nurse?"

Pete nodded.

"Well, you won't," said the sheriff.

"How's that?" queried Pete.

"I talked with her. Sensible girl. Break *her* all up if her patient was to make a break:—because"—and the sheriff's eyes ceased to twinkle, although he still smiled—"because I'd have to break *you* all up. Hate to do it. Hate to make her feel bad."

"Oh, shucks," said Pete.

"You're right—shucks. That's what you'd look like. I pack a forty-five—same as you. We can buy a hat—"

"I'll get it." And Pete left the room.

He could not quite understand Sheriff Owen. In fact Pete did not come half so close to understanding him as the sheriff came to understanding Pete. But Pete understood one thing—and that was that Jim Owen was not an easy proposition to fool with.

"Now where do we head for?" said Owen as they stood at the foot of the hospital steps.

"I was goin' to the bank—the Stockmen's Security."

"Good bank. You couldn't do better. Know old E.H. myself. Used to know him better—before he got rich. No—this way. Short cut. You got to get acquainted with your legs again, eh? Had a close call. A little shaky?"

"I reckon I kin make it."

"Call a cab if you say the word."

"I—I figured I could walk," said Pete, biting his lips. But a few more steps convinced him that the sheriff was taking no risk whatever in allowing him his liberty.

"Like to see old E.H. myself," stated the sheriff. "Never rode in a cab in my life. Let's try one."

And the sprightly sheriff of Sanborn County straightway hailed a languorous cabby who sat dozing on the "high seat" of a coupe to which was attached the most voluptuous-looking white horse that Pete had ever seen. Evidently the "hospital stand" was a prosperous center.

"We want to go to the Stockmen's Security Bank," said the sheriff, as the coupe drew up to the curb. The driver nodded.

Pete leaned back against the cushions and closed his eyes. Owen glanced at him and shook his head. There was nothing vicious or brutal in that face. It was not the face of a killer.

Pete sat up suddenly. "I was forgittin' I was broke," and he turned to Owen.

"No. There's sixty-seven dollars and two-bits of yours over at the station, along with your gun and a bundle of range clothes."

"I forgot that."

"Feel better?"

"Fine—when I'm settin' still."

"Well, we're here. Go right in. I'll wait."

Pete entered the bank and inquired for the president, giving the attendant his name in lieu of the card for which he was asked. He was shown in almost immediately, and a man somewhat of The Spider's type assured him that he was the president and, as he spoke, handed Pete a slip of paper such as Pete had never before seen.

"You're Peter Annersley?" queried Hodges.

"Yes. What's this here?"

"It's more money than I'd want to carry with me on the street," said Hodges. "Have you anything that might identify you?"

"What's the idee?"

"Mr. Ewell had some money with us that he wished transferred to you, in case anything happened to him. I guess you know what happened." Then reflectively, "Jim was a queer one."

"You mean The Spider wanted me to have this?"

"Yes. That slip of paper represents just twenty-four thousand dollars in currency. If you'll just endorse it—"

"But it ain't my money!" said Pete.

"You're a fool if you don't take it, young man. From what I have heard you'll need it. It seems that Jim took a fancy to you. Said you had played square with him—about that last deposit, I suppose. You don't happen to have a letter with you, from him, I suppose, do you?"

"I got this,"—and Pete showed President Hodges The Spider's note, which Hodges read and returned. "That was like Jim. He wouldn't listen to me."

"And this was his money?" Pete was unable to realize the significance of it all.

"Yes. Now it's yours. You're lucky! Mighty lucky! Just endorse the draft—right here. I'll have it cashed for you."

"Write my name?"

"Yes, your full name, here."

"And I git twenty-four thousand dollars for this?"

"If you want to carry that much around with you. I'd advise you to deposit the draft and draw against it."

"If it's mine, I reckon I'd like to jest git it in my hands onct, anyhow. I'd like to see what that much money feels like."

Pete slowly wrote his name, thinking of The Spider and Pop Annersley as he did so. Hodges took the draft, pressed a button, and a clerk appeared, took the draft, and presently returned with the money in gold and bank-notes of large denomination.

When he had gone out, Hodges turned to Pete. "What are you going to do with it? It's none of my business—now. But Jim and I were friends—and if I can do anything—"

"I reckon I'll put it back in—to my name," said Pete. "I sure ain't scared to leave it with you—for The Spider he weren't."

Hodges smiled grimly, and pressed a button on his desk. "New account," he told the clerk.

Pete sighed heavily when the matter had been adjusted, the identification signature slips signed, and the bank-book made out in his name.

Hodges himself introduced Pete at the teller's window, thanked Pete officially for patronizing the bank, and shook hands with him. "Any time you need funds, just come in—or write to me," said Hodges. "Good-bye, and good luck."

Pete stumbled out of the bank and down the steps to the sidewalk. He was rich—worth twenty-four thousand dollars! But why had The Spider left this money to him? Surely The Spider had had some other friend—or some relative...?

"Step right in," said Sheriff Owen. "You look kind of white. Feeling shaky?"

"Some."

"We want to go to the General Hospital," said the sheriff.

Pete listened to the deliberate plunk, plunk, plunk, plunk of the white mare's large and capable feet as the cab whirred softly along the pavement. "I suppose you'll be takin' me over to Sanborn right soon," he said finally.

"Well, I expect I ought to get back to my family," said the sheriff.

"I didn't kill Sam Brent," asserted Pete.

"I never thought you did," said the sheriff, much to Pete's surprise.

"Then what's the idee of doggin' me around like I was a blame coyote?"

"Because you have been traveling in bad company, son. And some one in that said company killed Sam Brent."

"And I got to stand for it?"

"Looks that way. I been all kinds of a fool at different times, but I'm not fool enough to ask you who killed Sam Brent. But I advise you to tell the judge and jury when the time comes."

"That the only way I kin square myself?"

"I don't say that. But it will help."

"Then I don't say."

"Thought you wouldn't. It's a case of circumstantial evidence. Brent was found in that cactus forest near the station. The same night two men rode into Sanborn and left their horses at the livery-stable. These men took the train for El Paso, but jumped it at the crossing. Later they were trailed to a rooming-house on Aliso Street. One of them—and this is the queer part of it—got away after shooting his pardner. The rubber heels in this town say these two men quarreled about money—"

"That's about all they know. Ed and me never—"

"You don't mean Ed Brevoort, do you?"

"There's more 'n one Ed in this country."

"There sure is. Old E.H. Hodges—he's Ed; and there's Ed Smally on the force here, and Ed Cummings, the preacher over to Sanborn. Lots of Eds. See here, son. If you want to get out of a bad hole, the quickest way is for you to tell a straight story. Save us both time. Been visiting with you quite a spell."

"Reckon we're here," said Pete as the cab stopped.

"And I reckon you're glad of it. As I was saying, we been having quite a visit—getting acquainted. Now if you haven't done anything the law can hold you for, the more I know about what you have done the better it will be for you. Think that over. If you can prove you didn't kill Brent, then it's up to me to find out who did. Get a good sleep. I'll drift round sometime tomorrow."

Back in his room Pete lay trying to grasp the full significance of the little bank-book in his pocket. He wondered who would stop him if he were to walk out of the hospital that evening or the next morning, and leave town. He got up and strode nervously back and forth, fighting a recurrent temptation to make his escape.

He happened to glance in the mirror above the washstand. "That's the only fella that kin stop me," he told himself. And he thought of Ed Brevoort and wondered where Brevoort was, and if he were in need of money.

Dr. Andover, making his afternoon rounds, stepped in briskly, glanced at Pete's flushed face, and sitting beside him on the cot, took his pulse and temperature with that professional celerity that makes the busy physician. "A little temperature. Been out today?"

"For a couple of hours."

Andover nodded. "Well, young man, you get right into bed."

The surgeon closed the door. Pete undressed grumblingly.

"Now turn over. I want to look at your back. M-mm! Thought so. A little feverish. Did you walk much?"

"Nope! We took a rig. I was with the sheriff."

"I see! Excitement was a little too much for you. You'll have to go slow for a few days."

"I'm feelin' all right," asserted Pete.

"You think you are. How's your appetite?"

"I ain't hungry."

Andover nodded. "You'd better keep off your feet to-morrow."

"Shucks, Doc! I'm sick of this here place!"

Andover smiled. "Well, just between ourselves, so am I. I've been here eight years. By the way, how would you like to take a ride with me, next Thursday? I expect to motor out to Sanborn."

"In that machine I seen you in the other day?"

"Yes. New car. I'd like to try her out on a good straightaway—and there's a pretty fair road up on this end of the mesa."

"I'd sure like to go! Say, Doc, how much does one of them automobiles cost?"

"Oh, about three thousand, without extras."

"How fast kin you go?"

"Depends on the road. My car is guaranteed to do seventy-five on the level."

"Some stepper! You could git to Sanborn and back in a couple of hours."

"Not quite. I figure it about a four-hour trip. I'd be glad to have you along. Friend of mine tells me there's a thoroughbred saddle-horse there that is going to be sold at auction. I've been advertising for a horse for my daughter. You might look him over and tell me what you think of him."

"I reckon I know him already," said Pete.

"How's that?"

"'Cause they's no thoroughbred stock around Sanborn. If it's the one I'm thinkin' about, it was left there by a friend of mine."

"Oh—I see! I remember, now. Sanborn is where you—er—took the train for El Paso?"

"We left our hosses there—same as the paper said."

"H-mm! Well, I suppose the horse is to be sold for charges. Sheriff's sale, I understand."

"Oh, you're safe in buyin' *him* all right. And he sure is a good one."

"Well, I'll speak to the chief. I imagine he'll let you go with me."

Pete shook his head. "Nope. He wouldn't even if he had the say. But the sheriff of Sanborn County has kind of invited me to go over there for a spell. I guess he figured on leavin' here in a couple of days."

"He can't take you till I certify that you're able to stand the journey," said Andover brusquely.

"Well, he's comin' to-morrow. I'm dead sick of stayin' here. Can't you tell him I kin travel?"

"We'll see how you feel to-morrow. Hello! Here's Miss Gray. What, six o'clock! I had no idea... Yes, a little temperature, Miss Gray. Too much excitement. A little surface inflammation—nothing serious. A good night's rest and he'll be a new man. Good-night."

Pete was glad to see Doris. Her mere presence was restful. He sighed heavily, glanced up at her and smiled. "A little soup, Miss Gray. It's awful excitin'. Slight surface inflammation on them boiled beets. Nothin' serious—they ain't scorched. A good night's rest and the cook'll be a new man tomorrow. Doc Andover is sure all right—but I always feel like he was wearin' kid gloves and was afraid of gittin' 'em dirty, every time he comes in."

Doris was not altogether pleased by Pete's levity and her face showed it. She did not smile, but rearranged the things on the tray in a preoccupied manner, and asked him if there was anything else he wanted.

"Lemme see?" Pete frowned prodigiously. "Got salt and pepper and butter and sugar; but I reckon you forgot somethin' that I'm wantin' a whole lot."

"What is it?"

"You're forgittin' to smile."

"I read that letter from Mr. Bailey."

"I'm mighty glad you did, Miss Gray. I wanted you to know what was in that letter. You'd sure like Ma Bailey, and Jim and Andy. Andy was my pardner—when—afore I had that trouble with Steve Gary. No use tryin' to step round it now. I reckon you know all about it."

"And you will be going back to them—to your friends on the ranch?"

"Well—I aim to. I got to go over to Sanborn first."

"Sanborn? Do you mean—?"

"Jest what you're thinkin', Miss Gray. I seen a spell back how you was wonderin' that I could josh about my grub, and Doc Andover. Well, I got in bad, and I ain't blamin' nobody—and I ain't blamin' myself—and that's why I ain't hangin' my head about anything I done. And I ain't kickin'

because I got started on the wrong foot. *I'm* figurin' how I kin git started on the other foot—and keep a-goin'."

"But why should you tell me about these things? I can't help you. And it seems terrible to think about them. If I were a man—like Dr. Andover—"

"I reckon you're right," said Pete. "I got no business loadin' you up with all my troubles. I'm goin' to quit it. Only you been kind o' like a pardner—and it sure was lonesome, layin' here and thinkin' about everything, and not sayin' a word to nobody. But I jest want you to know that I didn't kill Sam Brent—but I sure would 'a' got him—if somebody hadn't been a flash quicker than me, that night. Brent was after the money we was packin', and he meant business."

"You mean that—some one killed him in self-defense?"

"That's the idee. It was him or us."

"Then why don't you tell the police that?"

"I sure aim to. But what they want to know is who the fella was that got Brent."

"But the papers say that the other man escaped."

"Which is right."

"And you won't tell who he is?"

"Nope."

"But why not—if it means your own freedom?"

"Mebby because they wouldn't believe me anyhow."

"I don't think that is your real reason. Oh, I forgot to return your letter. I'll bring it next time."

"I'll be goin' Thursday. Doc Andover he's goin' over to Sanborn and he ast me to go along with him."

"You mean—to stay?"

"For a spell, anyhow. But I'm comin' back."

Doris glanced at her wrist watch and realized that it was long past the hour for the evening meal. "I'm going out to my sister's to-morrow, for the day. I may not see you before you leave,"

Pete sat up. "Shucks! Well, I ain't sayin' thanks for what you done for me, Miss Gray. 'Thanks' sounds plumb starvin' poor and rattlin', side of what I want to tell you. I'd be a'most willin' to git shot ag'in—"

"Don't say that!" exclaimed Doris.

"I would be shakin' hands with you," said Pete. "But this here is just 'Adios,' for I'm sure comin' back."

CHAPTER XLI

"A LAND FAMILIAR"

The following day Pete had a long talk with Sheriff Owen, a talk which resulted in the sheriff's accompanying Andover and Pete on their desert journey to Sanborn.

Incidentally Pete gave his word that he would not try to escape. It was significant, however, that the little sheriff expressed a preference for the back seat, even before Andover, who had invited him to make the journey, asked him if he cared to ride in front. The sheriff's choice was more a matter of habit than preference, for, alone upon the ample seat of the touring-car, he was shuttled ignominiously from side to side and bounced and jolted until, during a stop for water, he informed Andover that "he sure would have to pull leather to stay with the car."

The surgeon, a bit inclined to show off, did not hesitate to "step on her," when the going was at all good. And any one familiar with the road from El Paso to Sanborn is aware of just how good even the best going is. Any one unfamiliar with that road is to be congratulated.

Pete enjoyed the ride, as it brought him once more into the open country. The car whirred on

and on. It seemed to him as though he were speeding from a nightmare of brick and stone and clamor into the wide and sun-swept spaces of a land familiar and yet strange.

They reached Sanborn about noon, having made about one hundred and fifty miles in something like four hours.

After a wash and a meal at the hotel, they strolled over to the livery-stable to inspect the horse that Andover thought of buying. A small crowd had collected at the stables, as the auction was advertised to take place that afternoon. The sheriff himself started the bidding on the thoroughbred, followed by the liveryman, who knew about what he could get for the horse in El Paso. Andover raised his bid, which was quickly raised in turn by the sheriff. Pete realized that Andover really wanted the horse and told him quietly to drop out when the bidding reached two hundred, shrewdly estimating that neither the liveryman nor the sheriff would go beyond that figure, as neither of them really wanted the horse save as a speculation. "Then, if you want him, raise twenty-five, and you get a mighty good horse for a hundred less than he's worth. I know him. He's no good workin' cattle—but he's one fine trail horse for straight goin'. And he's as gentle as your gran'-mother."

The bidding ran to one hundred and seventy-five, when there was a pause. The sheriff had dropped out. The liveryman, conferring with his partner, was about to bid when Andover jumped the price to two hundred and fifty.

"I'm through," said the liveryman.

"Sold to—name, please—sold to Doctor John Andover for two hundred and fifty dollars," said the auctioneer. Then, after a facetious dissertation on thoroughbreds as against cow-ponies, Blue Smoke was led out. Pete's face went red. Then he paled. He had not forgotten that Blue Smoke was to be sold, but he had taken it for granted that he would be allowed to reclaim him. Pete stepped over to the sheriff and was about to enter a protest—offer to pay the board-bill against Blue Smoke, when the bidding began with an offer of twenty-five dollars. This was quickly run up to seventy-five when Pete promptly bid one hundred, which was a fair auction price, although every man there knew that Blue Smoke was worth more.

"I'm bid one hundred twenty-five," cried the auctioneer, as a young, bow-legged cowboy raised Pete's bid.

"One-fifty," said Pete without hesitation.

The sheriff glanced at Pete, wondering if he would borrow the money from Andover to make good his bid. But Pete was watching the auctioneer's gavel—which happened to be a short piece of rubber garden-hose. "Third and last chance!" said the auctioneer. "Nobody want that pony as a present? All right—goin', I say! Goin', I say *ag'in!* Gone! B' Gosh! at one hundred an' fifty dollars, to that young gent over there that looks like he could ride him. What's the name?"

"Pete Annersley."

Several in the crowd turned and gazed curiously at Pete. But Pete's eyes were upon Blue Smoke—his horse—the horse that had carried him faithfully so many desert miles—a cow-pony that could "follow a mountain trail all day and finish, a-steppin' high."

"Much obliged for your advice about the thoroughbred," said Andover as he stepped close to Pete. "Is that the pony you used to ride?"

"He sure is. Say, Doc, I got the money to pay for him, but would you mind writin' out a check. I ain't wise to this bankin' business yet."

"Why—no. I'll do that. I—er—of course—I'm a little short myself. New car—and this horse for my daughter. But I think I can manage. You want to borrow a hundred and fifty?"

"Say, Doc, you got me wrong! I got the makin's all right, but I don't jest sabe rollin' 'em." Pete dug into his coat-pocket and fetched up a check-book. "Same as you paid for your hoss with."

"This is Stockmen's Security. You have an account there?"

"That's what the president was callin' it. I call it dough. I got the book." And Pete dug into his pocket again, watching Andover's face as that astonished individual glanced at the deposit to Pete's credit.

"Well, you're the limit!"—and the doctor whistled. "What will you spring next?"

"Oh, it's *mine*, all right. A friend was leavin' it to me. He's crossed over."

"I s-e-e. Twenty-four thousand dollars! Young man, that's more money than I ever had at one time in my life."

"Same here,"—and Pete grinned. "But it don't worry me none."

"I'll make out the check for you." And Andover pulled out his fountain pen and stepped over

to the auctioneer's stand. Pete signed the check and handed it to the auctioneer.

"Don't know this man," said the auctioneer, as he glanced at the signature.

"I'll endorse it," volunteered Andover quickly.

"All right, Doc."

And Andover, whose account was as close to being overdrawn as it could be and still remain an account, endorsed the check of a man worth twenty-four thousand-odd dollars, and his endorsement was satisfactory to the auctioneer. So much for professional egoism and six-cylinder prestige.

Sheriff Owen, who had kept a mild eye on Pete, had noted this transaction. After Blue Smoke had been returned to the stables, he took occasion to ask Pete if he were still a partner to the understanding that he was on his honor not to attempt to escape.

"I figured that deal was good till I got here," said Pete bluntly.

"Just so, son. That's where my figuring stopped, likewise. Too much open country. If you once threw a leg over that blue roan, I can see where some of us would do some riding."

"If I'd been thinkin' of leavin' you, it would 'a' been afore we got here, sheriff."

"So it's 'sheriff' now, and not Jim, eh?"

"It sure is—if you're thinkin' o' lockin' me up. You treated me white back there in El Paso—so I'm tellin' you that if you lock me up—and I git a chanct, I'll sure vamose."

Pete's assertion did not seem to displease the sheriff in the least. To the contrary, he smiled affably.

"That's fair enough. And if I *don't* lock you up, but let you stay over to the hotel, you'll hang around town till this thing is settled, eh?"

"I sure will."

"Will you shake on that?"

Pete thrust out his hand. "That goes, Jim."

"Now you're talking sense, Pete. Reckon you better run along and see what the Doc wants. He's waving to you."

Andover sat in his car, drawing on his gloves. "I've arranged to have the horse shipped to me by express. If you don't mind, I wish you would see that he is loaded properly and that he has food and water before the car leaves—that is"—and Andover cleared his throat—"if you're around town tomorrow. The sheriff seems to allow you a pretty free hand—possibly because I assured him that you were not physically fit to—er—ride a horse. Since I saw that bank-book of yours, I've been thinking more about your case. If I were you I would hire the best legal talent in El Paso, and fight that case to a finish. You can pay for it."

"You mean for me to hire a lawyer to tell 'em I didn't kill Sam Brent?"

"Not exactly that—but hire a lawyer to *prove* to the judge and jury that you didn't kill him."

"Then a fella's got to pay to prove he didn't do somethin' that he's arrested for, and never done?"

"Often enough. And he's lucky if he has the money to do it. Think it over—and let me know how you are getting along. Miss Gray will be interested also."

"All right. Thanks, Doc. I ain't forgittin' you folks."

Andover waved his hand as he swung the car round and swept out of town. Pete watched him as he sped out across the mesa.

Sheriff Owen was standing in the livery-stable door across the street as Pete turned and started toward him. Midway across the street Pete felt a sharp pain shoot through his chest. It seemed as though the air had been suddenly shut from his lungs and that he could neither speak nor breathe. He heard an exclamation and saw Owen coming toward him. Owen, who had seen him stop and sway, was asking a question. A dim blur of faces—an endless journey along a street and up a narrow stairway—and Pete lay staring at yellow wall-paper heavily sprinkled with impossible blue roses. Owen was giving him whiskey—a sip at a time.

"How do you feel now?" queried the sheriff.

"I'm all right. Somethin' caught me quick—out there."

"Your lungs have been working overtime. Too much fresh air all at once. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"I reckon you won't have to set up and watch the front door," said Pete, smiling faintly.

"Or the back door. You're in the Sanborn House—room 11, second floor, and there's only one other floor and that's downstairs. If you want any thing—just pound on the floor. They'll understand."

"About payin' for my board—"

"That's all right. I got your money—and your other stuff that I might need for evidence. Take it easy."

"Reckon I'll git up," said Pete. "I'm all right now."

"Better wait till I come back from the office. Be back about six. Got to write some letters. Your case—called next Thursday." And Sheriff Owen departed, leaving Pete staring at yellow wallpaper sprinkled with blue roses.

CHAPTER XLII

"OH, SAY TWO THOUSAND"

Just one week from the day on which Pete arrived in Sanborn he was sitting in the witness chair, telling an interested judge and jury, and a more than interested attorney for the defense, the story of his life—"every hour of which," the attorney for the defense shrewdly observed in addressing the court, "has had a bearing upon the case."

Pete spoke quietly and at times with considerable unconscious humor. He held back nothing save the name of the man who had killed Brent, positively refusing to divulge Brevoort's name. His attitude was convincing—and his story straightforward and apparently without a flaw, despite a spirited cross-examination by the State. The trial was brief, brisk, and marked by no wrangling. Sheriff Owen's testimony, while impartial, rather favored the prisoner than otherwise.

In his address to the jury, Pete's attorney made no appeal in respect to the defendant's youth, his struggle for existence, or the defendant's willingness to stand trial, for Pete had unwittingly made that appeal himself in telling his story. The attorney for the defense summed up briefly, thanking the jury for listening to him—and then suddenly whirled and pointed his finger at the sheriff.

"I ask you as sheriff of Sanborn County why you allowed the defendant his personal liberty, unguarded and unattended, pending this trial."

"Because he gave his word that he would not attempt to escape," said Sheriff Owen.

"That's it!" cried the attorney. "The defendant *gave his word*. And if Sheriff Owen, accustomed as he is to reading character in a man, was willing to take this boy's word as a guarantee of his presence here, on trial for his life, is there a man among us who (having heard the defendant testify) is willing to stand up and say that he doubts the defendant's word? If there is I should like to look at that man! No!

"Gentlemen, I would ask you to recall the evidence contained in the letter written by former employers of the defendant, substantiating my assertion that this boy has been the victim of circumstances, and not the victim of perverse or vicious tendencies. Does he look like a criminal? Does he act like a criminal? I ask you to decide."

The jury was out but a few minutes, when they filed into court and returned a verdict of "Not guilty."

The attorney for the defense shook hands with Pete, and gathered up his papers.

Outside the courtroom several of the jury expressed a desire to make Pete's acquaintance, curiously anxious to meet the man who had known the notorious Spider personally. Pete was asked many questions. One juror, a big, bluff cattleman, even offered Pete a job—"in case he thought of punchin' cattle again, instead of studyin' law"—averring that Pete "was already a better lawyer than that shark from El Paso, at any turn of the trial."

Finally the crowd dwindled to Owen, the El Paso lawyer, two of Owen's deputies, and Pete, who suggested that they go over to the hotel until train-time.

When Pete came to pay the attorney, whom Andover had secured following a letter from Pete, the attorney asked Pete how much he could afford. Pete, too proud to express ignorance, and feeling mightily impressed by the other's ability, said he would leave that to him.

"Well, including expenses, say two thousand dollars," said the attorney.

Pete wrote the check and managed to conceal his surprise at the amount, which the attorney had mentioned in such an offhand way. "I'm thankin' you for what you done," said Pete.

"Don't mention it. Now, I'm no longer your legal adviser, Annersley, and I guess you're glad of it. But if I were I'd suggest that you go to some school and get an education. No matter what you intend to do later, you will find that an education will be extremely useful, to say the least. I worked my way through college—tended furnaces in winter and cut lawns in summer. And from what Andover tells me, you won't have to do that. Well, I think I'll step over to the station; train's due about now."

"You'll tell Doc Andover how it come out?"

"Of course. He'll want to know. Take care of yourself. Good-bye!"

Owen and his deputies strolled over to the station with the El Paso attorney. Pete, standing out in front of the hotel, saw the train pull in and watched the attorney step aboard.

"First, Doc Andover says to hire a good lawyer, which I done, and good ones sure come high." Pete sighed heavily—then grinned. "Well, say two thousand—jest like that! Then the lawyer says to git a education. Wonder if I was to git a education what the professor would be tellin' me to do next. Most like he'd be tellin' me to learn preachin' or somethin'. Then if I was to git to be a preacher, I reckon all I could do next would be to go to heaven. Shucks! Arizona's good enough for me."

But Pete was not thinking of Arizona alone—of the desert, the hills and the mesas, the cañons and arroyos, the illimitable vistas and the color and vigor of that land. Persistently there rose before his vision the trim, young figure of a nurse who had wonderful gray eyes... "I'm sure goin' loco," he told himself. "But I ain't so loco that she's goin' to know it."

"I suppose you'll be hitting the trail over the hill right soon," said Owen as he returned from the station and seated himself in one of the ample chairs on the hotel veranda. "Have a cigar."

Pete shook his head.

"They're all right. That El Paso lawyer smokes 'em."

"They ought to be all right," asserted Pete.

"Did he touch you pretty hard?"

"Oh, say two thousand, jest like that!"

The sheriff whistled. "Shooting-scrapes come high."

"Oh, I ain't sore at him. What makes me sore is this here law that sticks a fella up and takes his money—makin' him pay for somethin' he never done. A poor man would have a fine chance, fightin' a rich man in court, now, wouldn't he?"

"There's something in that. The *Law*, as it stands, is all right."

"Mebby. But she don't stand any too steady when a poor man wants to fork her and ride out of trouble. He's got to have a morral full of grain to git her to stand—and even then she's like to pitch him if she gits a chanct. I figure she's a bronco that never was broke right."

"Well,"—and Owen smiled,— "we got pitched this time. We lost our case."

"You kind o' stepped up on the wrong side," laughed Pete.

"I don't know about that. *Somebody* killed Sam Brent."

"I reckon they did. But supposin'—'speakin' kind o' offhand'—that you had the fella—and say I was witness, and swore the fella killed Brent in self-defense—where would he git off?"

"That would depend entirely on his reputation—and yours."

"How about the reputation of the fella that was killed?"

"Well, it was Brent's reputation that got you off to-day, as much as your own. Brent was foreman for The Spider, which put him in bad from the start, and he was a much older man than you. He was the kind to do just what you said he did—try to hold you up and get The Spider's money. It was a mighty lucky thing for you that you managed to get that money to the bank before they got you. You were riding straight all right, only you were on the wrong side of the fence, and I guess you knew it."

"I sure did."

"Well, it ain't for me to tell you which way to head in. You know what you're doing. You've got what some folks call Character, and plenty of it. But you're wearin' a reputation that don't fit."

"Same as clothes, eh?"—and Pete grinned.

"Yes. And you can change *them*—if you want to change 'em."

"But that there character part stays jest the same, eh?"

"Yes. You can't change that."

"Don't know as I want to. But I'm sure goin' to git into my other clothes, and take the trail over the hill that you was talkin' about."

"There are six ways to travel from here,"—and the sheriff's eyes twinkled.

"Six? Now I figured about four."

"Six. When it comes to direction, the old Hopis had us beat by a couple of trails. They figured east, west, north, and south, straight down and straight up."

"I git you, Jim. Well, minin' never did interest me none—and as for flyin', I sure been popped as high as I want to go. I reckon I'll jest let my hoss have his head. I reckon him and me has got about the same idee of what looks good."

"That pony of yours has never been in El Paso, has he?" queried the sheriff.

"Nope. Reckon it would be mighty interestin' for him—and the folks that always figured a sidewalk was jest for folks and not for hosses—but I ain't lookin' for excitement, nohow."

"Reckon that blue roan will give you all you want, any way you ride. He hasn't been ridden since you left him here."

"Yes—and it sure makes me sore. Doc Andover said I was to keep off a hoss for a week yet. Sanborn is all right—but settin' on that hotel porch lookin' at it ain't."

"Well, I'd do what the Doc says, just the same. He ought to know."

"I see—he ought to. He sure prospected round inside me enough to know how things are."

"You might come over to my office when you get tired of sitting around here. There ain't anything much to do—but I've got a couple of old law books that might interest you—and a few novels—and if you want some real excitement I got an old dictionary—"

"That El Paso lawyer was tellin' me I ought to git a education. Don't know but what this is a good chanct. But I reckon I'll try one of them novels first. Mebbe when I git that broke to gentle I can kind o' ride over and fork one of them law books without gittin' throwed afore I git my spurs hooked in good. But I sure don't aim to take no quick chances, even if you are ridin' herd for me."

"That lawyer was right, Pete. And if I had had your chance, money, and no responsibilities—at your age, I wouldn't have waited to pack my war-bag to go to college."

"Well, I figured *you* was educated, all right. Why, that there lawyer was sayin' right out in court about you bein' intelligent and well-informed, and readin' character."

"He was spreading it on thick, Pete. Regular stuff. What little I know I got from observation—and a little reading."

"Well, I aim to do some lookin' around myself. But when it comes to readin' books—"

"Reckon I'll let you take 'Robinson Crusoe'—it's a bed-rock story. And if you finish that before you leave, I'll bet you a new Stetson that you'll ask for another."

"I could easy win that hat,"—and Pete grinned.

"Not half as easy as you could afford to lose it."

"Meanin' I could buy one 'most any time?"

"No. I'll let you figure out what I meant." And the sturdy little sheriff heaved himself out of a most comfortable chair and waddled up the street, while Pete stared after him trying to reconcile bow-legs and reading books, finally arriving at the conclusion that education, which he had hitherto associated with high collars and helplessness, might perhaps be acquired without loss of self-respect. "It sure hadn't spoiled Jim Owen," who was "as much of a real man as any of 'em"—and could handle talk a whole lot better than most men who boasted legs like his. Why, even that El Paso lawyer had complimented Owen on his "concise and eloquent summary of his findings

against the defendant." And Pete reflected that his lawyer had not thrown any bouquets at any one else in that courtroom.

Just how much a little gray-eyed nurse in El Paso had to do with Pete's determination to browse in those alien pastures is a matter for speculation—but a matter which did not trouble Pete in the least, because it never occurred to him; evident in his confession to Andy White, months later: "I sure went to it with my head down and my ears laid back, takin' the fences jest as they come, without stoppin' to look for no gate. I sure jagged myself on the top-wire, frequent, but I never let that there Robinson Crusoe cuss git out of sight till I run him into his a home-coral along with that there man-eatin' nigger of his'n."

So it would seem that not even the rustle of skirts was heard in the land as Pete made his first wild ride across the pleasant pastures of Romance—for Doris had no share in this adventure, and, we are told, the dusky ladies of that carnivorous isle did not wear them.

CHAPTER XLIII

A NEW HAT—A NEW TRAIL

The day before Pete left Sanborn he strolled over to the sheriff's office and returned the old and battered copy of "Robinson Crusoe," which he had finished reading the night previous. "I read her, clean through," asserted Pete, "but I'd never made the grade if you hadn't put me wise to that there dictionary. Gosh! I never knowed there was so many ornery words bedded down in that there book."

"What do you think of the story?" queried the sheriff.

"If that Robinson Crusoe guy had only had a hoss instead of a bunch of goats, he sure could have made them natives ramble. And he sure took a whole lot of time blamin' himself for his hard luck—always a-settin' back, kind o' waitin' for somethin'—instead of layin' out in the brush and poppin' at them niggers. He wa'n't any too handy at readin' a trail, neither. But he made the grade—and that there Friday was sure one white nigger."

"Want to tackle another story?" queried Owen, as he put the book back on the shelf.

"If it's all the same to you, I'd jest as soon read this one over ag'in. I was trailin' that old Crusoe hombre so clost I didn't git time to set up and take in the scenery."

In his eagerness to re-read the story Pete had forgotten about the wager. Owen's eyes twinkled as he studied Pete's face. "We had a bet—" said Owen.

"That's right! I plumb forgot about that. You said you bet me a new hat that I'd ask you for another book. Well—what you grinnin' at, anyhow? 'Cause you done stuck me for a new lid? Oh, I git you! You said *another* book, and I'm wantin' to read the same one over again. Shucks! I ain't goin' to fore-foot you jest because you rid into a loop layin' in the tall grass where neither of us seen it."

"I lose on a technicality. I ought to lose. Now if I had bet you a new hat that you would want to keep on reading instead of that you'd ask for *another* book—"

"But this ain't no law court, Jim. It was what you was meanin' that counts."

"Serves me right. I was preaching to you about education—and I'm game to back up the idea—even if I did let my foot slip. Come on over to Jennings's with me and I'll get that hat."

"All right!" And Pete rolled a smoke as the sheriff picked up several addressed letters and tucked them in his pocket. "I was goin' over to the post-office, anyway."

They crossed to the shady side of the street, the short, ruddy little sheriff and the tall, dark cowboy, each more noticeable by contrast, yet neither consciously aware of the curious glances cast at them by occasional townfolk, some of whom were small enough to suspect that Pete and the sheriff had collaborated in presenting the evidence which had made Pete a free man; and that they were still collaborating, as they seemed very friendly toward each other.

Pete tried on several hats and finally selected one. "Let's see how it looks on you," he said, handing it to the sheriff. "I don't know how she looks."

Owen tried the hat on, turning to look into the mirror at the end of the counter. Pete casually picked up the sheriff's old hat and glanced at the size.

"Reckon I'll take it," said Pete, as Owen returned it. "This here one of mine never did fit too

good. It was Andy's hat."

Certain male gossips who infested the groceries, pool-halls, and post-office of Sanborn, shook their heads and talked gravely about bribery and corruption and politics and what not, when they learned that the sheriff had actually bought a hat for that young outlaw that he was so mighty thick with. "And it weren't no fairy-story neither. Bill Jennings sold the hat hisself, and the sheriff paid for it, and that young Annersley walked out of the store with said hat on his *head*. Yes, sir! Things looked mighty queer."

"Things would 'a' looked a mighty sight queerer if he'd 'a' walked out with it on his foot," suggested a friend of Owen's who had been buttonholed and told the alarming news.

Meanwhile Pete attended to his own business, which was to get his few things together, pay his hotel-bill, settle his account with the sheriff—which included cab-hire in El Paso—and write a letter to Doris Gray—the latter about the most difficult task he had ever faced. He thought of making her some kind of present—but his innate good sense cautioned him to forego that pleasure for a while, for in making her a present he might also make a mistake—and Pete was becoming a bit cautious about making mistakes, even though he did think that that green velvet hat with a yellow feather, in the millinery store in Sanborn, was about the most high-toned ladies' sky-piece that he had ever beheld. Pete contented himself with buying a new Stetson for Sheriff Owen—to be delivered after Pete had left town.

Next morning, long before the inhabitants of Sanborn had thrown back their blankets, Pete was saddling Blue Smoke, frankly amazed that the pony had shown no evidence of his erstwhile early-morning activities. He wondered if the horse were sick. Blue Smoke looked a bit fat, and his eye was dull—but it was the dullness of resentment rather than of poor physical condition. Well fed, and without exercise, Blue Smoke had become more or less logy, and he looked decidedly disinterested in life as Pete cautiously pulled up the front cinch.

"He's too doggone quiet to suit me," Pete told the stable-man.

"He's thinkin'," suggested that worthy facetiously.

"So am I," asserted Pete, not at all facetiously.

Out in the street Pete "cheeked" Blue Smoke, and swung up quickly, expecting the pony to go to it, but Smoke merely turned his head and gazed at the livery with a sullen eye.

"He's sad to leave his boardin'-house,"—and Pete touched Smoke with the spur. Smoke further surprised Pete by striking into a mild cow-trot, as they turned the corner and headed down the long road at the end of which glimmered the far brown spaces, slowly changing in color as the morning light ran slanting toward the west.

"Nothin' to do but go," reflected Pete, still a trifle suspicious of Blue Smoke's gentlemanly behavior. The sun felt warm to Pete's back. The rein-chains jingled softly. The saddle creaked a rhythmic complaint of recent disuse.

Pete, who had said good-bye to the sheriff the night before, turned his face toward the open with a good, an almost too good, horse between his knees and a new outlook upon the old familiar ranges and their devious trails.

Past a somber forest of cacti, shot with myriad angling shadows, desolate and forbidding, despite the open sky and the morning sun, Pete rode slowly, peering with eyes aslant at the dense growth close to the road, struggling to ignore the spot. Despite his determination, he could not pass without glancing fearsomely as though he half-expected to see something there—something to identify the spot as that shadowy place where Brent had stood that night...

Blue Smoke, hitherto as amiably disposed to take his time as was Pete himself, shied suddenly. Through habit, Pete jabbed him with the spur, to straighten him back in the road again. Pete had barely time to mutter an audible "I thought so!" when Blue Smoke humped himself. Pete slackened to the first wild lunge, grabbed off his hat and swung it as Blue Smoke struck at the air with his fore feet, as though trying to climb an invisible ladder. Pete swayed back as the horse came down in a mighty leap forward, and hooking his spurs in the cinch, rocked to each leap and lunge like a leaf caught up in a desert whirlwind. When Pete saw that Smoke's first fine frenzy had about evaporated, he urged him to further endeavors with the spurs, but Blue Smoke only grunted and dropped off into a most becoming and gentlemanly lope. And Pete was not altogether displeased. His back felt as though it had been seared with a branding-iron, and the range to the west was heaving most indecorously, cavorting around the horizon as though strangely excited by Blue Smoke's sudden and seemingly unaccountable behavior.

"I reckon we're both feelin' better!" Pete told the pony. "I needed jest that kind of a jolt to feel like I was livin' ag'in. But you needn't be in such a doggone hurry to go and tell your friends how good you're feelin'. Jest come down off that lope. We got all day to git there."

Blue Smoke shook his head as Pete pulled him to a trot. The cactus forest was behind them. Ahead lay the open, warm brown in the sun, and across it ran a dwindling grayish line, the road that ran east and west across the desert,—a good enough road as desert roads go, but Pete,

despite his satisfaction in being out in the open again, grew somewhat tired of its monotonously even wagon-rutted width, and longed for a trail—a faint, meandering trail that would swing from the road, dip into a sand arroyo, edge slanting up the farther bank, wriggle round a cluster of small hills, shoot out across a mesa, and climb slowly toward those hills to the west, finally to contort itself into serpentine switchbacks as it sought the crest—and once on the crest (which was in reality but the visible edge of another great mesa), there would be grass for a horse and cedar-wood for a fire, and water with which to make coffee.

Pete had planned that his first night should be spent in the open, with no other companions than the friendly stars. As for Blue Smoke, well, a horse is the best kind of a pal for a man who wishes to be alone, a pal who takes care of himself, never complains of weariness, and eats what he finds to eat with soulful satisfaction.

Pete made his first night's camp as he had planned, hobbled Blue Smoke, and, having eaten, he lay resting, his head on his saddle and his gaze fixed upon the far glory of the descending sun. The sweet, acrid fragrance of cedar smoke, the feel of the wind upon his face, the contented munching of his pony, the white radiance of the stars that came quickly, and that indescribable sense of being at one with the silences, awakened memories of many an outland camp-fire, when as a boy he had journeyed with the horse-trader, or when Pop Annersley and he had hunted deer in the Blue Range. And it seemed to Pete that that had been but yesterday—"with a pretty onnery kind of a dream in between," he told himself.

As the last faint light faded from the west and the stars grew big, Pete thanked those same friendly stars that there would be a To-morrow—with sunlight, silence, and a lone trail to ride. Another day and he would reach old Flores's place in the cañon—but Boca would not be there. Then he would ride to Showdown.—Some one would be at The Spider's place... He could get feed for his horse... And the next day he would ride to the Blue and camp at the old cabin. Another day and he would be at the Concho... Andy, and Jim, and Ma Bailey would be surprised... No, he hadn't come back to stay... Just dropped in to say "Hello!"...

Pete smiled faintly as a coyote shrilled his eternal plaint. This was something like it. The trembling Pleiades grew blurred.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE OLD TRAIL

The following afternoon Pete, stiff and weary from his two days' ride, entered the southern end of Flores's cañon and followed the trail along the stream-bed—now dry and edged with crusted alkali—until he came within sight of the adobe. In the half-light of the late afternoon he could not distinguish objects clearly, but he thought he could discern the posts of the pole corral and the roof of the meager stable. Nearer he saw that there was no smoke coming from the mud chimney of the adobe, and that the garden-patch was overgrown with weeds.

No one answered his call as he rode up and dismounted. He found the place deserted and he recalled the Mexican woman's prophecy.

He pushed open the sagging door and entered. There was the oilcloth-covered table and the chairs—a broken box in the middle of the room, an old installment-house catalogue, from which the colored prints had been torn, an empty bottle—and in the kitchen were the rusted stove and a few battered and useless cooking-utensils. An odor of stale grease pervaded the place. In the narrow bedroom—Boca's room—was a colored fashion-plate pinned on the wall.

Pete shrugged his shoulders and stepped out. Night was coming swiftly. He unsaddled Blue Smoke and hobbled him. The pony strayed off up the stream-bed. Pete made a fire by the corral, ate some beans which he warmed in the can, drank a cup of coffee, and, raking together some coarse dried grass, turned in and slept until the sound of his pony's feet on the rocks of the stream-bed awakened him. He smelt dawn in the air, although it was still dark in the cañon, and having in mind the arid stretch between the cañon and Showdown, he made breakfast. He caught up his horse and rode up the trail toward the desert. On the mesa-edge he re-cinched his saddle and turned toward the north.

Flores, who with his wife was living at The Spider's place, recognized him at once and invited him in.

"What hit this here town, anyhow?" queried Pete. "I didn't see a soul as I come through."

Flores shrugged his shoulders. "The vaqueros from over there"—and he pointed toward the north—"they came—and now there is but this left"—and he indicated the saloon. "The others they have gone."

"Cleaned out the town, eh? Reckon that was the T-Bar-T and the boys from the Blue and the Concho. How'd they come to miss you?"

"I am old—and my wife is old—and after they had drank the wine—leaving but little for us—they laughed and said that we might stay and be dam': that we were too old to steal cattle."

"Uh-huh. Cleaned her out reg'lar! How's the señora?"

Flores touched his forehead. "She is thinking of Boca—and no one else does she know."

"Gone loco, eh? Well, she ain't so bad off at that—seein' as *you're* livin' yet. No, I ain't comin' in. But you can sell me some tortillas, if you got any."

"It will be night soon. If the señor—"

"Go ask the Señora if she has got any tortillas to sell. I wouldn't bush in there on a bet. Don't you worry about my health."

"We are poor, señor! We have this place, and the things—but of the money I know nothing. My wife she has hidden it."

"She ain't so crazy as you think, if that's so. Do you run this place—or are you jest starvin' to death here?"

"There is still a little wine—and we buy what we may need of Mescalero. If you will come in —"

"So they missed old Mescalero! Well, he's lucky. No, I don't come in. I tried boardin' at your house onct."

"Then I will get the tortillas." And Flores shuffled into the saloon. Presently he returned with a half-dozen tortillas wrapped up in an old newspaper. Pete tossed him a dollar, and packing the tortillas in his saddle-pockets, gazed round at the town, the silent and deserted houses, the empty street, and finally at The Spider's place.

Old Flores stood in the doorway staring at Pete with drink-blurred eyes. Pete hesitated. He thought of dismounting and going in and speaking to Flores's wife. But no! It would do neither of them any good. Flores had intimated that she had gone crazy. And Pete did not want to talk of Boca—nor hear her name mentioned. "Boca's where she ain't worryin' about anybody," he reflected as he swung round and rode out of town.

Once before he had camped in the same draw, a few miles west of Showdown, and Blue Smoke seemed to know the place, for he had swung from the trail of his own accord, striding straight to the water-hole.

"And if you keep on actin' polite," Pete told the pony as he hobbled him that evening, "you'll get a good reputation, like Jim Owen said; which is plumb necessary, if you an' me's goin' to be pals. But if gettin' a good reputation is goin' to spoil your wind or legs any—why, jest keep on bein' onnery—which Jim was tellin' me is called 'Character.'"

As Pete hardened to the saddle and Blue Smoke hardened to the trail, they traveled faster and farther each day, until, on the Blue Mesa, where the pony grazed and Pete squatted beside his night-fire in the open, they were but a half-day's journey from the Concho. Pete almost regretted that their journey must come to an end. But he could not go on meandering about the country without a home and without an object in life: *that* was pure loafing.

Pete might have excused himself on the ground that he needed just this sort of thing after his serious operation; but he was honest with himself, admitting that he felt fit to tackle almost any kind of hard work, except perhaps writing letters—for he now thought well enough of himself to believe that Doris Gray would answer his letter to her from Sanborn. And of course he would answer her letter—and if he answered that, she would naturally answer... Shucks! Why should she write to him? All he had ever done for her was to make her a lot of bother and hard work. And what good was his money to him? He couldn't just walk into a store and buy an education and have it wrapped up in paper and take it to her and say, "Here, Miss Gray. I got a education—the best they had in the outfit. Now if you'll take it as a kind of present—and me along with it..."

Pete was camping within fifty yards of the spot where old Pop Annersley had tried to teach him to read and write—it seemed a long time ago, and Annersley himself seemed more vague in Pete's memory, as he tried to recall the kindly features and the slow, deliberate movements of the old man. It irritated Pete that he could not recall old man Annersley's face distinctly. He could remember his voice, and one or two characteristic gestures—but his face—

Pete stared into the camp-fire, dreaming back along that trail over which he had struggled and fought and blundered; back to the time when he was a waif in Enright, his only companion a lean yellow dog... Pete nodded and his eyes closed. He turned lazily and leaned back against his saddle.

The mesa, carpeted with sod-grass, gave no warning of the approaching horseman, who had

seen the tiny fire and had ridden toward it. Just within the circle of firelight he reined in and was about to call out when that inexplicable sense inherent in animals, the Indian, and in some cases the white man, brought Pete to his feet. In that same lightning-swift, lithe movement he struck his gun from the holster and stood tense as a buck that scents danger on the wind.

Pete blinked the sleep from his eyes. "Keep your hands right where they be and step down off that hoss—"

The rider obeyed. Pete moved from the fire that his own shadow might not fall upon the other. "Pete!" exclaimed the horseman in a sort of choking whisper.

The gun sagged in Peter's hand. "Andy! For God's sake!—I come clost to killin' you!" And he leaped and caught Andy White's hand, shook it, flung his arm about his shoulders, stepped back and struck him playfully on the chest, grabbed him and shook him—and then suddenly he turned and walked back to the fire and sat down, blinking into the flames, and trying to swallow nothing, harder than he had ever tried to swallow anything in his life.

He heard Andy's step behind him, and heard his own name spoken again. "It was my fault, Pete. I ought to 'a' hollered. I saw your fire and rode over—" Andy's hand was on Pete's shoulder, and that shoulder was shaking queerly. Andy drew back. "There goes that dam' cayuse," cried Andy. "I'll go catch him up, and let him drag a rope."

When Andy returned from putting an unnecessary rope on a decidedly tired horse that was quite willing to stand right where he was, Pete had pulled himself together and was rolling a cigarette.

"Well, you ole sun-of-a-gun!" said Pete; "want to swap hats? Say, how'll you swap?"

Andy grinned, but his grin faded to a boyish seriousness as he took off his own Stetson and handed it to Pete, who turned it round and tentatively poked his fingers through the two holes in the crown. "You got my ole hat yet, eh? Doggone if it ain't my ole hat. And she's ventilated some, too. Well, I'm listenin'."

"And you sure are lookin' fine, Pete. Say, is it you? Or did my hoss pitch me—and I'm dreamin'—back there on the flat? No. I reckon it's you all right. I ain't done shakin' yet from the way you come at me when I rode in. Say, did you git Jim's letter? Why didn't you write to a guy, and say you was comin'? Reg'lar ole Injun, same as ever. Quicker 'n a singed bob-cat gittin' off a stove-lid. That Blue Smoke 'way over there? Thought I knowed him. When did they turn you loose down to El Paso? Ma Bailey was worryin' that they wasn't feedin' you good. When did you get here? Was you in the gun-fight when The Spider got bumped off?"

Pete was still gazing at the little round holes in Andy's hat. "Andy, did you ever try to ride a hoss down the ole mesa trail backwards?"

"Why, no, you sufferin' coyote! What you drivin' at?"

"Here's your hat. Now if you got anything under it, go ahead and talk up. Which way did you ride when we split, over by the timber there?"

Andy reached over and put a stick of wood on the fire. "Well, seein' it's your hat, I reckon you got a right to know how them holes come in it." And he told Pete of his ride, and how he had misled the posse, and he spoke jestingly, as though it had been a little thing to do; hardly worth repeating. Then he told of a ride he had made to Showdown to let Pete know that Gary would live, and how The Spider had said that he knew nothing of Pete—had never seen him. And of how Ma Bailey upheld Pete, despite all local gossip and the lurid newspaper screeds. And that the boys would be mighty glad to see him again; concluding with an explanation of his own presence there—that he had been over to the T-Bar-T to see Houck about some of his stock that had strayed through some "down-fence"—"She's all fenced now," he explained—and had run into a bunch of wild turkeys, chased them to a rim-rock and had managed to shoot one, but had had to climb down a cañon to recover the bird, which had set him back considerably on his home journey. "And that there bird is hangin' right on my saddle now!" he concluded. "And I ain't et since mornin'."

"Then we eat," asserted Pete. "You go git that turkey, and I'll do the rest."

Wild turkey, spitted on a cedar limb and broiled over a wood fire, a bannock or two with hot coffee in an empty bean-can (Pete insisted on Andy using the one cup), tastes just a little better than anything else in the world, especially if one has ridden far in the high country—and most folk do, before they get the wild turkey.

It was three o'clock when they turned in, to share Pete's one blanket, and then Andy was too full of Pete's adventures to sleep, asking an occasional question which Pete answered, until Andy, suddenly recalling that Pete had told him The Spider had left him his money, asked Pete if he had packed all that dough with him, or banked it in El Paso. To which Pete had replied drowsily, "Sure thing, Miss Gray." Whereupon Andy straightway decided that he would wait till morning before asking any further questions of an intimate nature.

Pete was strangely quiet the next morning, in fact almost taciturn, and Andy noticed that he went into the saddle a bit stiffly. "That—where you got hurt botherin' you, Pete?" he asked with real solicitude.

"Some." And realizing that he had scarcely spoken to his old chum since they awakened, he asked him many questions about the ranch, and the boys, as they drifted across the mesa and down the trail that led to the Concho.

But it was not the twinge of his old wound that made Pete so silent. He was suffering a disappointment. He had believed sincerely that what he had been through, in the past six months especially, had changed him—that he would have to have a mighty stern cause to pull a gun on a man again; and at the first hint of danger he had been ready to kill. He wondered if he would ever lose that hunted feeling that had brought him to his feet and all but crooked his trigger-finger before he had actually realized what had startled him. But one thing was certain—Andy would never know just *how* close he had come to being killed; Andy, who had joked lightly about his own ride into the desert with an angry posse trailing him, as he wore Pete's black Stetson, "that he might give them a good run for their money," he had laughingly said.

"You're jest the same ornery, yella-headed, blue-eyed singin'-bird you always was," declared Pete as they slithered along down the trail.

Andy turned in the saddle and grinned at Pete. "Now that you've give the blessing parson, will you please and go plumb to hell?"

Pete felt a lot better.

A loose rock slipped from the edge of the trail, and went bounding down the steep hillside, crashing through a thicket of aspens and landing with a dull clunk amid a pile of rock that slid a little, and grumbled sullenly. Blue Smoke had also slipped as his footing gave way unexpectedly. Pete felt still better. This was something like it!

CHAPTER XLV

HOME FOLKS

Noon found them within sight of the ranch-house. In an hour they were unsaddling at the corral, having ridden in the back way, at Andy's suggestion, that they might surprise the folks. But it did not take them long to discover that there were no folks to surprise. The bunk-house was open, but the house across from it was locked, and Andy knew immediately that the Baileys had driven to town, because the pup was gone, and he always followed the buckboard.

Pete was not displeased, for he wanted to shave and "slick up a bit" after his long journey. "They'll see my hoss and know that I'm back," said Andy, as he filled the kettle on the box-stove in the bunk-house. "But we can put Blue Smoke in a stall and keep him out of sight till you walk in right from nowhere. I can see Ma Bailey and Jim and the boys! 'Course Ma's like to be back in time to get supper, so mebbey you'll have to hide out in the barn till you hear the bell."

"I ain't awful strong on that conquerin' hero stuff, Andy. I jest as soon set right here—"

"And spoil the whole darn show! Look here, Pete,—you leave it to me and if we don't surprise Ma Bailey clean out of her—specs, why, I'll quit and go to herdin' sheep."

"A11 right. I'm willin'. Only you might see if you kin git in the back way and lift a piece of pie, or somethin'." Which Andy managed to do while Pete shaved himself and put on a clean shirt.

They sat in the bunk-house doorway chatting about the various happenings during Pete's absence until they saw the buckboard top the distant edge of the mesa. Pete immediately secluded himself in the barn, while Andy hazed Blue Smoke into a box stall and hid Pete's saddle.

Ma Bailey, alighting from the buckboard, heard Andy's brief explanation of his absence with indifference most unusual in her, and glanced sharply at him when he mentioned having shot a wild turkey.

"I suppose you picked it and cleaned it and got it all ready to roast," she inquired. "Or have you just been loafing around waiting for me to do it?"

"I et it," asserted Andy.

Ma Bailey glared at him, shook her head, and marched into the house while Andy helped Bailey put up the horses.

"Ma's upset about somethin'," explained Bailey. "Seems a letter came for Pete—"

"Letter from Pete! Why, he ain't comin' back, is he?"

"A letter for Pete. Ma says it looks like a lady's writin' on the envelope. She says she'd like to know what female is writin' to Pete, and him goodness knows where, and not a word to say whether he's sick or broke, or anything."

"I sure would like to see him," said Andy fervently.

"Well, if somebody's writin' to him here at the Concho, looks like he might drift in one of these days. I'd sure like to know how the kid's makin' it."

And Bailey strode to the house, while Andy led the team to the corral.

Later Andy appeared in the kitchen and asked Mrs. Bailey if he couldn't help her set the table, or peel potatoes, or something. Ma Bailey gazed at him suspiciously over her glasses. "I don't know what's ailin' you, Andy, but you ain't actin' right. First you tell me that you had to camp at the Blue last night account o' killin' a turkey. Then you tell me that you et the whole of it. Was you scared you wouldn't get your share if you fetched it home? Then you want to help me get supper. You been up to something! You just keep me plumb wore out worrying about you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"For why, Ma? What have I done?"

"I don't know, but it'll come to the top. There's the boys now—and me a-standing here— Run along and set the table if you ain't so full of whatever is got into you that you can't count straight. Bill won't be in to-night. Leastwise, Jim don't expect him." And Ma Bailey flapped her apron at him and shooed him out as though he were a chicken that had dared to poke its inquisitive neck into the kitchen.

"Count straight!" chuckled Andy. "Mebby I know more about how many's here than Ma does."

Meanwhile Ma Bailey busied herself preparing supper, and it was evident to the boys in the bunkhouse that Ma had something on her mind from the sounds which came from the kitchen. Ma scolded the potatoes as she fried them, rebuked the biscuits because they had browned a little too soon, censured the stove for its misbehavior in having scorched the biscuits, accused the wood of being a factor in the conspiracy, reprimanded the mammoth coffee-pot that threatened to deluge the steak, and finally chased Andy from the premises when she discovered that he had laid the table with her best set of dishes.

"Ma's steamin' about somethin'," remarked Andy as he entered the bunk-house.

This information was received with characteristic silence as each and every cowboy mentally straightened up, vowing silently that he wasn't goin' to take any chances of Ma b'ilin' over on him.

The clatter of the pack-horse bell brought the men to their feet and they filed across to the house, a preternaturally silent aggregation that confirmed Ma Bailey's suspicion that there was something afoot.

Andy, loitering behind them, saw Pete coming from the stables, tried to compose himself, but could not get rid of the boyish grin, which provoked Ma Bailey to mutter something which sounded like "idiot," to which the cowboys nodded in cheerful concurrence, without other comment.

Hank Barley, the silent, was gazing surreptitiously at Ma's face when he saw her eyes widen, saw her rise, and stand staring at the doorway as Andy clumped in, followed by Pete.

Ma Bailey sat down suddenly.

"It's all right, Ma," laughed Andy, alarmed at the expression on her face. "It's just Pete."

"Just Pete!" echoed Ma Bailey faintly. And then, "Goodness alive, child, where you been?"

Pete's reply was lost in the shuffle of feet as the men rose and shook hands with him, asking him a dozen questions in as many seconds, asserting that he was looking fine, and generally behaving like a crowd of schoolboys, as they welcomed him to their midst again.

Pete sat in the absent Bill Haskins's place. And "You must 'a' knowed he was coming" asserted Avery. "Bill is over to the line shack."

"I got a *letter*," asserted Ma Bailey mysteriously.

"And you jest said nothin' and sprung him on us! Well, Ma, you sure fooled me," said Andy, grinning.

"You go 'long." Mrs. Bailey smiled at Andy, who had earned her forgiveness by crediting her

—rather wisely—with having originated the surprise.

They were chatting and joking when Bill Haskins appeared in the door-way, his hand wrapped in a handkerchief.

Ma Bailey glared at him over her spectacles. "Got any stickin'-plaster?" he asked plaintively, as though he had committed some misdemeanor. She rose and placed a plate and chair for him as he shook hands with Pete, led him to the kitchen and inspected and bandaged his hand, which he had jagged on a wire gate, and finally reinstated him at the table, where he proved himself quite as efficient as most men are with two hands. "Give Bill all the coffee he wants and plenty stickin'-plaster, and I reckon he never would do no work," suggested Hank Barley.

Bill Haskins grinned good-naturedly. "I see Pete's got back," he ventured, as a sort of mild intimation that there were other subjects worth discussing. He accompanied this brilliant observation by a modest request for another cup of coffee, his fourth. The men rose, leaving Bill engaged in his favorite indoor pastime, and intimated that Pete should go with them. But Ma Bailey would not bear of it. Pete was going to help her with the dishes. Andy could go, however, and Bill Haskins, as soon as he was convinced that the coffee-pot was empty. Ma Bailey's chief interest in life at the moment was to get the dishes put away, the men out of the way, and Pete in the most comfortable rocking-chair in the room, that she might hear his account of how it all happened.

And Pete told her—omitting no circumstance, albeit he did not accentuate that part of his recital having to do with Doris Gray, merely mentioning her as "that little gray-eyed nurse in El Paso"—and in such an offhand manner that Ma Bailey began to suspect that Pete was keeping something to himself. Finally, by a series of cross-questioning, comment, and sympathetic concurrence, she arrived at the feminine conclusion that the gray-eyed nurse in El Paso had set her cap for Pete—of course Pete was innocent of any such adjustment of headgear—to substantiate which she rose, and, stepping to the bedroom, returned with the letter which had caused her so much speculation as to who was writing to Pete, and why the letter had been directed to the Concho.

Pete glanced at the letter, and thanked Ma Bailey as he tucked it in his pocket.

"I don't mind if you open it, Pete," she told him. "Goodness knows how long it's been laying in the post-office! And it, mebby, is important—from that doctor, or that lawyer, mebby. Oh, mebby it's from the bank. Sakes alive! To think of that man leaving you all that money! Mebby that bank has failed!"

"Well, I'd be right where I started when I first come here—broke—lookin' for a job."

"And the boys'll worry you most to death if you try to read any letters in the bunk-house to-night. They're waitin' to hear you talk."

"Guess the letter can wait. I ain't such a fast reader, anyhow."

"And you're like to lose it, carryin' it round."

"I—I—reckon I better read it," stammered Pete helplessly.

He felt somehow that Ma would feel slighted if he didn't. Ma Bailey watched his face as he read the rather brief note from Doris, thanking him for his letter to her and congratulating him on the outcome of his trial, and assuring him of her confidence in his ultimate success in life. "Little Ruth," wrote Doris, "cried bitterly when I told her that you had gone and would not come back. She said that when you said 'good-bye' to her you promised to come back—and of course I had to tell her that you would, just to make her happy. She has lost all interest in the puzzle game since you left, but that queer watch that you gave her, that has to be shaken before taken—and then not taken seriously—amuses her quite a bit. She gets me to wind it up—her fingers are not strong enough—and then she laughs as the hands race around. When they stop she puts her finger on the hour and says, 'Pitty soon Pete come back.' Little Ruth misses you very much."

Pete folded the letter and put it in his pocket. "From a friend of mine," he said, flushing slightly.

Ma Bailey sighed, smiled, and sighed again. "You're just itching to go see the boys. Well, run along, and tell Jim not to set up all night." Ma Bailey rose, and stepping to the bedroom returned with some blankets. "You'll have your old bunk. It's yours just as long as you want to stay, Pete. And—and I hope that girl in El Paso—is a—a nice—sensible—"

"Why, Ma! What's the matter?—" as Mrs. Bailey blinked and showed unmistakable signs of emotion.

"Nothing, Pete. I reckon your coming back so sudden and all you been through, and that letter, kind of upset me. D-does she powder her face, Pete?"

"Who? You mean Miss Gray? Why, what would she do that for?"

"Does she wear clothes that—that cost lots of money?"

"Great snakes, Ma! I dunno. I never seen her except in the hospital, dressed jest like all the nurses."

"Is—is she handsome?"

"Say, Ma, you let me hold them blankets. They're gittin' you all sagged down. Why, she ain't what I'd say was *handsome*, but she sure got pretty eyes and hair—and complexion—and the smoothest little hands—and she's built right neat. She steps easy—like a thoroughbred filly—and she's plumb sensible, jest like you folks."

This latter assurance did not seem to comfort Ma Bailey as much as the implied compliment might intimate.

"And there's only one other woman I ever saw that made me feel right to home and kind o' glad to have her round, like her. And she's got gray eyes and the same kind of hair, and—"

"Sakes alive, Pete Annersley! Another?"

"Uh-huh. And I'm kissin' her good-night—right now." And Pete grabbed the blankets and as much of Ma Bailey as could be included in that large armful, and kissed her heartily.

"He's changed," Ma Bailey confided to herself, after Pete had disappeared. "Actin' like a boy—to cheer me up. But it weren't no boy that set there readin' that letter. It was a growed man, and no wonder. Yes, Pete's changed, bless his heart!"

Ma Bailey did not bless Pete's heart because he had changed, however, nor because he had suffered, nor yet because he was unconsciously in love with a little nurse in El Paso, nor yet because he kissed her, but because she liked him: and because no amount of money or misfortune, blame or praise, could really change him toward his friends. What Ma Bailey meant was that he had grown a little more serious, a little more gentle in his manner of addressing her—aside from saying good-night—and a little more intense in a quiet way. To sum it all up, Pete had just begun to think—something that few people do on the verdant side of forty, and rather dread having to do on the other side of that mile-post.

A week later, as they sat at table asking one another whether Ma Bailey had took to makin' pies ag'in jest for practice or for Pete, and plaguing that good woman considerably with their good-natured banter, it occurred to Bill Haskins to ask Pete if he were going to become a permanent member of the family or if he were simply visiting; only Bill said, "Are you aimin' to throw in with us—or are you goin' to curl your tail and drift, when the snow flies?"

"I reckon I'll drift," said Pete.

This was news. Andy White demurred forcibly. Bailey himself seemed surprised, and even old Hank Barley, the silent, expressed himself as mildly astonished.

"We figured you'd stay till after the round-up, anyhow," said Bailey.

"Reckon it's too tame for Pete here," growled Andy.

"That's no fault of yours, Andrew," observed Ma Bailey.

"You're always peckin' at me," grumbled Andy, who detested being called "Andrew" quite as much as that robust individual known to his friends as Bill detests being called "Willie"—and Ma Bailey knew it.

"So you aim to leave us," said Haskins, quite unaware of Ma Bailey's eye which glared disapproval of the subject.

"Pete's going—next Tuesday—and just to set your mind at rest and give you a chance to eat your supper"—Bill had been doing scarcely anything else since he sat down—"Pete has a right good reason to go."

"Kin I have another cup of coffee?" queried Bill.

"Sakes alive, yes! I reckon that's what's ailing you."

"I only had three, Ma."

"Pete is going away *on business*," asserted Ma Bailey.

"Huh," snorted Andy.

Bailey glanced at his wife, who telegraphed to him to change the subject. And that good man, who had been married twenty-five years, changed the subject immediately.

But Andy did not let it drop. After supper he cornered Pete in the bunk-house, and following some wordy fencing, ascertained that Pete was going to Tucson for the winter to get an

education. Pete blushing admitted that that was his sole intent, swore Andy to secrecy, and told him that he had discussed the subject with Ma Bailey, who had advised him to go.

"So you're quittin' the game," mourned Andy.

"Nope, jest beginnin'."

"Well, you might 'a' said somethin', anyhow."

Pete put his hand on Andy's shoulder. "I wa'n't sure—till yesterday. I *was* goin' to tell *you*, Andy. Shucks! Didn't I tell you about the money and everything—and you didn't say a word to the boys. I ain't forgittin'."

"Oh, I knowed havin' money wouldn't swell you up. It ain't that. Only, I was wonderin'—"

"So was I, Andy. And I been wonderin' for quite a spell. Come on out and let's go set on the corral bars and smoke and—jest smoke."

But they did more than just smoke. The Arizona stars shot wondrous shafts of white fire through the nipping air as the chums sensed the comfortable companionship of horses moving slowly about the corral; and they heard the far, faint call of the coyote as a drift of wind brought the keen tang of the distant timberlands. They talked together as only youth may talk with youth, when Romance lights the trail, when the heart speaks from itself to heart in sympathy. Yet their chat was not without humor or they would not have been Pete and Andy.

"You always was a wise one," asserted Andy; "pickin' out a professional nurse for *your* girl ain't a bad idee."

"I had a whole lot to do with pickin' her out, didn't I?"

"Well, you can't make me believe that she did the pickin', for you was tellin' me she had good eyes."

"I reckon it was the Doc that did the pickin'," suggested Pete.

"Well, I suppose the next thing you'll be givin' the preacher a chanct."

"Nope. Next thing I'll be givin' Miss Gray a chanct to tell me I'm a doggone idiot—only she don't talk like that."

"Then it'll be because she don't know you like I do. But you're lucky— No tellin'—" Andy climbed down from the bars.

"No tellin' what?" queried Pete.

"No tellin' you how much I sure want you to win, pardner—because you know it."

Pete leapt from the top rail square on to Andy, who, taken off his guard, toppled and fell. They rolled over and over, not even trying to miss the puddle of water beside the drinking-trough. Andy managed to get his free hand in the mud and thought of feeding some of it to Pete, but Pete was too quick for him, squirming loose and making for the bunkhouse at top speed.

Pete entrenched himself in the far corner of the room where Bill Haskins was reading a novel,—exceedingly popular, if the debilitated condition of the pages and covers were any criterion,—when Andy entered, holding one hand behind him in a suspicious manner. Pete wondered what was coming when it came. Andy swung his arm and plugged a fair-sized mud-ball at Pete, which missed him and hit the innocent and unsuspecting Bill on the ear, and stayed there. Bill Haskins, who was at the moment helping the hero hold a spirited pair of horses while the heroine climbed to a seat in the romantic buckboard, promptly pulled on the reins and shouted "Whoa!" and the debilitated novel came apart in his hands with a soft, ripping sound. It took Bill several seconds to think of something to say, and several more to realize just what had happened. He opened his mouth—but Andy interrupted with "Honest, Bill, I wasn't meanin' to hit you. I was pluggin' at Pete, there. It was his fault; he went and hid out behind you. Honest, Bill—wait and I'll help you dig that there mud out of your ear."

Bill shook his head and growled as he scraped the mud from his face and neck. Andy, gravely solicitous, helped to remove the mud and affectionately wiped his fingers in Bill's hair.

"Here—what in hell you doin'!" snorted Bill.

"That's right! I was forgittin'! Honest, Bill!"

"I'll honest you! I'll give you somethin' to forgit." But Andy did not wait.

A little later Bill appeared at the kitchen door and plaintively asked Ma Bailey if she had any sticking-plaster.

"Sakes alive! Now what you done to yourself, William?"

"Nothin' this time, Miss Bailey. I—I done tore a book—and jest want to fix it."

When Bill returned to the bunk-house with the "sticking-plaster," Pete and Andy both said they were sorry for the occurrence, but Bill was mighty suspicious of their sincerity. They were silent while Bill laboriously patched up the book and settled himself to take up the reins where he had dropped them. The heroine had just taken her seat beside the driver—when— "It's a darned shame!" said a voice, Pete's voice.

"It sure is—and Bill jest learnin' to read. He might 'a' spelled out a whole page afore mornin'."

"I wa'n't meanin' Bill," asserted Pete.

"Oh, you won't bother Bill none. He can't hear you. His off ear is full of mud. Go on and say anything you like about him."

Bill slowly laid down his book, stepped to his bunk, and drew his six-shooter from its holster. He marched back to the table and laid the gun quite handy to him, and resumed his chair.

Bill Haskins was long-suffering—but both Andy and Pete realized that it was high time to turn their bright particular talents in some other direction. So they undressed and turned in. They had been asleep an hour or two before Bill closed his book regretfully, picked up his gun, and walked to his bunk. He stood for a moment gazing at Andy, and then turned to gaze at Pete. Then he shook his head—and a slow smile lighted his weathered face. For despite defunct mountain lions, bent nails, and other sundries, Bill Haskins liked Andy and Pete—and he knew if it came to a test of friendship that either of them would stand by him to the last dollar, or the last shot even, as he would have gladly done to help them.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE RIDIN' KID FROM POWDER RIVER

The first thing Pete did when he arrived in Tucson was to purchase a suit as near like that which he had seen Andover wear as possible. Pete's Stetson was discarded for a soft felt of ordinary dimensions. He bought shoes, socks, and some underwear, which the storekeeper assured him was the latest thing, but which Pete said "looked more like chicken-wire than honest-to-Gosh cloth," and fortified by his new and inconspicuous apparel, he called on the principal of the high school and told him just why he had come to Tucson. "And I'd sure look queer settin' in with all the kids," Pete concluded. "If there's any way of my ketchin' up to my size, why, I reckon I kin pay."

The principal thought it might be arranged. For instance, he would be glad to give Pete—he said Mr. Annersley—an introduction to an instructor, a young Eastern scholar, who could possibly spare three or four evenings a week for private lessons. Progress would depend entirely upon Pete's efforts. Many young men had studied that way—some of them even without instruction. Henry Clay, for instance, and Lincoln. And was Mr. Annersley thinking of continuing with his studies and entering college, or did he merely wish to become conversant with the fundamentals?

"If I kin git so I can throw and hog-tie some of them fundamentals without losin' my rope, I reckon I'll be doin' all I set out to do. No—I guess I'd never make a top-hand, ridin' for you. But my rope is tied to the horn—and I sure aim to stay with whatever I git my loop on."

"I get your drift—and I admire your purpose. Incidentally and speaking from a distinctly impersonal—er—viewpoint" (no doubt a high-school principal may speak from a viewpoint, or even sit on one if he cares to), "your colloquialisms are delightful—and sufficiently forceful to leave no doubt as to your sincerity of purpose."

"Meanin' you sabe what I'm gittin' at, eh?"

The principal nodded and smiled.

"I thought that was what you was tryin' to say. Well, professor—"

"Dr. Wheeler, if you please."

"All right, Doc. But I didn't know you was a doc too."

"Doctor of letters, merely."

Pete suspected that he was being joked with, but the principal's manner was quite serious. "If you will give me your address, I will drop a line to Mr. Forbes," said the principal.

Pete gave his name and address. As Principal Wheeler wrote them down in his notebook he glanced up at Pete curiously. "You don't happen to be the young man—er—similarity of names—who was mixed up in that shooting affair in El Paso? Name seemed familiar. No doubt a coincidence."

"It wa'n't no coincidence—it was a forty-five," stated Pete.

The principal stared at Pete as though he half-expected to see him pull a gun and demand an education instanter. But Pete's smile helped the principal to pull himself together. "Most extraordinary!" he exclaimed. "I believe the courts exonerated you?"

"That ain't all they did to me," Pete assured him. "Nope. You got that wrong. But I reckon they would 'a' done it—if I hadn't 'a' hired that there lawyer from El Paso. He sure exonerated a couple o' thousand out o' me. And the judge turned me loose."

"Most extraordinary!"

"It was that lawyer that told me I ought to git a education," exclaimed Pete.

"Of course! Of course! I had forgotten it for the moment. Well, here is Mr. Forbes's address. I think you will find him at his room almost any evening."

"I'll be there!"

"Very good! I suppose you are aware that it is illegal to carry concealed weapons inside the city limits?"

"I get you, Doc, but I ain't packin' a gun, nohow."

As the weeks went by and the winter sun swung farther south, Mr. Forbes, the young Eastern scholar, and Pete began to understand each other. Pete, who had at first considered the young Easterner affected, and rather effeminate, slowly realized that he was mistaken. Forbes was a sincere and manly fellow, who had taken his share of hard knocks and who suffered ill health uncomplainingly—an exile of his chosen environment, with little money and scarce a companion to share his loneliness.

As for Forbes, he envied Pete his abundant health and vigor and admired his unspoiled enthusiasm. Pete's humor, which somehow suggested to Forbes the startling and inexplicable antics of a healthy colt, melted Forbes's diffidence, and they became friends and finally chums. Pete really learned as much through this intimacy as he did from his books: perhaps more. It was at Pete's suggestion that Forbes took to riding a horse, and they spent many afternoons on the desert, drifting slowly along while they discussed different phases of life.

These discussions frequently led to argument, sincere on Pete's part, who never realized that Forbes's chief delight in life was to get Pete started, that he might enjoy Pete's picturesque illustration of the point, which, more often than not, was shrewdly sharp and convincing. No amount of argument, no matter how fortified by theory and example, could make Pete change his attitude toward life; but he eventually came to see life from a different angle, his vision broadening to a wider perspective as they climbed together, Forbes loitering on familiar ground that Pete might not lose the trail and find himself entangled in some unessential thicket by the way.

Forbes was not looking well. His thin face was pinched; his eyes were listless. Pete thought that Forbes stayed indoors too much. "Why don't you go get a cayuse and ride?" he suggested.

"Never was on a horse in my life."

"Uh-huh. Well, you been off one too long."

"I'd like to. But I can't afford it."

"I don't mean to buy a horse—jest hire one, from the livery. I was thinkin' of gettin' out on the dry-spot myself. I'm plumb sick of town."

"You would have to teach me."

"Shucks! There's nothin' to learn. All you got to do is to fork your cayuse and ride. I'd sure be glad to go with you."

"That's nice of you. Well, say to-morrow afternoon, then. But what about horses?"

"We got a session to-morrow. What's the matter with this afternoon? The sun's shinin', and there ain't much wind, and I can smell the ole desert, a-sizzlin'. Come on!"

They were in Forbes's room. The Easterner laid his book aside and glanced down at his shoes. "I haven't a riding-costume."

"Well, you can get one for a dollar and four-bits—copper-riveted, and sure easy and comfortable. I'll lend you a pair of boots."

"All right. I'll try it once, at least."

Forbes felt rather conspicuous in the stiff new overalls, rolled up at the bottom, over Pete's tight high-heeled boots, but nobody paid any attention to him as he stumped along beside Pete, on the way to the livery.

Pete chose the horses, and a saddle for Forbes, to whom he gave a few brief pointers anent the art of swinging up and dismounting. They set out and headed for the open. Forbes was at first nervous; but as nothing happened, he forgot his nervousness and gave himself to gazing at the great sun-swept spaces until the horses broke into a trot, when he turned his entire attention to the saddle-horn, clinging to it affectionately with his free hand.

Pete pulled up. "Say, amigo, it's ag'inst the rules to choke that there horn to death. Jest let go and clamp your knees. We'll lope 'em a spell."

Forbes was about to protest when Pete's horse, to which he had apparently done nothing, broke into a lope. Forbes's horse followed. It was a rough experience for the Easterner, but he enjoyed it until Pete pulled up suddenly. Forbes's own animal stopped abruptly, but Forbes, grabbing wildly at the horn, continued, and descended in a graceful curve which left him sitting on the sand and blinking up at the astonished animal.

"Hurt you?" queried Pete.

"I think not— But it was rather sudden. Now what do I do?"

"Well, when you git rested up, I'd say to fork him ag'in. He's sure tame."

"I—I thought he was rather wild," stammered Forbes, getting to his feet.

"Nope. It was you was wild. I reckon you like to scared him to death. Nope! Git on him from this side."

"He seems a rather intelligent animal," commented Forbes as he prepared for the worst.

"Well, we kin call him that, seein' there's nobody round to hear us. We'll walk 'em a spell."

Forbes felt relieved. And realizing that he was still alive and uninjured, he relaxed a bit. After they had turned and headed for town, he actually enjoyed himself.

Next day he was so stiff and sore that he could scarcely walk, but his eye was brighter. However, he begged off from their proposed ride the following afternoon. Pete said nothing; but when the next riding afternoon arrived, a week later, Forbes was surprised to see Pete, dressed in his range clothes. Standing near the curb were two horses, saddled and bridled. "Git on your jeans and those ole boots of mine. I fetched along a extra pair of spurs."

"But, Annersley—"

"I can't ride 'em both."

"It's nice of you—but really, I can't afford it."

"Look here, Doc, what you can't afford is to set in that room a-readin' all day. And the horse don't cost you a cent. I had a talk with the old-timer that runs the livery, and when he seen I was onto my job, he was plumb tickled to death for me to exercise the horses. One of 'em needs a little educatin'."

"That's all right. But how about my horse?"

"Why, I brought him along to keep the other horse company. I can't handle 'em both. Ain't you goin' to help me out?"

"Well, if you put it that way, I will this time."

"Now you're talkin' sense."

Several weeks later they were again riding out on the desert and enjoying that refreshing and restful companionship which is best expressed in silence, when Pete, who had been gazing into the distance, pulled up his restive horse and sat watching a moving something that suddenly disappeared. Forbes glanced at Pete, who turned and nodded as if acknowledging the other's unspoken question. They rode on.

A half-hour later, as they pulled up at the edge of the arroyo, Forbes was startled by Pete's "Hello, neighbor!" to an apparently empty world.

"What's the joke?" queried Forbes.

The joke appeared suddenly around the bend in the arroyo—a big, weather-bitten joke astride of a powerful horse. Forbes uttered an exclamation as the joke whipped out a gun and told them to "Put 'em up!" in a tone which caused Forbes's hands to let go the reins and rise head-high without his having realized that he had made a movement. Pete was also picking invisible peaches from the air, which further confirmed Forbes's hasty conclusion that they were both doing the right thing.

"*I ain't got a gun on me, Ed.*" Pete had spoken slowly and distinctly, and apparently without the least shadow of trepidation. Forbes, gazing at the grim, bronzed face of the strange horseman, nervously echoed Pete's statement. Before the Easterner could realize what had actually happened, Pete and the strange rider had dismounted and were shaking hands: a transition so astonishing that Forbes forgot to lower his hands and sat with them nervously aloft as though imploring the Rain-God not to forget his duty to mankind.

Pete and the stranger were talking. Forbes could catch an occasional word, such as "The Spider—El Paso—White-Eye—Hospital—Sonora—Sanborn—Sam Brent—"

Pete turned and grinned. "I reckon you can let go the—your holt, Doc. This here is a friend of mine."

Forbes sighed thankfully. He was introduced to the friend, whom Pete called Ed, but whose name had been suddenly changed to Bill. "We used to ride together," explained Pete.

Forbes tactfully withdrew, realizing that whatever they had to talk about was more or less confidential.

Presently Pete approached Forbes and asked him if he had any money with him. Forbes had five dollars and some small change. "I'm borrowin' this till to-morrow," said Pete, as he dug into his own pocket, and without counting the sum total, gave it to the stranger.

Brevoort stuffed the money in his pocket and swung to his horse. "You better ride in with us a ways," suggested Pete. "The young fella don't know anything about you—and he won't talk if I pass the word to him. Then I kin go on ahead and fetch back some grub and some more dineros."

Forbes found the stranger rather interesting as they rode back toward Tucson; for he spoke of Mexico and affairs below the line—amazing things to speak of in such an offhand manner—in an impersonal and interesting way.

Within two miles of the town they drew up. "Bill, here," explained Pete, "is short of grub. Now, if you don't mind keepin' him company, why, I'll fan it in and git some. I'll be back right soon."

"Not at all! Go ahead!" Forbes wanted to hear more of first-hand experiences south of the line. Forbes, who knew something of Pete's history, shrewdly suspected that the stranger called "Bill" had a good reason to ride wide of Tucson—although the Easterner did not quite understand why Pete should ride into town alone. But that was merely incidental.

It was not until Pete had returned and the stranger had departed, taking his way east across the desert, that Pete offered an explanation—a rather guarded explanation, Forbes realized—of the recent happenings. "Bill's keepin' out on the desert for his health," said Pete. "And, if anybody should ask us, I reckon we ain't seen him."

"I think I understand," said Forbes.

And Forbes, recalling the event many months later, after Pete had left Tucson, thought none the less of Pete for having helped an old friend out of difficulties. Forbes was himself more than grateful to Pete—for with the riding three times a week and Pete's robust companionship, he had regained his health to an extent far beyond his hopes.

Pete rejected sixteen of the seventeen plans he had made that winter for his future, often guided by what he read in the occasional letters from Doris, wherein he found some rather practical suggestions—for he wrote frankly of his intent to better himself, but wisely refrained from saying anything that might be interpreted as more than friendship.

Pete had not planned to go to El Paso quite as soon as he did; and it was because of an unanswered letter that he went. He had written early in March and it was now May—and no reply.

If he had waited a few days longer, it is possible that he would not have gone at all, for passing him as he journeyed toward Texas was a letter from Doris Gray in which she intimated that she thought their correspondence had better cease, and for the reason—which she did not intimate—that she was a bit afraid that Pete would come to El Paso, and stay in El Paso until she had either refused to see him—it was significant that she thought of refusing to see him, for he was actually worth looking at—or until he had asked her a question to which there was but one answer, and that was "no." Just why Doris should have taken it for granted that he would ask her

that question is a matter which she never explained, even to herself. Pete had never made love to her in the accepted sense of the term. He had done much better than that, although he was entirely unconscious of it. But that psychological moment—whatever that may mean—in the affairs of Doris and Pete was rapidly approaching,—a moment more often anticipated by the female of the species than by the male.

Just what kept Pete from immediately rushing to the hospital and proclaiming his presence is another question that never can be answered. Pete wanted to do just that thing—but he did not. Instead, he took a modest room at a modest hotel, bought himself some presentable clothing, dropped in to see Hodges of the Stockmen's Security, and spent several days walking about the streets mentally preparing himself to explain just why he *had* come to El Paso, finally arriving at the conclusion that he had come to see little Ruth. Doris had said that Ruth had missed him. Well, he had a right to drop in and see the kid. And he reckoned it was nobody's business if he did.

He had avoided going near the General Hospital in his strolls about town, viewing that building from a safe distance and imagining all sorts of things. Perhaps Miss Gray had left. Perhaps she was ill. Or she might have married! Still, she would have told him, he thought.

Doris never knew what a struggle it cost Pete—to say nothing of hard cash—to purchase that bottle of perfume. But he did it, marching into a drug-store and asking for a bottle of "the best they had," and paying for it without a quiver. Back in his room he emptied about half of the bottle on his handkerchief, wedged the handkerchief into his pocket, and marched to the street, determination in his eye, and the fumes of half a vial of Frangipanni floating in his wake.

Perhaps the Frangipanni stimulated him. Perhaps the overdose deadened his decision to stay away from the hospital. In any event, that afternoon he betook himself to the hospital, and was fortunate in finding Andover there, to whom he confided the obvious news that he was in town—and that he would like to see little Ruth for a minute, if it was all right.

Andover told him that little Ruth had been taken to her home a month ago—and Pete wondered how she could still miss him, as Miss Gray had intimated in her last letter. And as he wondered he saw light—not a great light, but a faint ray which was reflected in his face as he asked Andover when Miss Gray would be relieved from duty, and if it would be possible to see her then.

Andover thought it might be possible, and suggested that he let Miss Gray know of Pete's presence; but some happy instinct caused Pete to veto that suggestion.

"It ain't important," he told Andover. "I'll jest mosey around about six, and step in for a minute. Don't you say I'm in town!"

Andover gazed curiously after Pete as the latter marched out. The surgeon shook his head. Mixed drinks were not new to Andover, but he could not for the life of him recognize what Pete had been drinking.

Doris, who had not been thinking of Pete at all,—as she was not a spiritualist, and had always doubted that affinities were other than easy excuses for uneasy morals,—came briskly down the hospital steps, gowned in a trim gray skirt and a jacket, and a jaunty turban that hid just enough of her brown hair to make that which was visible the more alluring. She almost walked into Pete—for, as it has been stated, she was not thinking of him at all, but of the cozy evening she would spend with her sister at the latter's apartments on High Street. Incidentally Doris was thinking, just a little, of how well her gown and turban became her, for she had determined never to let herself become frowsy and slipshod—Well—she had not to look far for her antithesis.

"Why, Mr. Annersley!"

Pete flushed, the victim of several emotions. "Good-evenin', Miss Gray. I—I thought I'd jest step in and say 'Hello' to that little kid."

"Oh! Ruth?" And Doris flushed just the least bit herself. "Why, little Ruth is not here now."

"Shucks! Well, I'm right glad you are! Was you goin' somewhere?"

"Yes. Out to my sister's on High Street."

"I only been in town two or three days, so I don't know jest where High Street is, but I reckon I could find my way back all right." And Pete so far forgot the perfume as to smile in his old, boyish way.

Doris did some rapid mental calculation and concluded that her latest—or rather her last—letter had just about arrived in Tucson, and of course Pete had not read it. That made matters a little difficult. But there was no reason in the world why he should not walk with her to her sister's.

Pete saw no reason why he should not, either, but rather a very attractive reason why he should.

Without further word they turned and walked down the street, Doris wondering what in the world had induced Pete to immerse himself in Frangipanni, and Pete wondering if there was ever a prettier girl in the world than Doris Gray.

And because Pete wanted to talk about something entirely impersonal, he at once began to ask her what she thought of his latest plan, which was to purchase an interest in the Concho, spend his summers working with the men and his winters in Tucson, studying with Forbes about whom he had written to her.

Doris thought it was a splendid plan. She was sure—quite impersonally—that he would make a success of anything he attempted.

Pete was not so sure, and he told her so. She joked him for doubting himself. He promptly told her that he didn't doubt himself for a minute, but that he did doubt the willingness of the person whom he hoped to make a partner in the venture.

"Not Mr. Forbes?" she queried, glancing quickly at Pete's serious face.

"Nope. It's you."

They walked another block without speaking; then they walked still another. And they had begun to walk still another when Pete suddenly pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and threw it in the gutter. "That doggone perfume is chokin' me to death!" he blurted. And Doris, despite herself, smiled.

They were out where the streets were more open and quiet now. The sun was close to the edge of the desert, far in the west. Doris's hand trembled just the least bit as she turned to say "good-night." They had stopped in front of a house, near the edge of town. Pete's face was a bit pale; his dark eyes were intense and gloomy.

Quite unconscious of what he was doing, he pulled out his watch—a new watch that possessed no erratic tendencies. Suddenly Doris thought of Pete's old watch, and of little Ruth's extreme delight in its irresponsible hands whirling madly around, and of that night when Pete had been brought to the hospital. Suddenly there were two tears trembling on her lashes, and her hand faltered. Then, being a sensible person, she laughed away her emotion, for the time being, and invited Pete in to supper.

Pete thought Doris's sister a mighty nice girl, plumb sensible and not a bit stuck up. And later, when this "plumb sensible" person declared that she was rather tired and excused herself and disappeared, after bidding Pete good-night, he knew that she was a sensible person. He couldn't see how she could help it, being the sister of Doris.

"So I'll be sayin' good-night," stated Pete a few minutes later, as he stood by the door, proud and straight and as vital as a flame.

But he didn't say it, at least coherently. Doris's hand was on his sleeve. Pete thought she had a mighty pretty hand. And as for her eyes—they were gray and misty and warm ... and not at all like he had ever seen them before. He laughed happily, "You look plumb lonesome!" he said.

"I—I was."

Pete dropped his hat, but he did not know it until, well—several minutes later, when Doris gave it to him.

It was close to midnight when a solitary policeman, passing down a side street, heard a nocturnal singer inform dark and empty High Street that he was

"The Ridin' Kid from Powder River,"—

with other more or less interesting details.

Pete felt a hand on his shoulder. "You better cut that out!" said the officer.

Pete whirled and his hand flickered toward his hip. "You go plumb to—" Pete hesitated. The officer sniffed suspiciously. Pete grinned—then proffered his hand with irresistible enthusiasm.

"Sure I'll cut it out."

THE END

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE RIDIN' KID FROM POWDER RIVER ***

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